

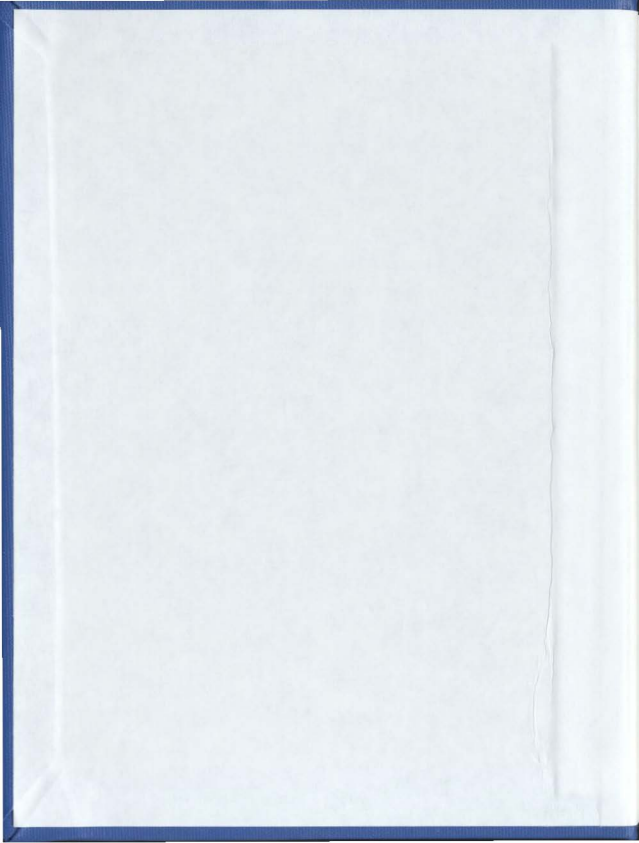
LOOKING GOOD AND FEELING GREAT -
WOMEN, EXERCISE AND WEIGHT CONSCIOUSNESS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**LOOKING GOOD and FEELING GREAT -
Women, Exercise and Weight Consciousness**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the body image and weight consciousness of women taking part in aerobic exercise in an Atlantic Canadian fitness centre. Their reasons for participating in aerobics and their perceptions of the role of cultural institutions such as the media in shaping their body image are also explored. The participants consisted of twenty-seven women who are moderately or highly committed to aerobic exercise. A short questionnaire was used to obtain information about their backgrounds. This was followed by an intensive, semi-structured interview. It was shown from these interviews that the discussion on diet, exercise and the body emanated from the perception that to be thin is to be fit, healthy and beautiful. The findings of this study attest to the existing dissatisfaction that women in western societies feel about their physical appearance. It also revealed that there was a link between being physically fit and healthy and experiencing a healthy mind.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Come on, ladies, one more time. You know you can do it. Just think about all the lovely clothes you will be wearing this summer. Think about the swimsuits.

In 1997 I undertook to study the body image and weight consciousness of a group of women participating in aerobics classes in a fitness centre in Atlantic Canada. Since that time, I have continued, myself, to attend aerobics classes. Most days when I walk into the gym I can hear the voice of the aerobics instructor motivating her class to try harder. I can see women of all shapes and sizes exercising, huffing and puffing, all in the name of fitness, health and beauty. Everyone in the class really wants to believe that they can do it if they try hard enough. But for most of them it is a long, hard and gruelling road to the “perfect” body. They want to believe that they will get there somehow, and yet most of them know deep down in their hearts that no matter how hard they try they will only

manage to get off a few pounds... they will never have the body they had when they were young or that they see in the media. So why do they come? Why do they strive so hard for something that seems so far away? Why do they work towards a goal that seems to be attainable and yet proves to be elusive? These are some of the questions that I try to answer in this thesis.

Definitions of beauty and beauty norms have varied over time and between cultures, but the underlying assumption always seems to have been that beauty is worth the time, money, effort and even pain (Davis, 1995b: 23). Western women are reminded on a daily basis of what they could or should be doing to make themselves physically more attractive. They are especially vulnerable to these messages because women have been taught to define themselves in terms of their physical appearance.

It is a sad fact, but many women in western societies are dissatisfied with their bodies. At some time in their lives and for many, most of their lives, they have felt unhappy with the way that they look. They either feel too fat, too thin, too buxom, too old, not beautiful

enough, not thin enough...the list goes on. Very few women in this culture can honestly say that they are at peace with their bodies. Women's dissatisfaction with their body size and shape has been the result of the influence, to some extent, of sociocultural factors, fashion, the media, economics and even medicine.

Since the 1970s, there has been increasing public attention on body weight, size and shape. More and more people in western societies are dieting and exercising in order to change the size and shape of their bodies. Women especially are continuously trying to reduce their body size in order to conform to the thin body ideal, which defines female beauty in western culture today. For women, thinness has also become synonymous with being healthy, fit and beautiful. This message equating thinness with health, fitness and beauty is all pervasive. The media portray women as strong, active and independent. Women in the media jog, cycle, juggle a career, domestic work and do aerobics every evening. They are the "supermums," the "superwomen," and the "superheroes" of the last 20 years. But these youthful, standardized "superwomen" models

fit poorly with the diverse opportunities, commitments and varied physiologies nature provides us with. This makes achieving the thin, fit, youthful ideal body impossible for many women. Being fat in this culture means to be ugly, lazy and worthless and having no self control. Conversely, to be thin means to be in charge, disciplined, energetic and desirable.

This research explores the body image and weight consciousness of women who take part in aerobic exercise in one fitness facility. The research is broadly concerned with sociocultural factors that pressure women to attain an unrealistically thin body ideal. It examines weight consciousness which is becoming pervasive amongst women in western societies. The term weight consciousness was borrowed from Nasser's (1988) article, *Culture and Weight Consciousness*, which examines the relationship between eating disorders and culture. However, Nasser did not define weight consciousness, which shall be understood in this thesis as pre-occupation and dissatisfaction with weight and body shape.

Body image in this thesis is defined as how people see themselves

and also how they think others see them. It is not the same as the body; it is, rather, the translation of the physical experience by the mind (Hutchinson, 1982:59) or the mental image that one has of one's body. Body image also refers to a perception of how bodies meet cultural standards and how important these cultural standards are to the individual and members of the group (Fallon, 1990:82). Body image, therefore, is a mental picture of the feelings, attitudes and beliefs that one has about one's body. It is also an important part of one's self concept and a basis for self identity.

The research for this thesis was conducted in a city in Atlantic Canada. For the women interviewed, it will show that their focus on diet and exercise emanates from the cultural norm that to be thin is to be fit, healthy and beautiful.

The research also suggests that in western culture, women's relationship with their bodies is inconsistent and contradictory. On the one hand, they are promised self-empowerment through exercise as a strong healthy body defies the traditional view of femininity - that women

are physically fragile and weak. On the other hand, the very preoccupation with their bodies associated with their pursuit of the thin, fit ideal reflects the continued centrality of women's bodies to their self perception, their sense of worth, and to their acceptance within western society.

This is the first sociological study of its kind to be conducted in this city. It also gave the participants an opportunity to voice their concerns, feelings and perceptions about their bodies. Moreover, it adds to the existing literature about women, exercise and body image by providing information regarding body consciousness and exercise among this particular group of women in Atlantic Canada.

The main drawback of this study is that the participants were all well educated, middle class, white Canadians. This did not leave room for ethnic and class diversity. Its main strength was that through the interviews it allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words. This thesis is organized in the following way.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing research on women's relationship

to their bodies in western society and, more specifically, on weight consciousness and body image among contemporary women. Western society places a high value on youth and beauty for women resulting in particular challenges for women as they age and their bodies change. In western culture today, thinness has become a symbol of self discipline and self control. These factors, combined with traditional values of beauty and fashion, have resulted in dieting becoming a national preoccupation (Nasser, 1988:574). Women are therefore becoming more conscious about their weight and body shape and are becoming more dissatisfied with their bodies. This societal push for women to pursue a thin body ideal comes from messages in the media, pressures from their family and friends and ultimately, pressures from their own perceptions of their bodies that make them diet and exercise in order to lose weight. Chapter 2 also reviews different feminist theoretical frameworks that have been employed by feminist researchers to interpret women's relationship to their bodies in western societies. These frameworks include radical feminism, socialist feminism, post modernist feminism and the theories

of agency. The work of Davis (1995), Beausoleil (1994) and Smith (1990) are especially salient to this work.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed exposition of the setting, the participants, methodology and the results of participant observation.

Chapter 4 provides a more detailed analysis of some of the pains, joys, realities and illusions of having a female body in a male dominated culture.

Chapter 5 will offer some plausible conclusions to the thesis and explore a better understanding of weight related concerns, exercise and body image based on evidence from the women in this study.

Chapter 2

The Health/Fitness/Beauty Discourse

This chapter reviews recent literature that pertains to the health/fitness/beauty discourse about the female body in western society.

It begins by examining the different definitions of body image and then moves on to discuss the contemporary cultural emphasis on thinness for women in western society, by tracing the historical development of attitudes to the female body. A discussion of body image, body weight dissatisfaction and the role of the media in promoting the thin body ideal is followed by an examination of different feminist theories that have been used to explore women's relationship with their bodies.

Recent literature has shown that more and more people in western societies are becoming preoccupied with their bodies and that women, more than men, diet and exercise to control their weight (Drewnowski and Yee, 1987:626; Davis and Cowles, 1991:33). These patterns are the result of ongoing interactions between sociocultural and individual

factors that give rise to weight consciousness (Nasser, 1988) among women in western societies. Thinness is valued as a standard of attractiveness for women in western culture where emphasis on women's appearance has been traditional (McLorg & Taub, 1997:262).

The concept of beauty has never been static. It changes from era to era and culture to culture. Non western cultures recognize variations in women's body sizes and weight (Nasser, 1988:574). The concept of feminine beauty, fear of becoming fat and the pursuit of thinness are thus restricted to current western culture. In western culture the issues of appearance, beauty and matters relating to weight extend quite far back in time. Medieval western women became preoccupied with eating and non-eating and used food to express their religious ideals of suffering and service to others. In this way, this culture controlled women's appetite (Brumberg, 1988:45). In nineteenth century America, a heavy and "voluptuous" woman with her waist corseted as tightly as possible was admired. Middle class women became preoccupied with body management and diet became important in the pursuit of an ideal body

weight and shape (Bordo, 1990:83). By the mid 19th century, this ideal was replaced by a more robust and heavier woman. Throughout the twentieth century, the standards for feminine beauty shifted rapidly (Davis, 1995a: 41) and the thin woman triumphed over the fat woman (Zeldin, 1977). The curvy ideal of the 1920s was replaced by the flat-chested flapper look of the 1930s, which was notable for the near absence of female secondary characteristics (Fallon, 1990:87).

In the 1950s large breasts were celebrated, especially in North America, and Marilyn Monroe, who would be considered overweight by today's standards, became a sex symbol. During the 1960s, in the early days of aerobics, people like Kenneth Cooper, who is regarded as the founder of the aerobics running programme, encouraged women to exercise in order to improve their body appearance (Markula, 1995:431). By the 1970s, the thin body had become the ideal.

In the early 1980s women were urged to exercise to take care of their bodies, and a more muscular, healthier ideal of the female body began to emerge. With the advent of the exercise craze, it became

desirable for women to have a thin, firm body, and this is now equated with fitness and health. In addition to a thin and firm body, women are now required to possess strong and toned muscles in order to acquire an "ideal" fit and healthy body. Women not only have to build strong muscles as part of their health and fitness programme, they have to tone them as well. The muscular body has become a "cultural icon," and working out a "glamourized and sexualized yuppie activity" (Bordo, 1990:94).

As a result of thinness being associated with fitness and health, many women are becoming more conscious of their weight and body shape and are becoming more dissatisfied with their bodies (Charles and Kerr, 1986:543; Drewnowski and Yee, 1987:626; Davis and Cowles, 1991:33). This dissatisfaction leads women to partake in activities such as dieting, exercise and even reconstructive surgery to alter their body shape and size so that they can resemble the thin body ideal. The societal push for women to pursue a thin body ideal comes through messages in the media (Hutchinson, 1982:61; Levine et al., (1994:472), pressures

from their family and friends (Levine et al., (1994:472-473) and ultimately pressures from their own perceptions of their bodies that make them more likely than men to diet and exercise in order to lose weight (Drewnowski and Yee, 1987:626; Davis and Cowles, 1991:33).

Findlay (1996:174) argues that bodies in society are controlled through a strict dichotomy of sex and gender. The differences between men and women are highlighted through the norms of masculinity and femininity. Men and women are pressured to comply with appearances that are socially constructed and these “appearance norms” (Findlay, 1996:175) restrict women more than men. The vast range of dietary, weight reduction, exercise and cosmetic products sold in the market places and targeting privileged women, point to the significance of appearance for women in western societies (Featherstone, 1982:18). Commercial advertising, which is aimed at those women who can afford to buy these products, has created an image of what a successful woman should look like, and what she should buy and do in order to achieve this image (Featherstone, 1982).

One of the prominent body image concerns for women in western culture today is dissatisfaction with weight and body shape. This is because women in this society are expected to have a body that does not weigh too much and yet possess a body shape that represents physical health – one that is muscular in specific places like upper arms and legs. Added to this, western culture also idealizes thinness in women (Cash and Hicks, 1990:327-328) and pressures them to attain an unrealistic body ideal (Nasser, 1988; Frederick et al., 1994; Drewnowski and Yee, 1987; Mintz and Betz, 1986; Franzoi, 1995; Furnham et al., 1994; Kenen, 1987; Hutchinson, 1982; Orbach, 1978). Thinness in western society has become the ideal standard for feminine beauty (Orbach, 1978). It is presented as the 'royal road to success, love and happiness (Szekely, 1988:147) and it has come to symbolize "self discipline, control and assertiveness" (Nasser, 1988:574). This standard has been internalized by many women who find their body size excessive and unacceptable (Fallon and Rosen, 1985). As this culture places a high value on the importance of appearance in women, and women, more than men, are

judged by their appearance, many women in western culture “do not accept their bodies” (Hutchinson, 1982:59). According to Kaplan (1989), for many women in western culture, to be “in shape” really means to be thin. Many women associate feeling good about themselves with feeling lighter, slimmer, less heavy (p.194). This obsession with appearance and thinness pushes some women into a relentless struggle to get their bodies into smaller and smaller sizes (Orbach, 1987) and it is in this way that women in the west connect body weight with body shape.

The message that slimness means sexual attractiveness makes many women unhappy with their body image and this dissatisfaction is further reinforced by the comments of men, especially their partners (Charles and Kerr, 1986:537). Comparative studies of men and women show that women express dissatisfaction with body shape, see themselves as overweight, and desire an ideal figure that is thinner than their own perceived figure (Silberstein et al., 1988; Mintz and Betz, 1986; Drewnowski and Yee, 1987; Davis and Cowles, 1991). Men, on the other hand, tend to express a desire to be more muscular or are almost evenly

split between those who wish to be thin or to gain weight (Silberstein et al., 1988; Drewnowski and Yee, 1987).

In their studies of body image and body dissatisfaction, some researchers argue that many women are concerned about their weight (Charles and Kerr, 1986; Wardle and Foley, 1989; Cash and Henry, 1995). Charles and Kerr (1986:541), for example, found that 88.5% of those interviewed were concerned about their weight and most of them felt that dieting was important to them because it allowed them to fit into clothes that were fashionable and attractive. Wardle and Foley (1989:60) argued that women in general were dissatisfied with their appearance, felt "fat" and overestimated their body size. Cash and Henry (1995:25) found that many women were dissatisfied with their middle or lower torso and some were dissatisfied with their upper torso, facial features, height and hair.

Cash and Henry (1995:20) examine the attitudes of women towards body image and their perception of being or becoming fat. About one half of the eight hundred and three women in their study

reported dissatisfaction with their looks and concerns with becoming fat. They also found that the black participants possessed a more positive body image than the white and Hispanic participants (1995:26). They felt that these difference might stem in part from the fact that African American culture has broader latitude in accepting the different sizes of women's bodies.

Wardle and Foley (1989:57) wanted to test their hypothesis that overestimation (of body size) is related to negative body image and that dieters (people who are deliberately trying to change their body size) would have a more negative view of themselves and show higher levels of overestimation. Their study indicated that women were dissatisfied with their appearance, felt "fat" and overestimated their body size. These findings support the view that there is a strong relationship between feeling fat and satisfaction with appearance, and that fatness is an important part of women's self image (1989:60).

These studies, which were done on women alone, found that women were generally dissatisfied with their body shape and have a

negative body image (Cash and Henry, 1995:26; Charles and Kerr, 1986:541), that weight loss is important to them (Markula, 1995:439), that exercisers possess a more positive body image (Furnham et al., 1994:347; Redican and Hadley, 1988:56) and that there is a relationship between body image dissatisfaction and overestimation of body size (Wardle and Foley, 1989:60).

Drewnowski and Yee (1987), Davis and Cowles (1991) and Silberstein et al. (1988) studied sex differences in the perception of body image. All hypothesized that women were more likely than men to be dissatisfied with their body weight and body image. They all found that both men and women exhibit some degree of bodily dissatisfaction, but in different directions. In Silberstein et al.'s (1988:224) study of forty-five women and forty-seven men, only one woman expressed a desire to gain weight. The rest of the women desired an ideal figure thinner than their own perceived figure. Men, on the other hand, were as likely to express a desire to be heavier as to be thinner. Drewnowski and Yee's (1987:626) study confirmed that women were more likely than men to

see themselves as being overweight, worry about becoming fat and showed greater concern about dieting and body weight. The men in their study were equally divided between those who wanted to lose weight and those who wanted to gain weight (p.631). Davis and Cowles (1991:40) reported that both men and women showed a desire to change their current weight. A majority of women showed a desire to lose weight, whereas older men were more likely to want to lose weight and younger men to gain weight (p.40).

Freedman (1984) states that people experience feelings of inadequacy and doubts about their bodies when they compare themselves with images of “ideal” bodies found in advertisements. Media images constantly remind women of how their bodies measure up or fail to measure up to today’s standards of feminine beauty (Hutchinson, 1982:62; Bartky, 1988:110) and this advertising strategy suggests to women that their bodies are deficient (Bartky, 1988:110). Content analyses of television shows, commercials and magazines were done by Silverstein et al. (1986:522) and Chris-Downs and Harrison (1985:15) to

examine the role of the mass media in promoting a thin body ideal for women. Silverstein et al.'s findings (1986:525) revealed that, "women receive more messages to be slim and stay in shape than do men." Their analysis also shows that women receive more information about beauty and the body from magazines, and that they receive more gender specific messages to stay in shape and be thin (1986:526). Chris-Downs and Harrison found that audiences were exposed to some form of attractiveness messages in over a quarter of the commercials that they analyzed. They also found that commercials were linked to sexism as women were used as the performers and men delivered the voice-overs (1985:17).

Thinness in western culture is associated with self control, social acceptance, elegance and youth (Nasser, 1988:574). Obesity, on the other hand, connotes a negative image (Dalley and Gomez, 1980:64). Thinness is seen as a statement of a person's worth rather than the "ratio of fat body tissue and lean body tissue" (Orbach, 1978:xx). These, together with traditional values of what is attractive and fashionable, have

resulted in dieting and exercising becoming a “cultural preoccupation.” An overwhelming majority of women in western societies diet because they feel that they are too fat, and this has, in fact, become a way of life for them (Nagel and Jones, 1992:108). The message in the popular media is that fitness, youth and health go together. The healthy body, therefore, is one that is not only young but also thin and muscular. In their study of sixty women, Furhnam et al. (1994:347) found that those who exercise compared to those who don't, possess a more positive perception of their bodies. They also found an increased tolerance towards women whose shapes differ from their own among women who exercise (p.347). Redican and Hadley's study of twelve women, who were regular members of a health club, showed that the women believed that attending the club improved their health (1988:56). They also found that the club provided a place for social interaction for some women who used it as a “meeting place”(p.59). They conclude that although fitness has an impact on these women, their commitment to pursuing the ideal body image is the major factor in club membership (p.60).

MacNevin's study (1992:127) of twelve women confirmed that participants are dissatisfied with their perception of their bodies. They stated that their involvement in aerobics was a result of a rational choice, and that they were not "merely a product of effects of social structure" (p.105-106). Markula (1995:450) found that women's relationships with their bodies are contradictory. They want to lose weight and conform to the thin and toned body ideal but they find the whole process "ridiculous." The women in Markula's study state that although aerobic workouts help them to lose weight and tone their muscles, they view this as being "hard, boring and repetitious" (p.433).

Thus, existing research suggests that contemporary western women are generally dissatisfied with their body shape and have a negative body image. Weight loss and body shape is important to them. These studies also support the view that the media play a role in this discontent and in changing body images, that there is a strong relationship between feeling fat and dissatisfaction with appearance, and that this plays an important part in women's self image.

Feminist Theories about Women's Relationship to their Bodies

There are a number of different theoretical approaches to understanding the relationship between the body, gender and western society. One of the first attempts to provide a systematic theory of the body was Turner's *The Body and Society* (1984), in which he argues that in order to reclaim the body in social theory it is important to study society and the social order. Turner states that the sociology of the body essentially involves a discussion of social control and this includes an examination of the control of women's bodies by men in a patriarchal system (1984:2-3). Turner views the body as an important medium by which societal control over the self is exercised (1984:39-40). Since social control of women is greater than that of men, women's bodies have become the focal point in the study of social control of individuals (Valentine, 1994:114). Women's bodies have become the locus of social control through medical institutions (Wolf, 1990:10-11) or the "medical gaze" (Turner, 1984) which symbolizes medicine's control over bodies in society. They are

also controlled by restrictive body practices like dieting which "discipline the hunger" (Bartky, 1988:105), by eating disorders (Bordo, 1993) and by reconstructive surgery (Davis, 1995a).

Feminist writers have, for a long time, regarded the body as important. Many feminists see women's pursuit of beauty as a form of suffering and oppression (Wolf, 1990; Bartky, 1988; Spitzack, 1990). Beauty is seen as an important ingredient in the social oppression and subordination of women. Through body maintenance and body improvement women become victims of the beauty ideology. They are made to believe that they can gain control of their lives through their bodies. Beauty practices such as body-work, body maintenance and body transformation help to police, constrain and subordinate women. Women's preoccupation with their bodies is seen as an artefact of femininity within the power hierarchies of sex, gender, race and culture. Some feminists (Beausoleil, 1994; Smith, 1990) see the beauty practices of women as part of a cultural discourse. The female body becomes a medium through which culture and femininity are expressed.

The radical feminist perspective sees male domination (patriarchy) as the basis of women's oppression. Patriarchy is defined as a "sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege" (Eisenstein, 1979:17). Radical feminists believe that women are the victims of male supremacy both in the public and the private spheres. Thus men control women's bodies, labour and their lives either individually or collectively. For women to be liberated in society, this perspective argues, patriarchy has to be eliminated.

Orbach (1978) argues that in the 1970s there was an increase in women's preoccupation with food and body image. This was a result of the mass media's marketing of fashion, beauty, the aesthetics of thinness and its images of "perfect" bodies that pressured women into a "relentless struggle" to make their bodies smaller and smaller (Orbach, 1987:28). The cultural pressure to be thin diverted women from issues that were central to their life experiences. This energy could be used instead to help change the world and not just their bodies (Orbach, 1987:30). Orbach notes that being overweight is one way to say "no" to

feelings of powerlessness. A fat woman defies western notions of beauty and challenges the culture that turns women into commodities (1978:21).

Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) is an example of a radical feminist account about the increase in eating disorders, cosmetic surgery and women's willingness to spend time, energy and money, and to endure pain and discomfort in the name of beauty. She contrasts these developments in the 1980s with the many strides that women had made towards freeing themselves in the prior two decades. She argues that women have escaped domesticity and redefined their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. Women, Wolf says, are now imprisoned in their bodies instead of their homes. They are encouraged to focus their time, money and energy on physical appearance and bodily perfection at the expense of their intellectual, professional and spiritual capabilities. She argues that the forces of oppression are stronger now than ever. Through the diet, cosmetic, health and fitness industries women are made to feel shame, humiliation, anxiety and self hatred. The "beauty myth," claims Wolf, is a backlash response to the revival of the women's

movement in the 1960s and 1970s. She further argues that the intention of patriarchy is to turn women away from their true goals by making them feel unworthy so that they will not have the will to challenge the status quo. When women are “at war with their bodies” (Pollack-Seid 1989), they do not have the time or the energy to work towards increasing their opportunities, securing their future or broadening their roles in society.

Socialist-feminism uses a combination of both radical and Marxist feminist theories of patriarchy and capitalism to explain women's subordination and men's domination (Davis and Fisher, 1995:6). It has therefore examined those practices and ideologies that regulate women's sexualities through “gendered economic relations” (Cole, 1993:80). This perspective argues that beauty cannot be understood without taking gender and economic power into account. According to Cole, disciplines like medicine, law, science as well as the media reduce women to their “natural” roles of mother and domestic worker, marginalize lesbianism as being abnormal, and work towards regulating childbearing through

abortion laws and foetal rights (1993:80). Socialist-feminist thought is informed by dualities like sex/gender, culture/nature, mind/body, Marxist analyses of labour, class and exploitation, together with the theory that power is controlling and localized (Cole, 1993:80). According to socialist feminism, the economic basis of gender relations is responsible for women's oppression in society (Andersen, 1993:330).

Socialist-feminists like Hesse-Biber (1991:174) and Szekely (1988:18) argue that in order to understand women's eating problems, it is necessary to examine the larger historical transformation of women's bodies into commodities in capitalist patriarchal societies where women are dominated by men. In capitalist patriarchal societies, women's bodies are considered to be "cultural artefacts" and the way they are defined and redefined over time makes them sites of subordination (Hesser-Biber, 1991:174). According to Hesser-Biber, capitalism (through the diet, cosmetic, beauty and health industries), and patriarchy (by defining women as decorative objects under male authority) continue to control women's bodies through sociocultural pressures on them to be thin

(1991:177). Women have become objectified in these societies through the gendered language and sexist images in the media which are used to sell products.

Both socialist and radical feminism focus on the structures that give men the power to dominate women. They therefore tend to construct women as victims of oppression and domination, overlooking the ability of women to resist these power structures.

Postmodernist feminism rejects traditional assumptions about truth and reality that are centred on "phallogocentric thought," which looks at truth and reality from the male perspective (Tong, 1989:217). This perspective's critique of radical feminism is that radical feminism sees male oppression as the primary oppression for all women. Postmodernist feminism offers a better understanding of differences among men and among women. Postmodernism argues that beauty cannot be understood without taking gender and power into account. The body still remains the main theme in postmodernist work but it is seen as a text on which culture is inscribed rather than the product of male dominance (Bordo,

1993; Spitzack, 1990; Grosz, 1994). Each of the feminist postmodern writers uses different examples to explain this.

Postmodernist feminists use the theoretical framework of Foucault (1979) which sees the female body as a site that is always available to be inscribed on. In this theoretical framework, routine beauty practices are seen as disciplining and normalizing regimes that improve and transform the body. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1979), Foucault argues that the body is subject to subtle disciplinary practices that seek to regulate its existence. For Foucault, the body becomes a locus of political control, surveillance and regulation. Different disciplinary institutions like the army, prison and school produce “docile bodies” that become ready to obey the power structures in society. Through these institutions, bodies are subjected to increasing regulation, constant monitoring, discipline and surveillance. Through discipline and behaviour regulation, “docile bodies” become subjected and practiced bodies. For “docile bodies” to be produced, Foucault argues, an uninterrupted coercion has to be directed towards the processes of bodily activities.

Foucault uses Bentham's panopticon, which is a design for a model prison, to capture the essence of discipline in society. The panopticon is a tower in the centre of multiple storeys of cells arranged in a circular fashion. There are wide windows both in the tower and in each cell. Due to the light entering from the back of each cell, the prisoners are visible to the guards but the guards are completely invisible to the prisoners. Each prisoner, writes Foucault, "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication...this invisibility is the guarantee of order" (p.200). The panopticon creates the ever present possibility of being seen and thus the idea of conscious and permanent visibility prevents disobedience and guarantees order. The exercise of this kind of power makes guards unnecessary because the threat of their presence makes the prisoners their own "guards." Each person's body is thus governed by his own gaze through which "he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (p.203).

Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1993) have appropriated Foucault's concepts of "discipline" and the "docile body" to examine the making of

the female body in western society. They emphasize that the daily social practices of women that are defined as “feminine” produce gendered-docile bodies. Some of these practices include regulating the body's size and contours through diet and exercise (Bartky, 1988:105) and displaying the female body as an ornament through make-up, dress and adornments (Bordo, 1993:166). These routine beauty practices belong to the disciplinary and normalizing regime that improves and transforms the body, thus making it “docile” (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1990). Thus, the every day rituals of women produce a feminine body in western society, one that is thin and toned, small breasted, narrow hipped; one that has specific postures, movements and gestures, and one that becomes a surface on which culture is inscribed. This feminine body is uniquely docile and disciplined.

Spitzack also examines women's dieting practices from a Foucaultian perspective. She states that the promotion of slenderness for women, together with women's every day practices represents a “paradigm” within which the powers governing women's bodies operate

(1990:35). Women's bodies are controlled through many institutions and social practices, which discipline and regulate the body through a "penetrating cultural gaze" (p.42). This makes it necessary for women to continuously monitor their bodies through self-scrutiny and self-surveillance (like the inmates of the panopticon). Spitzack suggests that women are also promised liberation through the discipline of diet. They are made to believe that losing weight will change their lives and they will be able to pursue new challenges that were unobtainable to them earlier due to their excess weight. However, this false sense of liberation only hides the continuous control of women's bodies by capitalist patriarchal powers. The first step toward this control is when women openly acknowledge that they have excess weight, are willing to improve their bodies by losing this weight, and thus take control of their lives. For this to take place there has to be continuous self-surveillance and self-monitoring. In this way a woman's body becomes a site of constant self-scrutiny and self-correction. Dieting is one way of disciplining women's bodies and invisibly controlling them.

Bordo (1989:16) points out that the female body is like a text which can be read as a "cultural statement" and which is also as a "statement about gender." In order to explain the body as a "text of femininity", Bordo uses three disorders, namely, hysteria, agoraphobia and anorexia, which are generally associated with femininity (1993:168).

Bordo states that women believe that by controlling their bodies and appetites they can achieve "self-mastery" (p.172), take on "male virtues." (p.171) and thus take on male power. Grosz (1994:156) points out that feminists ought not to see the body as a "blank, passive page." The specific manner in which the "page" or body is seen must be taken into account as the same message written on a male or a female body can come to mean different things and have different results (p.156). Postmodern feminism, therefore, gives new insight into the many meanings surrounding the female body and the power structures that work to control and discipline women in the name of beauty and femininity.

MacNevin uses the work of Foucault to discuss how the female

body in North America is “formulated within the framework of patriarchal capitalism” (1992:2). She examines how institutional forces like medical science (which acts as a disciplinary agent of the state), gender and the social construction of the body in western society control women’s bodies in western societies. She found that there was dissatisfaction with the participants’ perceptions of their bodies, and that they expressed concern about what they perceived as “excessive” body weight (p.127). MacNevin’s study also revealed that the participants’ involvement in aerobics was a result of a rational choice and that they were not “merely a product of effects of social structure”(1992:105).

Some feminist writers (Davis, 1995; Beausoleil, 1994; Smith, 1990) state that beauty and femininity cannot be discussed solely as a form of repression. They argue that women are not victims or blind followers of the beauty system but in fact take part in its “delights” (Davis, 1995b:30), are “active creators” (Beausoleil, 1994:51) and “agents who give power to the forces that overpower them” (Smith,1990:160). Therefore, the routine beauty practices of women

cannot be described strictly in terms of oppression. Although women are aware of the beauty system and norms of femininity, they are in fact actively making decisions that affect their lives as well as their bodies. Women are knowledgeable about their bodies and they possess specialized skills about how to create an appearance that is acceptable as feminine (Smith, 1990; Beausoleil, 1994).

Beausoleil (1994) analyzes how make up and appearance work are part of many women's lives in western society. She argues that in order to challenge the notion that women's beauty practices are oppressive, it is necessary to first understand how these practices enter into women's lives. She challenges the notion that the creation of "femininity" is oppressive to women by viewing women as "competent agents" who are actively involved in all aspects of creating the self (p.36). She states that women, as active creative agents, enjoy partaking in their "appearance practices" (p.46) and express who they are through appearance. Thus, it is through appearance work that women "create and reflect the self" (p.51).

According to Davis, both feminist perspectives of beauty as oppression and beauty as cultural discourse provide valuable insight into why women continue to improve or alter their bodies despite the difficulties and the dangers they sometimes face. However, these perspectives do not do justice to how women are active in and knowingly partake of these beauty practices (1995a: 56-57). Davis argues that although the postmodernist perspective makes it possible to examine how power and resistance work, it does not allow for women's agency to be theorized other than discursively (1995:10). She further argues that while a beauty industry and discourses of feminine beauty exist, beauty and femininity cannot strictly be seen as repressive (1995b: 30) and that women are not passive victims of these systems. Using the example of cosmetic surgery, she argues that these perspectives also fail to explain "women's lived experiences with their bodies" (1995a:58). She further states that women are active, knowledgeable and involved in their decisions to take actions that affect their bodies - even if these practices are degrading or detrimental to them (1995a: 57).

Smith (1990:185-186) argues that women are shown ideal and perfect female bodies through the advertisement, fashion and cosmetic industries. This results in dissatisfaction among women with their own bodies. This dissatisfaction brings about a desire to change and transform their bodies, and these industries provide the text that instructs them how to do so. However, these texts are organized around the notion of agency. Women, as agents, who make knowledgeable, informed, rational choices with regard to their bodies and lives, are the essence of the beauty system. Female agency is required to process the texts and it is the texts that motivate women to take part in activities of body improvement. Thus, women's bodily imperfections become the catalyst for action.

Although the various feminist theories for understanding women's beauty practices differ as to whether these practices are seen as a cultural discourse or a product of male and/or economic domination of women, they share the belief that these practices result in the discipline and control of women. The first perspective (radical feminism) is concerned with how the female body in western society becomes a site through

which gender and male power are constituted. This perspective emphasizes male power and privilege over women as a basis for social relations. The second (socialist feminism) sees women's beauty practices as an important feature in the social subordination of women by men and within capitalist economies. Postmodernism (the third perspective discussed) sees beauty in terms of cultural discourses and beauty practices of women as a disciplinary and normalizing regime. The social production of femininity and the powers that dominate and subjugate women are seen as essential ingredients in their analysis of beauty. The fourth perspective sees women as active "agents" who are knowledgeable about their bodies and who make informed decisions concerning their bodies within constraints generated by the beauty system.

Many feminist theories fail to address differences between women, and the related fact that many women in western society are economically independent and privileged, and therefore possess power. They also often fail to explore women's power to resist patriarchal and economic structures of oppression. Postmodern feminists recognize the role of

power and gender in the beauty discourse, but see beauty not simply as a form of oppression but as a cultural discourse. Unlike radical and socialist feminists, postmodern feminism takes into consideration the differences among women and among men. The theory of agency (Davis, 1995) acknowledges the role of women as free agents who are knowledgeable about their bodies and make informed choices about them within social constraints.

This study is partly informed by the postmodernist and agency theories because the interviews revealed that although the participants were influenced in part by culture and the society around them, they were also exercising their power as free agents when it came to their bodies. As the review of empirical research on weight consciousness, body image and male and female motivations for exercising in this chapter suggests, the current consensus seems to be that while both men and women are often somewhat dissatisfied with their bodies, men are generally more evenly split between those who want to lose weight and those who want to gain weight. A vast majority of women, on the other hand, want to

lose weight. Unlike men, women tend to believe that they should be able to control how they look because the societal pressure to attain a thin and strong body is greater for them than it is for men. Much of the research reviewed suggests that most women believe that they have to look a certain way. Although both sexes experience concerns about weight, the fear of becoming fat and the pursuit of the thin, muscular body ideal are more strongly related to women. This may be the result of diverse sociocultural pressures like advertising and the mass media, which have promoted an increasingly thin ideal for the female body together with the message that a thin, muscular, toned body is a healthy and fit one. However, existing research also suggests that women are agents and not simply “cultural dopes” (Davis, 1995b) responding in an unthinking fashion to the media, advertising and social norms. Thus, while there is plenty of evidence from this study and from others that cultural scripts shape women's body image and, in the contemporary context in western society, have resulted in relatively intense weight consciousness, most women do not unthinkingly dedicate themselves to achieving the often

unachievable cultural ideal of a thin, youthful, toned body but find, instead, other sources of satisfaction from aerobic exercises and are often critical of the social institutions responsible for generating unrealistic and standardized cultural ideals for women's bodies. I explore these themes in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Using the studies of Markula (1995) and MacNevin (1992) as a guide, this study incorporated participant observation, field notes, a short structured questionnaire and intensive interviews to collect and analyze data. This study is a sociological inquiry into how women who do aerobic exercises regularly feel about their body shape, body size and body image. It could be described as an ethnographic study (Markula, 1995:430) as the participants gathered regularly in a well-defined public place, which was the aerobics gym. Although ethnography is mainly associated with anthropology, its methods are being used today to study the details of everyday life in western society (Markula, 1995:429).

The Setting

The research for this thesis was conducted in 1997. My field consisted mainly of a fitness club in a university community in a city in Atlantic Canada. Many of the participants were, or had been, associated in some way with the university.

The club's facilities included three adult swimming pools where swimming lessons and shallow water fitness classes were held. The shallow water fitness programme consisted of mixed impact exercises, which combined high and low intensity exercises. The facilities also included a children's swimming pool, two squash courts, an aerobics gym, a fully equipped health and fitness centre that had a weight room with Nautilus strength training equipment, treadmills, life cycles, Stairmasters and a hot tub. The centre also had a sauna, an outdoor track, showers, locker rooms and free parking for members. There was a coffee and donut shop in the foyer and numerous vending machines with all kinds of pop, juices and health drinks.

The aerobics gym was a fully mirrored room where nineteen aerobics training programmes took place between 9:15 a.m. and 9 p.m. Mondays to Thursdays, 9:15 a.m. to 6:15 p.m. on Fridays, and 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. on weekends.

Six different types of aerobics classes were offered. They were advertised as fitness classes that were "both designed to keep you looking

good and feeling great". The aerobics classes were advertised as:

1. Morning Fitness - Limited bouncing keeps the class low impact and easy on the joints.
2. Incredible ABS! - Weak abdominal muscles are often linked to lower back problems and poor posture. Something new - a concentrated half-hour "for stomachs only!"
3. Mixed Impact - A high-energy, calorie-burning workout.
4. Step - Really sculpts the seat and thighs with a series of easy-to-learn moves on and off the step platform. Step lively and see the difference!
5. Interval Step - Alternate movements on and off the step provide the perfect blend of step and regular aerobics.
6. Advanced Step - Longer step sequences add an extra challenge for the step enthusiast.

At the time of the research the membership cost for the aerobics class was:

\$46.00 (One month - unlimited use).

\$109.25 (Ten weeks - unlimited use).

\$4.00 (per class - drop in).

Gaining Access

I contacted the manager of the club by telephone to set up an appointment so that I could ask permission to conduct my study there. At our first meeting, I presented her with a synopsis of the research proposal together with a letter of introduction from my supervisor. The manager was very friendly and accommodating and was also interested in the study. I discussed the approximate duration of the study and assured her about confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and the establishment. I also told her that should she wish, she could obtain a copy of the study when it was completed. She then took me around and introduced me to the instructors who were present and told me that she would inform the rest of the instructors about the study. She also offered to lend me an office on the premises where I could conduct my interviews. I was given free membership for the time it took to become familiar with the club procedures, and was allowed to join in the aerobics classes as part of my

participant observation approach. This allowed me to get to know the members, to begin to establish rapport and, eventually, to conduct the interviews.

The participant observation period lasted for four weeks (9 November 1997 to 10 December 1997), during which time I attended various morning, afternoon, evening and weekend classes as a normal club member observing, listening, and carefully identifying the thirty members who could be approached for the interviews during the next phase. I stayed behind after each class to make notes on my observations.

Selecting The Participants

At the end of the four weeks, the instructors introduced me to the class at the beginning of the programme. They explained that I was a sociology student, that I was going to do research on the body and exercise and that if anyone wanted to volunteer they could meet with me after class. At the end of the class many women approached me. They were all very curious about the research and asked questions about how long it would take if

they volunteered, what would be required of them, the format of the study, when I would be conducting the interviews and so on. Some like Jacklyn and Mary “signed up” immediately. Others said that they would think about it and some said that they would talk to their friends and let me know. Jacklyn and Mary were very excited about “the project” and said that they felt proud that I was back at university “at my age.”

At first, I managed to recruit quite a few volunteers (about fifteen at the next three classes). As word got around the friends of the volunteers contacted me and they also joined. All in all, I managed to recruit twenty-five women. I still needed five more. I continued attending the classes with the hope of getting more volunteers. I approached some of the women after class but had no luck. I was now feeling despondent and frustrated. I then decided to give up on the aerobics class and go down to the Health and Fitness Centre to see if I could get some volunteers there. I managed to recruit three women but only two kept the appointment. One cancelled at the last minute. I now had twenty-seven interviews scheduled.

I contacted all the volunteers personally to set up an appointment and the interview was scheduled. At this stage I informed them about the research in some detail. I told them about the consent form (see appendix 1) that they had to sign, the nature of the questionnaire (appendix 2) that had to be completed and the format of the actual interview (appendix 3). All three documents were modified from the research done by MacNevin (1992). I stressed that their identity would be concealed through the use of a pseudonym, that strict confidentiality would be maintained at all times, that they were free to withdraw from the research project at any time, and that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions that came up in the questionnaire or the interview. They also had the right to refuse permission to be audio taped. They were informed that notes would be made of any conversation or informal discussion that took place after the tape recorder was switched off. Only one participant refused permission to be audio taped but she gave me permission to make notes as we went through the interview. Each interview was numbered sequentially and a pseudonym was assigned to

each participant. The name of the club and its location have not been disclosed so as to ensure strict confidentiality.

Conducting the Interviews

Most of the interviews took place at the club, before or after class, where I was given the use of an office. This ensured privacy and a relaxed atmosphere with no disturbances. Some of the participants invited me into their homes where the interviews were conducted over a cup of tea.

The first stage of the interview was the completion of the questionnaire (appendix 2). This was to acquire some background information about the participant. This was followed by a more intensive, semi-structured interview that included questions about the participants' childhood and adolescence, their diet history, their feelings about their bodies, their exercise and participation history and their feelings about the sociocultural pressures on women in general (appendix 3). These questions, however, were only used as a guideline. This allowed the participants to do most of the talking without interruption.

After the completion of the questionnaire, the interviews became

more of a conversation between the participant and myself. The participants were encouraged to express what was significant to them rather than consider those things that they presumed to be important to the researcher. I therefore stressed to them that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was interested in whatever they had to tell me. I told them not to leave out anything even if they felt it to be unimportant or insignificant as I was interested in their stories and everything was important.

The questions in appendix 2 were discussed and a particular concern or observation of the participant usually followed this. We usually discussed body image and societal expectations of women quite extensively. We also discussed women's attitudes towards dieting and exercise and their satisfaction with the shape and size of their bodies. Many of the participants told me stories about their friends and their concerns about their bodies. Some talked about their relationships with their family members and how the shape or size of their bodies or their commitment to exercise sometimes affected this relationship.

The length of each interview usually varied from 45 minutes to one hour. One interview in particular went on for one hour and forty-five minutes. I interviewed all the participants only once but sometimes I telephoned them afterwards to clarify certain points. Because I used appendix 2 as a guide for all the interviews, there were similarities in the answers, but there was also diversity in the discussions and the conversations with the individual participants. As the interviews progressed, many new questions emerged and both the participant and the interviewer determined the direction of each interview. In this way connections were made between the different experiences and feelings of the participants. Because the interview questions were used as a guide, the interviews followed a particular order and sequence. The interview became more informal and the participants visibly relaxed after the tape recorder was shut off. It seemed as if they were a little intimidated by the tape recorder as they "opened up" immediately after it was switched off and they did not mind my making notes as they spoke. Each of the participants expressed a desire to see the study after it was completed as they found the whole project quite "interesting and exciting." I told them

that I would be sending a copy to the manager of the club and they should contact her and feel free to read it. I also told them that they could contact me if they had any questions or queries regarding the written thesis.

Data Analysis

The data were collected and analyzed after each interview. This allowed for ongoing revision of the feelings and perceptions of the participants. It also allowed me to try to summarize what I thought the participants meant and to clarify certain concepts. I re-examined what was said by the participants and tried to view it from different angles and under different circumstances. I did this by asking the participants to further explain what they meant or to explain it in a different way or to expand on what they said. The participants were also encouraged to explain and expand on how they understood the different concepts and questions.

At the end of every interview I recorded my personal feelings and observations and read these before I began the next interview. This allowed for continuity between the interviews. I also made note of the different themes that emerged from each interview together with the

similarities and differences that emerged. This was used as a starting point for the next interview. In this way, the data were analyzed continuously and the different interviews were linked to each other. It also allowed for revisions and changes to be made.

Each interview was regarded as a conversation between the participant and the researcher where the participant was encouraged to tell her story in her own words. Because of the conversational nature of the interviews many of the questions led to discussions between ourselves, and many participants were interested in hearing my opinions on different matters that arose from these conversations. They were especially interested in my own culture and asked many questions regarding women and body in my culture. I explained to them that I was forty-six years old, married and a mother of three grown children. I also told them that I came to Canada from South Africa and that my forefathers were originally from India. They were especially interested in my head covering. I told them that I was a Muslim and that that was one of the requirements for a Muslim woman. Some were curious as to why I continued to wear it now that I was in a different country. I again

explained that I was trying to practice my religion in the best way that I could. Some wanted to know whether there were many gyms in South Africa and whether people were as hyped up about exercise as they were in North America. I replied that South Africa was in fact quite “Americanized” and that people watched movies and television and were influenced by them.

Being a South African who was exposed to the same cultural messages, I could understand the type of pressures that these women were under. As a Muslim woman who dressed to cover her body completely, I felt a sense of relief that I was not exposed to the same societal scrutiny as these women. Taking care of one's body is very important in my religion, as it is believed to be a gift from God. Exercise and a healthy diet are therefore encouraged. However, this does not mean that women from my culture, including me, are not influenced by the cultural norms that surround us. Just like western women, some of us feel more pressured than others and each one of us has our reasons for doing whatever it is that we do.

As indicated in Table 1 on page 57, the sample of participants for

this study consisted of 27 active, energetic women who were committed to aerobics classes. They ranged in age from 22 to 55 years. They attended classes regularly and enjoyed the physical activity. Most had been exercising regularly for at least two years and some for about 20 years. Despite the fact that their bodies were firm and fit, not all possessed ultra-thin athletic bodies. All of the participants led a fairly busy life in terms of their paid employment and caring for their families. They also led a fairly active social life, going out with their friends and family. Their regular attendance at the gym and their interest, and eager readiness to participate in the study, show their concern with body related issues. All of the participants were very open in their discussions and showed much interest in the questions they were asked, and the answers they gave. They asked me questions about the research project and were interested in what other participants had said. Therefore, the interviews were like a conversation between two women.

PSEUDONYM	MARITAL STATUS	HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	AGE RANGE
Marie	Common Law	Attending University	Student	22-27 Years
Annette	Single	University Graduate	Graduate Student	
Cassy	Married	Nursing Diploma	Professional	
Gloria	Single	Attending University	Student	
Stephanie	Single	University Degree	Professional	
Faye	Married	University Degree	Office Administration	
				31-37 Years
Jennifer	Married	Graduate Degree	Managerial	
Anny	Married	University Degree	Professional	
Diane	Married	University Degree	Professional	
Emily	Married	High School	Homemaker	
Beth	Single	Attending University	Professional	
Glenda	Married	High School	Professional	
Vikki	Married	University Degree	Professional	
Sonie	Married	University Degree	Professional	
				40-55 Years
Judy	Married	High School	Secretary	
Deanne	Divorced	Trade College	Homemaker	
Jackie	Married	University Degree	Professional	
Elaine	Married	Post Secondary Diploma	Professional	
Jill	Married	University Degree	Homemaker	
Laura	Single	University Degree	Professional	
Carly	Married	High School	Homemaker	
Aunie	Married	Trade College	Homemaker	
Made	Married	Post Secondary Diploma	Manager	
Rose	Married	University Degree	Homemaker	
Jacklyn	Married	2 Yrs. University	Homemaker	
Mary	Married	University Degree	Business	

This chapter has discussed the methodologies that were used in this study. These methodologies combined participant observation with interviews. The interviews included both a short, structured questionnaire and longer, semi-structured interviews. The chapter also presents the demographic profiles of the participants and describes the process for gaining access to the fitness centre and for the collection and analysis of the data. The next chapter summarizes the research findings.

Chapter 4

Am I Fit Enough Yet?

This chapter will present the results of the participant observation and the interviews that were done with the 27 participants of this study. It will also link the results to themes that can be found in the existing research on women and their bodies in contemporary western society. This research was carried out in 1997, and although the research results will be presented in the present tense, it is possible that the concerns, issues and beliefs of these women may have changed since that time.

This chapter will also introduce general claims about women's relationships to their bodies in western societies and the link between this relationship and the explosion of involvement in exercise and fitness facilities. It will provide some evidence from this study to support these general claims and move towards more specific claims that came out of this study. It will deal with what the participants think shapes their relationship with their bodies and the sociocultural issues that affect their perceptions of their bodies.

Participant Observation

My first class was a mixed impact class on a Monday evening (5:15 to 6:15 p.m.) I arrived at the club at 5 p.m. and went to the reception desk to sign in for the class. The receptionist put a sticker on my membership card and asked me to proceed to the gym. I noticed a few women dressed up in exercise gear - leotards, matching tops, headbands, sneakers, leg warmers, sweat bands, water bottles in their hands and towels around their necks. They looked confident and totally in sync with the place. I immediately felt intimidated as I was dressed in my old jogging pants and T-shirt that did not quite match. Because I am a Muslim, I also had on my head scarf and I felt as though I didn't quite "fit in." I made my way up gingerly, but when I got up to the aerobics class I noticed that most of the women were dressed in jogging pants or shorts and T-shirts and that I was not too conspicuous. Groups of women were standing outside the room and talking.

This being my very first aerobics class I looked around the room and slowly moved to a corner at the back. I felt as if everyone except me knew what to do and where to go. There was a sense of purpose to the

movements before the class began. Some went to their usual space; others were doing some sort of stretching exercise, while others were filling their water bottles from a water fountain at the end of the corridor. I then realized that I did not even possess a water bottle.

The room itself was quite large with windows on one end and a fully mirrored wall in the front. Other than that, it was empty except for a tape recorder and sound equipment in the front right hand corner. By 5:10 p.m., there were about 15 women in the room. The instructor walked in and busily organized her tapes as well as her portable microphone. One or two women went up to her to chat. I found out from the instructor later that many of the women would ask questions before and after class concerning the various exercises and would also ask advice about how to tone certain parts of their bodies or how to lose weight in certain areas. Some would enquire about chronic pain and ask advice about exercise for arthritis or back pain. Some were anxious to lose weight fast and they would eagerly ask how soon they would be able to see the results of the exercise.

After a while, some of the women smiled at me. Others greeted me

with, "hi!" Jacklyn (a pseudonym) came up to me and said, "This is your first class isn't it?" I replied, "yes." She said, "Don't worry, we all feel lost on the first day. Just stand behind me and try to follow. It's difficult at first but you'll get the hang of it." She was very friendly and comforting. By this time the music had begun and the instructor was calling out, "four, three, two, one and take it to the right, left, right, good. You're doing fine. Come on ladies, one more time." I was completely lost. The music was too fast, the exercise even faster and when everyone went to the left, I went to the right. I felt stupid, clumsy, uncoordinated and totally self-conscious. I felt as though every pair of eyes was on me. After a while I managed a few steps and missed many more. At this stage I was getting sympathetic smiles from the others and those near me smiled encouragingly. Some of the women seemed to be seasoned exercisers as they were doing the movements with relative ease. Others like me were struggling to keep up, gasping for breath, faces red as beets and sweating a lot.

After what seemed like a really long time, the music got a little softer and all the women began leaving the room. I thought that the class

had ended. Soon after, I saw them returning with a thin blue plastic mat in one hand and two dumbbells in the other. I also went out and was told by Jacklyn that the next twenty minutes would be taken up by floor exercises and that was the winding down period. She showed me where to get my "equipment." At this stage many of the women were drinking out of their water bottles and drying themselves. Some were checking their pulse and one or two just lay on their mats and relaxed. This part of the programme was worse for me. We were all lying down on our mats and I couldn't see the instructor and didn't have a clue as to what I was supposed to do. Every now and then I would sit up and have a peek but that didn't help much as the rest of them were already at the next stage.

Jacklyn took me under her wing. She was really friendly and encouraging. After class she introduced me to Mary who said, "What are you doing here? You're so skinny." And then she said, "I guess we could all use the exercise." Mary, too, was friendly and encouraging. They both assured me that most people felt lost on their first day "except for the young ones." Mary said, "They are usually so fit and coordinated that they just seem to fit right in." We laughed about the fact that we

were the “oldies” and consoled ourselves that at least we had the guts to give it a try. We then walked to the locker room together. It was quite crowded and busy. Some were changing and others had just come out of the shower. Two young women were looking at themselves in the mirror and “comparing” their bodies. The general conversation centered around the activity in the class - someone said that this instructor was too fast and that someone else was better, someone else talked about how lazy she felt to come that day but she still had “quite a few pounds to lose.” I said goodbye to Jacklyn and Mary and then went back to the foyer to find a corner where I could write up my notes.

I noticed that by now the coffee shop was quite busy. Some of the women from my class were also having something to eat and drink. I remember at that point making a note in my notebook – “CONTRADICTION.” I had a feeling that many of them came to exercise in order to lose weight and keep in shape, and yet immediately after class they were eating rich, creamy donuts and cheesecake.

The next day, I decided to attend the morning 9:15 to 10:15 a.m. class but when I got up I discovered that my arms and legs were hurting.

I then realized how unfit I was. I had hardly managed any of the exercises and yet I felt stiff. I was determined to continue with my participant observation, so I went. This was the Trim and Tone Class. I was surprised to see Jacklyn there. She told me that she came every day and that she tried to attend the different ones. I found that the instructor for this class went a little slower, so it wasn't too hard to follow. I did not find much difference in the type of exercise, though. It seemed as if the basic exercise routine was very similar and the pace and emphasis on the different parts of the body depended on the instructor. I also noticed that there were more older women in the morning class. Perhaps they were homemakers and it was convenient for them to come at that time. The evening classes (5:15 to 6:15 and 8 to 9 p.m.) were more popular with the younger set. I guessed that many of them were students and women who worked outside the home, in which case this might have been a convenient time for them. Some came to the 5:15 p.m. class after work before they went home. The 8 p.m. class was popular with mothers with young children, as the fathers were available to babysit. The weekend classes were popular with both younger and older women.

I continued in this way, attending the classes at different times, attempting the various exercise routines, making contacts with the women and jotting down all my observations immediately after class so as not to forget anything. By the second week, I found that I was fitting in better and that I was not bad at exercising after all. I was getting the hang of it. I did realize, though, that it was hard work and it needed a lot of commitment to get to the classes regularly. My research was a great motivation for me and so I continued despite the stiffness and the laziness I felt at times. By this time I had a fair idea of whom I was going to approach for the interviews. I was becoming a “regular” at some of the classes. Many more women greeted me and we even exchanged a few words.

I began going to the classes at least half an hour early so that I could observe the last part of the previous class. I found that I could get a better view of what was going on by observing classes when I was not a participant. I also found this a great opportunity to chat with the women who were waiting for the next class. Most of the conversation revolved around weight, food, the different exercise programmes and the different

instructors. The general feeling was that Step was the most difficult routine and only the “really good ones” coped with it. I noticed that “the really good ones” always stood at the front of the class whereas those like me gravitated towards the back. Another observation was that many of the instructors attended the class as participants as well and were always in the front. I also noticed that friends usually stood side by side and encouraged each other. Throughout the class the instructors continued to encourage the participants with words like, “get those thighs in shape,” “one more time will flatten those tummies,” “pull those bottoms in,” “come on ladies lift your knees higher, higher, backs straight, you're doing fine, all right and one more time, and five, four, three, two, one and relax.”

The participant observation component of my research helped me understand that regular participation in aerobics classes requires substantial commitment from the participants. The classes themselves require hard work, coordination, familiarity with the routines and sacrifice of other activities. Sometimes it took a lot of effort for me to get to the class, especially after a long, hard day, but my research was a

motivation for me. So I continued to go.

By observing the discussions between the participants and the instructors I learned about some of the motivations of the participants for pursuing aerobics and about some of their expectations. For example, I overheard a conversation where one woman said to another, "I've been bad. I didn't come [to the gym] for weeks and now I'm paying for it." This comment suggests that there is a moral code to participation in these classes that participants use to judge themselves, their behaviour and to explain what is happening to their bodies. They feel they must individually take charge of their bodies so that they will not get out of control.

I was able to observe differences among the women in terms of their use of the classes for socializing, etc. as some of them met their friends during the class and went for coffee thereafter. Another observation was, that some participants like Gloria and Stephanie participated in more than one class a day and some, like Jacklyn, participated everyday of the week. Finally, the participant observation component of the research made it easier for me to attract volunteer

interviewees because some of them knew me before this phase of the research began.

Interview Results

The analysis of the interview data focused on interactions between sociocultural and individual factors that appear to give rise to weight consciousness and influence the body image of participants in the study. Although the participants were not a homogeneous group in that they varied in age, educational levels, marital status, etc. they generally shared many beliefs and perceptions.

The interviews confirmed the centrality of aerobics participation in the lives of these women. Body management is socially mandated for these women and they feel guilty if they don't comply. It becomes a matter of "should" and "feeling bad" and "feeling terribly guilty" when they miss one class. Only seven out of the twenty-seven participants stated that they did not feel pressured or guilty if they missed a class. Not coming to the class was almost seen as a character flaw and many of the participants stated that they "felt bad" and as if they were "letting

themselves down.”

Weight Consciousness and Body Dissatisfaction

When the participants were asked if they were happy with their bodies, twenty out of twenty-seven said they were. Most of them were committed to their exercise and stated that it was important for them to come to the gym. This suggests that their happiness with their bodies was contingent on continuing to exercise. When they were asked what relationship they felt women in our society generally have with their bodies, only one out of the twenty-seven said they felt that this relationship was good. Others thought that women have a negative relationship to their bodies. They attributed this to the fact that people in this society judged women by, and placed too much emphasis on, physical beauty. Annette, who is in her twenties, said, “I don’t think it’s positive because women think that they are judged by their looks.” Women’s relationship with their bodies was also described as involving a “love/hate relationship” (Vikki, between thirty and thirty-nine years old) and as a “fighting relationship” (Faye, in her forties). Because most women in this culture are unhappy with their

bodies they are continuously trying to change their shape and size through diet and exercise. Gloria, who was in her twenties, said that she thought that most women had a negative relationship with their bodies and [therefore] they were always working for hours trying to improve [their bodies].

For many participants this overidentification was associated with weight consciousness. Most of them, no matter what they weighed, were not satisfied with the shape and size of their bodies. They felt they weighed too much, their tummies bulged, their thighs were too fat, their hips were too big or that they were not tall enough. They considered body parts like thighs, hips, behinds and stomachs as being least attractive. It seems as if these “female parts” are the ones these women hate the most and, as a result, they are constantly fighting to make them smaller (Markula, 1995:435). Interestingly, eyes and hair were reported as being the most attractive, but one participant stated that for her the most attractive feature was the fact that she was thin now.

Many of the participants stated that weight consciousness for them began in childhood, especially during the teen years. For some of the

participants, this consciousness still remained with them in their adult years. Ashley, who was in her twenties, stated that once she reached nine or ten she began to feel conscious about her weight and tried different diets but they never worked. As an adult she dieted. For Cassy, as a teen, dieting was a constant battle and a struggle to deny herself food that she enjoyed. She stated, "Yes I was dieting, I'd say, in high school and the way I was dieting I used to say, 'The diet begins on Monday' and if I broke my diet on Tuesday I would pig out until next Monday." Elaine, who was in her forties, began dieting in high school and was still dieting at the time of the interview. She said that she was happier with her body because of her dieting. Emily said that she started dieting when she was about sixteen or seventeen years old because she felt that she was overweight. Judy, who was in her forties, and Gloria, who was in her twenties, both stated that they dieted as children when they were between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Vikki and Jacklyn stated that they were very conscious of their weight when they were young and that they still dieted. Vikki said that she was on Weight Watchers and that she had lost twenty pounds. Jacklyn said that she tried to be on the "2000 calorie" type

of diet and that she did not drink too much juice because she knew that juice was very high in calories. Others stated that while they did not diet as such, they were mindful of what they ate and tried to maintain a healthy balanced diet. Faye stated that she definitely and consciously watched what she ate. Deanne stated that she tried to control what she ate by cutting down on the sugars and fats.

Some of the participants stated that they have been exercising for most of their lives. Five out of the twenty -seven participants said that they had been exercising for twenty years, eleven, for between ten and fifteen years, and the remaining eleven for between one and eight years.

Many of the participants stated that dieting and exercise were important to them, not only in terms of their appearance, but also in terms of being able to fit into clothes that were in fashion as they felt that this would make them look and feel more attractive.

I guess I try to maintain a healthy weight.
Not so much a healthy weight as a healthy size because I
don't really care how much I weigh. I guess I do to
an extent but not as much as I care about what I look
like when I look into the mirror. If I look good in my
clothes I don't care if I weighed a hundred and eighty
pounds. As long as I look good in my clothes.
Marie

I don't have any measurements as such. It's just that if you feel comfortable in your clothes you feel the difference in your body. That is my main thing. I never really go by weight. I just go by the way I feel in my clothes. Cassy

I hate putting on weight. Why? Because I won't fit into my clothes. Cathy.

Every day I'm mindful of trying to get my body down to a certain weight so that I can fit into the clothing that I have. The basic weight that I feel for myself is like a hundred and twenty-five pounds - a hundred and thirty max, so I'm way over that. So I'd like to be a hundred and twenty pounds. I do think about that. Yes, all the time. Jacklyn

It was evident from the interviews that most of the participants were conscious of their body weight and shape and that, given the chance, they would have changed at least one part of their bodies. Self-reported body weight ranged from one hundred and seven pounds to one hundred and sixty-five pounds. Of the twenty-seven participants who were interviewed, only three were satisfied with their current body weight. Twenty-one participants reported that they would like to be between five and twenty-five pounds lighter (one reported that she would like to be at least forty pounds lighter). One expressed the desire to gain weight (by about seven pounds) and two stated that they would like to replace their body fat with muscle.

Self-reported heights ranged from five feet to five feet, ten inches. When asked about satisfaction with height, thirteen reported that they were satisfied, thirteen reported that they wished to be taller by between two and six inches and one reported that she wished to be shorter.

Only five of the participants stated that they accepted their bodies as they were. This acceptance came after many years of dieting and exercise and finally getting their bodies down to a particular size and shape. Annette, a student who is in her twenties, reported that she was happy with her body. She said that she thought that she looked as good as everyone else and she felt good about her body. Beth, a professional in her thirties, also felt content with her body.

The Thinness Ideal of Feminine Beauty

The current appearance norm for women in western culture is thinness, which is associated with fitness and health. Those women who comply with the norms of thinness and fitness are applauded and those who defy or deviate from them are looked down upon. Therefore, fear of being fat or of being visibly deviant has become a critical problem for

many women and this has led to their striving for thinness. In western culture, being fat is equated with being unhealthy. Despite the fact that none of the participants were visibly overweight, most of them still felt overweight and expressed a wish to lose weight and to be thin. They did not want to be associated with anything "big." All the participants equated thin, toned bodies with fit bodies and admired anyone who possessed such a body. Their aspirations towards such bodies came mainly from a discourse of health and also the strength that supposedly comes with having such bodies. They were at the same time aware of the fact that their bodies were admired more because they exercised. Exercise was seen as a way to self empowerment and positive self construction. The participants in this study clearly saw this. They were aware of the role of exercise in their lives and were active agents in whatever decisions they made concerning their bodies. Many of the participants were aware of the "thinness ideal" and some were even driven by it. Stephanie and Gloria are two examples of the latter. They exercised every day of the week and still viewed their bodies negatively, although they were not heavier than the other participants. Stephanie,

who is a professional in her twenties, was five feet, ten inches in height and weighed one hundred and thirty-five pounds, yet she felt that she was overweight. She said that her “weight issue” was linked to [her] own internal struggle and that she had come to a point in her life when she could not stop [herself] from exercising. She did aerobics every day and sometimes she also used the Nautilus machines after her aerobics workout. She was so committed to her exercise routine that even after a knee injury she did not take a break. When asked about the importance of exercising, Stephanie said, “On a scale of one to ten, I’d say ten.”

I'm not satisfied. It's like competing with myself and nothing is too much any more. It's like I can't stop. Now I've come to a point where I do aerobics every day and I try to put in some Nautilus too, some days. I wouldn't say that I'm obsessed but I just have to excel in whatever I do. I'm not satisfied. It's like competing with myself and nothing is too much any more. It's like I can't stop. I rationalize and think that I shouldn't overdo it but it's something in me. I can't explain. It's like I just have to go on. It's just too important for me to be this way. Stephanie

Gloria, a student in her twenties, was five feet tall and weighed one hundred and seven pounds. Like Stephanie, she felt that she was not “small enough.” She stated that she was “always afraid of being fat” as that would mean that she was “out of control” and she felt that it was

something that she should be “looking after.” She had started aerobics at the age of twelve because she “wanted to be small” and “to work away the fat.” At the time of the interview, she still exercised at least eight times a week. Although her favourite foods were sweet things like cookies, cakes and chocolates, she knew that if she exercised she could “work away the fat.” Gloria loved the “sore, stiff feeling” after exercising as this made her feel as if she had “really exercised.” She felt “good” and she saw this as an “achievement.” Exercise was really important to her and she rated it “nine out of ten” on her priority list.

Not all of the participants were equally driven by the thinness ideal and it could even be said that one participant was immune to this. Judy, who was in her forties, said that she was very comfortable with herself and was not too concerned with her appearance. She also stated that she would not put appearance before comfort. She said, “I have only one coat. I do not wear make up and I don’t dye my hair.”

The experience of many of the participants in this study corroborates the idea that fear of becoming fat has more to do with the social interpretation of their body size than actual weight. Ashley, who

was in her twenties, stated that she did not want ever to go back to the twenty pounds that she had put on a few years ago. She said that she would hate someone to say that she was fat or overweight. Marie, who was also in her twenties, said that she wouldn't like it if she were fat. That was why it was so important for her to go to the gym.

Control and Discipline

The current cultural ideal for women in western societies emphasizes thinness but also controlled and disciplined bodies. Thus, the ideal female body of the 1990s is one that suggests energy, will power, discipline and control. Some of the participants felt that it was important for them to discipline and control their bodies. Jacklyn, Deanne, Annie, Cassy and Vikki are just a few examples.

For me, exercise is where I can take charge. It makes me frustrated when I'm slacking off. I feel that I'm not disciplined enough. Jacklyn

I get a sense of achievement when I maintain my weight. I feel that I can control my body - like I'm in charge. I'll probably feel undisciplined. Right now I've got control over my body. Deanne

We all think that we are too fat, at least most of us.
I think that's basically why a lot of us exercise because
if we didn't we would be out of control. Annie

You reach this point where you got to do something
about your weight - just take control. Cassy

Taking control of and disciplining the body involves more than just physical exercise. Vikki, who is in her thirties, said, "It's almost like a moral issue - you're good only if you control the way that you look."

Body management becomes a real battle with the self and a morality issue for many women in western societies. They therefore find themselves engaging in a never ending course of "self improvement," trying to change their bodies and appearances to suit the ideal of the time. These women are persuaded that they can achieve the desired body and appearance with effort and body work. They are asked to assume self responsibility for their looks. Because women in this culture are often judged by their physical appearance, body work which involves taking care of the body through diet and exercise, and adorning the body through dress and make up, is prioritized. There are things that have to be carried out on a daily basis, every day of a woman's life. Achieving this look is

not only elusive but also momentary. Therefore, women have to be ever vigilant and on guard. There is no time to relax or feel comfortable.

Exercise became an important part of working on appearance and failure to comply left some of the participants feeling guilty. For others it had become part of a routine that had to be carried out. Fifteen of the twenty-seven participants clearly expressed feelings of guilt associated with not exercising or taking care of their bodies. Jacklyn stated that she felt “absolutely guilty” if she missed a class. To her, exercise and coming to the gym were like an “inner conditioning.”

This is a thing that you need to fulfill for yourself.
It's a thing that you have inside. If you don't do it
there's no one else who is going to do it for you.
This is a goal that you set for yourself – something
that you need to do. You can go check your tummy
and say, ‘Wow this is too much. You shouldn't have
this.’ You have to try to work on that to get rid of the
fat. Jacklyn

[I feel guilty] because I feel like I'm not burning off
enough calories that I should. Marie

Yeah, I do [feel guilty]. I feel like I've got to go
[to the gym]. I don't know. It's just a thing. I
feel that if I don't go I'll gain weight or I'll be out
of shape. Ashley

Yeah, I do [feel guilty]. Even if I go on vacation I
feel guilty that I'm missing a class. It's because my
body should be in shape. Jill

Slenderness and firmness of the body have become strongly linked to moral control, self discipline and taking care of oneself. Pictures of "perfect" bodies in magazines, television and newspapers have become constant reminders to women of what they are and what they might look like if only they made the effort. Stay young, stay beautiful and live longer is the message. This places much more pressure on older women who are constantly told that wrinkles, sagging bodies and expanding waistlines, which are part of aging, should be combated by diet, exercise and energetic body maintenance. They are encouraged to seek the help of cosmetic and beauty products to achieve this beauty ideal. Older women have to work especially hard on the thighs, stomach and hips, which seem to get flabbier and more resistant to toning and firming. Thus the ideal is not only to be thin and toned but also to have a youthful body.

Some of the participants had turned to aerobics specifically to fight the effects of aging. Cassy, who was in her twenties, was already worried about "preserving" her body. She said, "I know for me I'm trying to preserve my body. Like I'm twenty-five now and I'm using moisturizers and sun blocks and just trying to look after myself." Deanne said that she

was happy when people commented on how slim she was and how good she looked for her age. She said that she was forty-one and she didn't look her age and that made aerobics worth while for her. Cathy, who was in her forties, commented that most women she knew looked younger than their age and she attributed this to the fact that they took care of their bodies and therefore were happy with them.

Body management and body work thus act as regulatory and subjugatory forces under the guise that diet, make-up and dress of a particular nature are normal for women. The effort required is often exhausting and painful (Bordo, 1989:14). Thus, many women's lives are dominated by the cult of the perfect body (Freedman, 1984), the beauty myth (Wolf, 1990), and the tyranny of bodily perfection (Chernin, 1981). Given a culture that is overflowing with images of "perfect" bodies for women together with the message that one can obtain moral perfection through body work, it makes sense that many of the participants feel that they have to make the effort to achieve this perfection and they feel guilty if they fail to do so.

Motivation

The equation of body size and self esteem makes it very difficult for some women to like themselves if they do not conform to the current body ideal. The message to women is “eat less, exercise more, and do it forever” (Szekely, 1988:134). Women are told that it is simple and it is really up to them to do something about it. They are also told that exercise will do more than just get the body into shape, healthy and fit - it can help a woman develop a positive self image as well. Therefore, looking good will make you feel better about yourself and it will, in turn, increase your self confidence and self esteem.

Most participants in this study stated that health and fitness rather than tone and thinness were the primary motivating factors for their exercising. Only five out of the twenty-seven participants stated that they exercised for weight control. Cassy, who was in her twenties, said that she used to hate aerobics but she loves it now because she found it to be a good form of exercise and she lost weight faster by doing aerobics. For her, the fast results and the positive changes in her body are strong

motivating factors that encourage her to come to the gym. Ashley, who was also in her twenties, stated that for her the most important reason for exercising is to look good. Stephanie and Marie (in their twenties) and Annie (in her fifties) all stated that they exercise for weight control. The remaining twenty-two participants exercised in order to be mentally and physically healthy. Taking care of the body was seen as a very positive step towards nurturing the self. The participants saw their time at the gym as being time for themselves. Jacklyn, who was in her fifties, talked about exercise being an "inner conditioning" and something that you do or undertake for yourself. She saw this as a goal to be set for herself - as something that needed to be done. Glenda (in her thirties) stated that exercise not only kept her body in shape but it also kept her mind in shape. Amy said that exercise made her feel good about herself and she felt a sense of accomplishment. The participants talked about exercise as being a source of stress relief and increased energy. They also emphasized feelings associated with exercise. Jacklyn, Cassy, Mary, Emily, Elaine and Jackie were some of the participants who talked about "feeling good" because they exercised. Feeling good was also associated

with looking good. The connection between self and body size was evident in this study as many of the participants asserted that exercise not only made their bodies beautiful but it also made them feel better about themselves.

It has to do with self esteem. Like if you like the way you look or feel the achievement after exercise, you begin to have a better self esteem. You like yourself more. Gloria

I think it [weight and self esteem] must be connected in some way because I know that when I do have a bit of weight on or I'm not in good shape, I don't feel good about myself. Stephanie

I think a lot of issues of body image and fitness for women really come back to self image. If you don't have a good self esteem you have a very poor image of yourself and you compare yourself to other people. Susie.

Many participants in this study stated that, in fact, it was quite difficult and required hard work to remain committed to exercise. Some stated that it took time away from their daily schedule and that it was, in some cases, even quite expensive. Feeling happy with one's body is part of this process. However, to think that by correcting the size and shape of one's body one would automatically feel good about oneself is an

illusion. Many women lose massive amounts of weight and still remain dissatisfied with their bodies. In fact, when they fail to reach their ideal some end up feeling more frustrated, disillusioned and even depressed and those who achieve their initial ideals may develop new, higher standards. This was clearly borne out by Stephanie, a professional in her twenties, who said that the more she exercises the more she feels she has to increase it. She said that she feels as if she is competing with herself.

The Sociocultural Pressures to Conform

Having discussed the thinness ideal in an earlier section, I now turn to the sociocultural pressures that encourage women to pursue thinness. The participants in this study emphasized their vulnerability to the images and messages in the media, especially the advertisements. Jacklyn, who is a homemaker in her fifties, felt very passionate about the advertisement companies and how they “control” women’s lives. She said, “It’s the ad companies that control our lives - they tell us what to wear; they tell us what make- up to use; they tell us how to be; how to live. They actually do.”

Advertising promotes the slimness norms through having ultra thin female models in newspapers, magazines and television. Szekely (1988:50) states that women's preoccupation with their appearance has been fostered by advertisements, popular books, television programmes and movies. Through the media women are offered the "Total Fitness Package" (Szekely, 1988:116) - fitness, health and youth all in one deal. Women are made to believe that if they exercise they will be able to have the body that they had when they were young.

In the following excerpts, the participants talked about the power of the media in shaping their feelings and perceptions about their bodies.

...just the things that you see on television, they all shape your thoughts about your body and everyone thinks they have to be a certain size and a certain shape. Cassy

I think everyone wishes to look like the models in the magazines and I think it kind of motivates you to look like that. Ashley

Emily, a homemaker in her thirties, felt that many people become "obsessed" or "upset" with their bodies and she blamed this on the advertisements in the media. She said, "I suppose again it comes from advertising. You see so many slim, skinny and beautiful models and you

see them everywhere. So your husband or partner wants you to be like that.”

Many participants were aware of the pressures that are placed on women by the media and they felt that it was difficult and frustrating to try to keep up with them. Gloria, a student in her twenties, said that she was definitely affected by the media and all the images that she sees and that made her disappointed with her body. She felt that she should change her body [to fit the media ideal]. Cathy, who was a homemaker in her forties, stated that the media put pressure on women through advertisements and pictures of models. She said that when one sees how nice [the models] look, one wants to be like them. According to Vikki, who is a professional in her forties, women are pressured from the time they are twelve or thirteen to conform to a certain perception of what is beautiful and attractive, and they beat themselves up all the time because they don't measure up. Hutchinson (1982:62) argues that the media images of perfect female beauty that bombard us daily leave no doubt in the minds of most women that they fail to measure up. She further states that many of the beauty advertisements suggest to women that their

bodies are deficient and in need of improvement. Diane, a professional in her thirties, felt that men do not experience the same sort of pressures that women do. She said, "Women, more than men, are shown images all the time on how they are supposed to look, and if they don't look that way they start to wonder why and blame themselves for not looking that way. Men don't have the same standards imposed on them." Some of the participants felt that although men do not experience the same social pressures as women with regard to their bodies, many men expect women to have the "ideal" bodies that are portrayed in the media.

Much like the women in Szekely's 1988 study, some of the participants felt that they had to be thin in order to be sexually attractive to men. Ashley, a student in her twenties, stated that men didn't like heavy girls and that this can be cruel. She said that she noticed this at parties and bars where heavy girls were not asked to dance. She felt that was why, at her age, it was important to look good. Cathy and Jill, who are both in their forties, clearly stated that women want to please the gaze of men. Both saw slimness in terms of keeping their marriages alive. Cathy stated that she likes to look good for her husband. Jill said that she

tried her best [to look good] as it meant a lot to her that she looked nice. She felt that it was important for a woman to maintain a slim and attractive body so that her husband would not look at other women. Thus, having a slim and therefore an attractive body seemed to be connected to these participants' security in their marriage. It was interesting to note that both Cathy and Jill were married and homemakers. Their attitude could be interpreted as rooted in the insecurity that both these women experienced because they were economically dependent on their husbands. They also belong to the same age group. Ashley, who was in her twenties, was the only one in her age group to verbalize the importance for women to look good in order to be attractive to men.

Some other participants felt that many women wanted to look good because they want to please the gaze of other women. Jennifer, who was in her thirties, said that although women want to be attractive to men, she thought that many women are concerned about how other women see them. Laura, who is a professional in her forties, felt that women are the main critics of other women and that [some] men don't care how women look. Marie, who was in her twenties, said that women are so

focused on their looks because they want to meet the standards set by other women. Mary, who was in her fifties, stated that she loved it when people told her that she didn't look her age. She felt that it had a lot to do with exercise. She said that she knew that her body was aging and she could not change that, but exercise definitely made her skin firm and therefore she looked younger than she was. This also points to the importance of peer assessments/local networks versus just the media in shaping people's weight consciousness and body image.

Demands are always being made upon women in western societies to contour their bodies to please the eyes of others. Orbach (1978) argued that much of a woman's experience and identity depends on how she sees herself and how she feels others see her. She therefore works towards attaining a body that she feels will be pleasing to others. Marie, who was in her twenties, said that she knew when other people looked at her they had feelings [about her] because of the way that she looked. Mary stated that her husband constantly talked about her weight and when she ate she compared her portions to his. She feels as if he is watching or keeping an eye on what she eats.

The link between a thin body and health, fitness and beauty further increases the guilt and frustration experienced by many women in western societies who cannot achieve this "ideal." Most participants were very much aware of the unreal, unattainable, elusive body ideal that was presented to them, and some were torn between what was believed to be the "ideal" and what was realistically attainable. Many felt that the thin, toned "perfect" media ideal was not realistic - it was too perfect, unreal. Nine out of the twenty-seven participants stated that they knew that the images they saw in the media were not "real" and that they knew that, for them, they were unattainable. They were never going to look like the models on television or in the magazines.

We all know that it's not real, yet we get caught up in this at some time or the other, especially in our teen years. I think it will be better if we were all more realistic. You know, if you look at some of the supermodels, their height and their weight, it's totally unrealistic for ninety percent of women in the western world. You know you are not going to be six foot one and a hundred and twenty pounds. It's just not going to happen. Vikki

We don't realize that we will never reach the ideal. Most women cannot accept that that's the way they're going to be. You can't change the way that you are built - it's not real. Diane

Most women are always working for hours trying to

improve or trying to attain goals that I think they are not going to reach because it is not possible. People ought to realize that there are a lot of individual differences. The ideals that people set aren't realistic and it doesn't matter what you look like. But that's really a hard thing to change - very hard. Gloria

Beth, who was in her thirties, said that she was not bothered by the images in the media because she knew that they were not real. She said that she wished these images would change because models have shapes and sizes that are unrealistic and this makes it hard for young girls who are trying to look like them.

This conscious rejection indicates a paradox because the participants are aware that the images they are seeing are neither real nor fully attainable, and yet they work really hard in their aerobics class and often assess their own bodies by comparing them to these images. The participants did not come across as being victims of the beauty system and yet they seemed to be driven by internalized sociocultural pressures to appear to be "in control" or to "fit in." It therefore seemed as if their relationship with their bodies was ambiguous. The participants seemed to keep on struggling to try to make sense of the contradictions associated

with inhabiting a woman's body in western society. Most of them talked about the "perfect" "unreal" models in the media and their own personal struggles to resist this body ideal. At the same time, they found it difficult to ignore them. Most of the participants in this study acknowledged the fact that the bodies that we see in the media are not "real" or that it takes professional make overs, hours of hairstyling and "trick" photography to achieve such a look. Yet some of them got caught in a vicious cycle where they desired to look like the media images. Some of the participants felt that because of the media images, their husbands, partners and family members expected them to lose weight and to have a body of a particular shape. All were very concerned about the media presentation of thin and small models and the influence that this had on society as a whole. They all talked about how they themselves were affected at one time or the other by these images. Most of the participants acknowledged that because of the societal pressure on women to be thin most women have a negative relationship with their bodies. This relationship is described as the "love/hate relationship, a fighting relationship, unrealistic, unhealthy." This negative relationship that

women have with their bodies is blamed on the messages that women receive through the media.

Many felt that it was time that women worked together to resist these sociocultural pressures that push them towards such an unreal and elusive body ideal.

So I think that the more we women are independent, think for ourselves and are less dependent on others for our well being then we will start to come out of this forced exile into trying to become so perfect. There should come a point in a woman's life where she says, wait a minute, enough already, be comfortable with who you are. I would like women to feel comfortable with their bodies in their own skins. Jacklyn

A woman should just find herself and try to avoid as much as possible other people's opinions and just try to find things she enjoys and appreciates and try to keep it that simple rather than worry about what other people think. Faye

[You have to] just be yourself and don't let others influence the way you are. You've got to make decisions yourself. Be comfortable with yourself. If you are not comfortable you have to take control and do something about it. Don't let others tell you what to do. Glenda

Most participants stated that women should stand up to the social pressures that are placed upon them. They also emphasized the fact that they exercised because it was something that they did for themselves.

Agency and Self Construction

Despite the fact that most participants said that they were influenced by the media, their friends and families in the way that they perceive their bodies, they stated that body improvement was not the only reason they exercised. They did it for health reasons, enjoyment, energy and stress relief. They cited these as the real benefits of exercise. For some, it was also an opportunity to meet other women and to make friends.

I like coming in here because there is a sort of comradery in here...and I also enjoy meeting people. Rose

I like the fellowship too. Being a regular I've met people and we chat before and after class. Vikki
Well, meeting people. I've been going for a long time and you see each other and it's kind of a meeting place - a social event. Glenda

Get into shape, lose weight, enjoyment, stress relief and the company. Besides I've made friends. We go and have coffee afterwards. Annie

Most participants, except for Stephanie and Gloria who were mentioned earlier, stated that they were exercising out of rational choice, i.e. that their commitment to exercise was reasonable, free and voluntary. It was something they were doing for themselves.

There's nobody putting a gun to your head to do it.

You do it for yourself. So there you are out there doing something for yourself with end results that you are looking for. So it's a very incentive building thing to do. [I exercise] because it makes me feel good. It soothes me mentally; it works out my stress...for mental sanity. Jacklyn

I exercise because I find that when I do, I feel better about myself. Faye

I love it. It makes me feel better, more energy. It keeps you going. Cassy

It makes me feel good about me. I feel a sense of accomplishment. Amy

The participants talked about how exercise was something that they enjoyed. This verifies the theory of Davis (1995b: 23) that women are not “cultural dopes” who blindly follow the enticements of the beauty system; that women actually take part “in its delights” (Davis, 1995b: 30) and are “active creators” (Beausoleil, 1994:51) and agents of their own destiny. They are knowledgeable about their bodies and make informed decisions regarding their bodies. According to Davis (1995b:31), the feminist concept of women as agents is, that women are “active participants in the constitution of [everyday] social life.” Davis states that, despite the fact that women might not always have control over their

condition, they nonetheless, do have awareness about their situation and the consequences that their actions might have. The participants in this study were very much aware of their situation and the consequences of their actions and this made them take responsibility for their bodies as active, knowledgeable, rational individuals. It is in this context that they can be classified as “agents.”

Conclusion

The participants acknowledged that the sociocultural forces that surround them shaped to some degree their thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours regarding their bodies. There is no doubt that the participants were influenced and to a certain degree pressured by these forces through the media, their friends and their family. They are, however, not passive followers who quietly devote their time, money and energy entirely to the reconstruction of their bodies. Many of them do in fact question the western body ideal for women, and are skeptical of the media presentation of such an ideal. Some are faced with a contradiction with regard to their bodies. On the one hand, they want to conform to the

social ideal, on the other hand, they find that it is an unreal, elusive goal. This awareness shows that the participants have not entirely "bought into the ideal body hype." They question the logic of the contradictory beauty ideal for women by trying to challenge and resist it.

Although many of the participants expressed a desire to be a different shape or to be able to lose a few more pounds, and some have managed to achieve this to some degree, others have managed to come to terms with the impossibility of achieving this body ideal.

Aerobic classes are mainly geared to reshape and tone the body. However, many of the participants felt that these classes offered more than just physical gains. Many came "for the enjoyment and the music," they gave them energy "to face the rest of the day," others gained a "sense of achievement" that made them "feel better" about themselves. The classes allowed them time to themselves and "soothed them mentally." For many, it was also a place "to meet and make friends." Doing aerobics was a means to positive self construction for some, as well as to fitness and health. For some it was a means to beauty.

Unlike the participants in Redican and Hadley's (1988) study, only

eight participants in this study felt that the gym was a social place where they could meet other women. The majority of the participants left as soon as the class was over.

When the participants were asked what advice they would give to a young woman regarding her body or body image, they unanimously stated that inner beauty was more important than outer beauty and that although diet and exercise were important for health, everything should be done in moderation. They also stressed that young women should do whatever they wanted for themselves and not be pressured by anything whether it was the media, family or friends.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusion : So Many Calories – So Little Time

When Brook Mahealani Lee, Miss America, was crowned Miss Universe in 1997, she was asked, "If there were no rules in your life for one day and you could be outrageous, what would you do?" She replied, "I would eat everything in the world. You do not understand...I would eat everything twice." It is sad and contradictory that in North America, a land of plenty, many women choose to starve themselves in the name of beauty. It seems as if, in this "Garden of Eden," food has become the forbidden fruit. Eating, a requirement for survival, has become a pathology for many women.

In western culture, women are taught to nurture and feed others, but they have to deny themselves. Many women are faced with the challenge of achieving bodily perfection through diet and exercise throughout their lives. Early in life, as little girls, they learn that it is important to be pretty and soon discover the power of being beautiful. Women in this culture know that to be perceived as physically beautiful

means to be accepted, to be popular, and that to differ from the norm means to be marginalized and isolated. They often therefore feel pressured to conform to accepted standards of beauty. The ideal female form today is one that is thin, toned and muscular. Western women are reminded on a daily basis that it is important for them to achieve this look. The overemphasis that is placed on the female body by this culture continues to drive women to struggle, work hard and, for some, even to starve themselves to change the size and shape of their bodies in order to conform to these beauty ideals. Many soon realize the futility of trying to achieve this virtually unattainable body ideal. Genetically, women's bodies have fat deposits in the hips, thighs, bottoms and stomachs yet these are the very areas where women are required to be fat free.

Today, beauty is promoted under the guise of health and fitness and women are promised that if they look good they will feel great. They are made to believe that any form of change to the body - like losing a few inches or pounds in the "right places" or the toning of certain muscles will lead to better health. Experts tell women that changing their bodies will also change their lives; it is just a matter of getting out there

and doing something about it. The question is, when is a woman thin enough or healthy enough?

This thesis has examined weight consciousness and body image among a small group of women in Atlantic Canada who do aerobics regularly at a fitness centre. In this thesis, weight consciousness has been defined as a preoccupation with weight, body shape, exercise, fitness and health among individuals in western societies and western society as a whole. Body image refers to how people in this society perceive their bodies and how they feel about them.

Chapter 2 reviewed existing research on weight consciousness and body image among men and women in North America. It also outlined several feminist theoretical frameworks that have been used to account for women's preoccupation with their bodies, exercise and fitness in the contemporary period. This thesis draws primarily on insights from postmodern feminism and agency theory. The works of Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1989) were used to illustrate how some feminists have used Foucault's concepts of "discipline" and the "docile body" to examine the female body in western society. According to Foucault, different

disciplinary institutions produce “docile bodies” which become ready to obey the power structures in society. Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1989) argue that the beauty practices of women which produce a feminine body in western societies result in a docile and disciplined body.

Bordo (1989) states that in managing their bodies women pursue an unreal goal. They are constantly being told that dress, make up and body work will put right their shortcomings (Wolf, 1990:272). Bordo (1990), Bartky (1988) and Chernin (1981) argue that many women in western society grow up despising their bodies because the ideal female body in this society is expected to resemble that of a young boy - wide shoulders, tight muscles and narrow hips. The majority of women, no matter how hard they try, will never be able to achieve this type of body because there are fundamental differences between a man's and a woman's body. Chernin (1981) further argues that this unattainable boyish ideal is one of the major causes of bodily dissatisfaction and anxieties for women.

However, Davis (1995), Beausoleil (1994) and Smith (1990) argue that women do not blindly follow the beauty practices that are imposed

upon them by society. They are knowledgeable about their bodies and make informed decisions about their bodies and their appearances.

The findings of this study support those from studies indicating that women in western societies tend to be dissatisfied with their body weight and body shape because this culture idealizes thinness in women. Many of the study participants had a long history of dieting and attempts to discipline their bodies and mould them to the current ideal for women of youthful, thin, toned bodies. These women acknowledged the role the media play in promoting the thin body ideal and agreed that the media have tended to create unrealistic and unattainable standards for women to emulate. These media messages play a role in generating weight consciousness and negative body images among women in this fitness centre as among women elsewhere in the West.

There is no doubt that western culture admires and encourages thinness in women. Everywhere women turn, they are told that it is very important for them to look beautiful, that it is part of their femininity and to be thin is to be beautiful. Most women cannot help being overly concerned about their bodies and their appearance because they are

continuously being told that if they want to be happy, successful and accepted they have to look good. Physical beauty and admiration will give them increased value in a society that idealizes appearance and beauty in women. Some women are therefore pushed into a relentless struggle to the thin body ideal.

Today, the cultural standard for female sexual attractiveness is slimmer for women than at any other time since the 1930s (Silverstein et al. 1986). Many participants realize how difficult it is to have a body that meets the standards that are laid down for them in such a society. The notion that a woman's body must be small and take up little space (Bartky, 1988:111) was borne out by some of the participants who stated that they wanted to be thin and small. Being "big" or "developed" became problematic for them while growing up, as they felt that they did not "fit in."

Another notion is that the female body needs to be managed through diet and exercise. Body management is seen as a sign of control and discipline. As Nasser (1988) points out, thinness in western society is associated with discipline and self control. Many women in this culture

tend to weigh themselves frequently and seek medical help in order to lose weight. Weight becomes a crucial factor in their lives because it plays an important role in their psychological and social well being. Thinness, through diet and exercise, is no longer seen as something that is private and personal. It has almost become an obligation that is demanded of women by society. In western societies obesity is seen as a character flaw, as a sign that the body is out of control. This was borne out by the participants who felt that being overweight was a sign of being undisciplined and out of control. In this culture, with obesity comes feelings of isolation, depression and failure. Therefore, to be fat, or to fear becoming fat, has become a critical problem for many women. They believe that they have to look a certain way and that they should be able to control how they look. Many of the participants in this study also expressed a concern with being fat or a fear of becoming fat.

Despite the fact that none of the participants was visibly overweight, they still expressed a concern about being overweight and felt that they had to lose weight. Through diet and exercise they felt that they could control their bodies. The findings of this study revealed that

concerns with body shape and body size were normative for the participants in this study. This concurred with MacNevin's (1992) findings from a similar study.

Another implicit message that is given to a woman in western society is that she alone is responsible for her body's shortcomings and hence she must take the initiative to correct them. Women are told that anyone can achieve a healthy, fit and beautiful body... that it's really a matter of trying. These are the types of messages that set women up for continuous self surveillance, self monitoring, exercise and weight control. Some participants felt guilty if they could not manage their bodies and judged themselves in terms of their capacity to avoid slacking off and to keep their bodies under control. Thus, body management became something important for the participants. They felt that they had to do something to make their bodies look and fit the sociocultural expectations. They had to individually take charge of their bodies so that they would not go out of control.

Despite their efforts to exercise and the hard work that is involved, body management had become a real battle for many of the participants

who saw it as a constant “struggle.” For others, the end results were worth the hard work and effort and this also became a motivating factor to exercise.

However, another strong motivation for some of these women was that taking care of the body was seen as a very positive step toward nurturing the self. The participants saw their time at the gym as being time for themselves. Exercise was seen as a means to achieve self empowerment - to be able to control one's body means to have control over one's self.

The participants realized that it was very difficult to attain a body that resembled the models in the magazines. They admitted that although they were to some degree pressured by them, having a perfect body was not the main reason for their exercise. Health was viewed as their main goal. They did aerobics because it made them feel better. Most of them stated that they exercised in order to have a healthy and fit body and that any weight loss that resulted from this was an added bonus. Some said that they exercised for the pure enjoyment and that they loved the music and the movements. Exercise, according to the participants, was relaxing,

energizing and gave them a feeling of accomplishment that they had done something good. The participants further stated that they exercised mainly because it promotes self improvement and that the decision to take part in exercise was entirely voluntary.

This study also suggests that there is a link between feeling physically fit, feeling you have a beautiful and healthy body, and experiencing a healthy mind. The participants acknowledged that physical beauty was an advantage socially, but they also felt that the benefits derived from exercise were related more to physical fitness and good mental health than to beauty. They also confirmed that their bodies were definitely admired more after they began exercising.

The interviews showed that the participants did not go about their exercise unknowingly. They were quite aware of the societal expectations when it comes to women's bodies and were especially skeptical when it came to the media presentation of women. They talked about the power of the media in influencing the attitudes of people when it came to women's bodies. They especially talked about the advertisements and how, as Jacklyn put it, "they control our lives."

The participants were aware of these pressures and they wanted to resist these expectations. Yet they could not help but conform. The participants were thus faced with contradictions in their expectations. On the one hand, they worked really hard to change the size of their bodies and yet they realized that it was an elusive goal. Many of the participants talked about the unrealistic expectations that women have when it comes to their bodies and how women feel that they have to meet the cultural standards in order to be accepted or attractive.

Added to this is another burden for the already heavy workload towards body maintenance - the fight to get rid of the fat and to look young. The participants always alluded to the thighs, hips, stomach and bottoms as the "problem" areas - as the areas where they put on weight which they could not get rid of. They also described these areas as being the least attractive and were not at all hesitant to talk about them. Most of them had at least one part of her body that she was not happy with. Only six of the participants were undecided as to which particular part of their body they found least attractive. Interestingly enough, the things that they liked about their bodies like their smile, hair, dimples and eyes

were parts that were not identified as female.

Resistance and acceptance were issues that were discussed by most of the participants. There was talk about women getting together to challenge and “fight” the system and that women should feel comfortable and happy with their bodies. Having a healthy body image, developing self confidence and positive self esteem was also seen as being important for women. The participants felt that women should accept themselves as they are and not set their goals to please others. They emphasized that feeling good about oneself was more important than just looking good; and that there should be moderation in everything whether it was exercise or diet. Women should work on trying to stay healthy instead of getting caught up in the “skinny model phenomena.”

The participants' commitment to exercise was clearly shown by the fact that twenty-one out of twenty-seven stated that it was very important for them to come to the gym. The costs associated with going to the gym varied between their commitments to their careers, families and social obligations. The participants all felt that the overall benefits outweighed the cost.

Today, in many Canadian cities, "Women's Only" gyms have sprung up in large numbers and they attract many members. I, too, have joined such a gym. Through my observations and conversations with the members I discovered women who were comfortable in a place they could call their own. The women in such a gym felt that they didn't have to worry about how they dressed or how they looked. They also did not feel self conscious when there were only women around them. A future study might address the question of why women choose to go to an all women's gym as opposed to a "mixed" one.

The overall purpose of this study was to explore women's body experiences within the realm of aerobic exercise. This study of twenty-seven women who are highly active in aerobic exercise confirms that concerns with body weight and body size are normative for them. They acknowledged that although they were partly influenced by the culture of the "thin body ideal" their main reason for exercising was fitness and health. They were all very well aware of the media representation of women and were not entirely "duped" by it. Their participation in exercise was also a result of a knowledgeable and rational decision and

the belief that a fit body was a healthy one.

The findings of this study attest to the existing dissatisfaction that women in western societies feel about their physical appearance. Although the participants' ideas about exercise often resonate with the health and fitness discourse, the findings show the extent to which body dissatisfaction represents a "normative discontent" among many of them.

It is important for women to question the cultural preoccupation with women's bodies and to challenge them. We need to challenge the cultural expectations that we should be a particular shape and size and work towards changing these expectations so that we might be accepted and respected for who we are. Women need, also, to resist and fight the large advertising companies that impose upon us the ideas of how we should look and dress. As women, we should celebrate our differences and our oneness - this will allow us to grow and it will empower us.

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APPENDIX 1

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Women, Aerobics and Body Image
Researcher: Ferhana Coovadia
Graduate Studies
Department of Sociology
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

The purpose of this research project is to address women's body experience within aerobics. This study intends to explore the body image of young and older women who participate in aerobic exercise and their reasons for participating. For this purpose I will be asking you a number of questions concerning your experience with, your knowledge of and participation in aerobic exercise as well as questions about your diet and your body. You will be **guaranteed** total confidentiality and anonymity. You may withdraw from participating in this study at any time, or refuse to answer any questions, or discuss anything that you may be uncomfortable with during the study. You also have the right to request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time. All the tapes will be disposed of after the study is completed.

Thank you for your participation.

Signed by interviewee:.....

Date:.....

Signed by interviewer:.....

Date:.....

APPENDIX 2

BODY CONCEPT QUESTIONNAIRE*

INTERVIEW NO:.....

The purpose of this questionnaire is to increase our understanding of how we feel about our bodies and how we think others perceive them. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We are only interested in learning your own point of view. Please do **not** write your name on the questionnaire. We wish to maintain **strict anonymity** and **confidentiality**. Please remember to return this questionnaire to the investigator.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Part 1: General Information

1. In what year were you born? 19.....
2. What is your marital status? Single.....
 Married.....
 Common Law.....
 Widowed.....
 Divorced.....
 Separated.....
3. Do you have any children? Yes..... No.....
If yes, now many?..... What are their ages?.....
4. What is the highest levels of education of your:
 Father.....
 Mother.....

Yourself.....

- 5.(a) What is your father's occupation?
- (b) What is your mother's occupation?
- (c) What is your occupation?
6. How many brothers do you have?
7. How many sisters do you have?
8. You were the (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.) child born in your family?.....
9. What is your height?.....feet,inches, /metres
10. What is your weight?.....lb. /kg.
11. What is your current employment status? Are you:
Employed 1-20 hours a week?.....
Employed 21-30 hours a week?.....
Unemployed and looking for work?.....
Unemployed and not looking for work?.....
12. If you could change only one feature of your physical appearance,
what would it be?
Height.....
Weight.....
A specific part of your body..... Which one?.....
Nothing.....

THANK YOU

*Borrowed from MacNevin (1992)

APPENDIX 3

***BODY CONCEPT INTERVIEW**

Interview No:.....

Date:.....

Time Started:.....

Time Ended:.....

Participation History:

Were you physically active as a young child? If so, in what sort of activity and with whom?

Did you participate in organized sports in school? If yes, in which sport(s) and how long? If you did not participate in sports, why not?

What sort of memories, feelings do you have about your body during early adolescence? Do you remember your feelings about menstruation? Did puberty affect the level of your physical activity? If so, how? Do you remember any specific comments made about your body by others at this time?

How did you first become interested in physical exercise? Why? Were you influenced in any way (positively/negatively) by family members, peers, media images, etc.? Did you start exercising after having children? After reaching menopause (where applicable)?

Diet History:

Did you ever consciously attempt to lose/gain weight as a child? If so, how old were you at that time? What were your feelings/motives?

What were your favourite foods when you were a child? When and approximately how often did you have them?

What are your favourite foods now? When and how often do you eat them? Do you usually eat them with others (family, friends, mealtimes) or when you are alone?

Do you diet, i.e., consciously control what you eat and how much you eat?

Are your eating habits different (i.e., the types of food, how often you eat, the amount that you eat) when you are tired/depressed/stressed/before/during menstruation?

Body History:

Does your body weight fluctuate? Has this changed over your adult life (with pregnancy, menopause)? If so, how much? Are you heavier/lighter now than you were five years ago? Ten years ago?

Have you lost/gained weight recently? If so, how much?

Have you ever stayed indoors because you felt “too fat” to go out?

Have you ever wished you were taller/shorter? If so, how tall would you like to be?

If you could weigh what you wanted, what would that be?

What do you consider your most attractive physical feature? Your

least attractive?

Do you think that your body, appearance, etc., is admired more now that you are exercising?

How do you feel others rate your attractiveness? Do men find you attractive? Do other women ever compliment you on your appearance, body type, a particular physical feature, etc.?

How do you feel about your body now?

How did you feel about your body before you began to exercise?

How do you describe the way that you dress? How long does it take you to get dressed in the morning? To go out to a dinner/party?

Do you enjoy shopping for new clothes? What are your favourite stores? Do you shop for clothes only when you need them or do you shop regularly looking for just the perfect garment?

Role of Exercise:

Why do you exercise?

How long have you been exercising regularly? What kinds of exercise have you tried? What is your favourite form of exercise? Why?

How often (times per week) do you attend aerobics classes? Do you participate in any other form of regular exercise in addition to aerobics? How long have you taken aerobics classes?

How do you feel immediately after you exercise? The next day?

What do you enjoy the most about aerobic exercise? Least? Are there any rewards/positive features you hadn't expected? What about costs/sacrifices? Are there any? If so, what are they?

Do you ever compare yourself to the others in the class?

Do you have any definite goals established for your body? Do you have any specific weight/measurements to achieve? What are these goals?

Do you know of anyone whom you feel is more "fit" than you?

Why do you think that they are more fit?

Do you think that you are more fit because you exercise?

Have you ever hurt yourself doing aerobics?

Do you ever feel guilty if you miss a class? Why?

Have you ever missed a class? Why?

How important is it for you to come to the gym?

Are you currently in a relationship?

How do your friends/family/partner feel about your involvement in exercise? How does this affect your relationship with them? Do they engage in any form of physical exercise? If so, what sort?

How important is it to you what others think about your appearance? Why?

How do you feel about the relationship that most women have with their bodies? Is there anything about it you would like to see changed?

Are you happy with the way that you look now?

What would you consider to be the ideal body?

What would you consider to be a beautiful body?

How would you define beauty?

Why do you think that women feel the way they do about their bodies?

Has your family/friends/partner ever criticized the way that you look?

Have you ever felt pressured by anyone to exercise in order to control your weight?

Do you think that you have ever been influenced by media images/pictures/ads in the way that you feel about your body?

What advice would you give to a young girl concerning her body/body image?

* Borrowed from MacNevin (1992) and revised for this study.

