

**Body Size, Food and Women's Identity:  
A Qualitative Psychological Study across the Life Span.**

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Dedication

To my parents with all my love and gratitude

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Summary

This thesis investigates the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women from three different stages of the life span. A qualitative feminist psychological perspective is adopted, which shifts the emphasis from models of individual deficiency to a model of subjective meanings shaped in relation to social and historical discourses surrounding femininity, sexual attractiveness and a 'thin ideal' of body size. The life span perspective reduces the emphasis on young women, and explores sexual attractiveness and relationships in relation to ageing discourses which construct women's sexual attractiveness as declining after early adulthood. In addition, the contribution of women's experiences of feeding their families to the meanings of body size and food are explored.

The research is located within the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). It develops a methodology incorporating social constructionist grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995; Charmaz, 1990) and feminist standpoint methodology (Griffin, 1995; Oakley, 1981). The individual is conceptualised as constructing the meanings of her experiences in relation to extra-local discourses through a process of interaction with, and reflection upon, discourses.

The empirical research comprised a pilot study (N=3), which used a group interview methodology to explore the experiences of three women in their early twenties. The main studies of the thesis used in-depth individual interviews to explore the meanings of body size and food for women aged between sixteen and eighteen (*Study One*, N=15); women in the thirty to forty five age group (*Study Two*, N=18); and women in the over sixty age group (*Study Three*, N=12).

The findings of the thesis indicate that there were a range of different meanings surrounding body size and food for women from the different age groups of the studies. These meanings were related to the different sexual and family relationships in which the women were involved and to the women's sense of themselves in these relationships. The women's experiences of the relationship between self and others were constructed in relation to the social discourses surrounding femininity and women's roles, where there was a reflection upon these discourses in the context of the women's lives and experiences. In addition, some women also constructed their experiences in relation to alternative discourses which minimised the importance of body size and rejected the traditional expectations of women's lives and relationships.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS: PERSONAL TRANSITIONS AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines my intellectual development within the first year of my postgraduate research, in order to describe the transition I made from working as a quantitative social psychologist interested in research on women to working as a qualitative feminist social psychologist. This transition followed the identification of a number of problems in mainstream psychology and represented a fundamental shift in my ideas and attitudes towards the subject matter which psychology examines and the methods upon which psychological theory is based. A discussion of these issues is important because this shift resulted in substantial changes in the research I subsequently carried out for my PhD. These changes related both to the substantive nature of the research and to its epistemological and methodological orientation.

I began studying for my PhD in 1991, following the completion of an undergraduate degree in psychology. The first six months of my postgraduate research were spent setting up a project to examine the role of cognitive factors in psychological adjustment to miscarriage. This project was to build on the research I carried out for my undergraduate dissertation, which was a small-scale quantitative study relating psychological distress following women's first miscarriage to their use of specific pre-defined cognitions (Tunaley, Slade and Duncan, 1993, 1992a, 1992b). My PhD proposed to further investigate the preliminary findings of this research in a large scale prospective study.

As I began studying for my PhD I gradually became aware of a number of problems with the theoretical and methodological framework in which both my undergraduate and postgraduate research were based. As will be discussed in section 2, these problems focused around psychology's failure to explore social context and gender, its dismissal of the meanings and understandings which individuals have of their experiences, and its potential exploitation of research participants.

The identification of these problems made carrying out traditional psychological research extremely problematic for me. After much thought and after six months of my

postgraduate research, I decided to change both the substantive content and the theoretical and methodological orientation of my PhD research. This involved changing the topic of study to that of women, body size and food as well as looking at women's experiences from a feminist perspective, through exploring the role of gender power relations in women's lives. Methodologically, the changes involved shifting the research from the traditional quantitative framework of mainstream psychology to a qualitative interpretative framework which analysed individual's experiences from their own perspectives. These changes also involved changing my PhD supervisors.

As I write about the transitions I made at the start of my postgraduate research I can look back upon the transition and clearly outline the problems which I experienced. In considering this transition at the end of the research, I can relate these problems to current critiques and debates within psychology (see Chapter Four). However, whilst this chapter presents the development of my ideas about psychology as a straightforward process, this does not represent the actual reality of the experience. When I was actually in the process of the transition the problems were experienced in terms of 'gut feelings' or instincts which were very difficult to define or identify in a formal academic manner. This meant that I felt very confused about the research I was proposing to carry out as well as about my role as a postgraduate researcher.

The confusion and unhappiness which the transition in my ideas about psychology created for me can be related to a number of factors. Firstly, it relates to the fact that my undergraduate degree had involved little coverage of the critiques of the epistemology of mainstream psychology. Secondly, I had been 'trained' within my psychology degree to be objective rather than subjective and hence not to rely on my own 'subjective' and hence supposedly 'biased' perspectives. Thirdly, the dissatisfactions I experienced in relation to the academic content of psychology were confused with feelings of dissatisfaction with the process of carrying out postgraduate research itself. Such a process is commonly recognised as an extremely stressful and confusing experience (see Phillips and Pugh, 1994) and I found this was particularly the case during the initial stages of my research.

A final problem I encountered in relation to the transition in my research related to my feelings about taking on a 'public' identity as a feminist and as a feminist psychologist. These feelings centred around the way I believed feminism to be perceived both within psychology and society more generally. Whilst I was interested in feminism outside of my work as a psychologist (see section 2.1 below), I had internalised the view within mainstream psychology that taking a feminist perspective involves taking a 'political' and hence biased view towards society and the individual. For a long time I felt that my work

would therefore not be valued because of its feminist perspective. This created a lot of problems for me in relation to commitment and motivation.

## **2. THE IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEMS WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In this section of the chapter the problems which I came to identify within mainstream psychology are identified in terms of my personal feelings and experiences about these issues. The ideas raised in this chapter are returned to at other parts of the thesis, particularly in Chapter and Four, where they are referenced to the related critiques and debates within psychology.

### **2.1. A Failure to Explore Gender and Social Context**

The first problem I came to identify in the mainstream psychological approach in which my initial postgraduate research was based was its failure to examine the psychology of women in relation to social context and gender power relations. I came to realise that mainstream psychology takes no account of the influence of these factors on women's lives in terms of the way women experience themselves and their relationships with others. This is part of the way in which social psychology theorises the individual as isolated from social context and part of the way in which psychology has attempted to divorce itself from issues surrounding gender and power.

Whilst I have always had a personal interest in feminism and women's issues, it was only when I began the research for my undergraduate dissertation that I began to consider how this interest contributed to my studies in psychology. Prior to this, I regarded feminism as part of my personal life, which I explored through discussion with friends for example, rather than as something which was a part of what psychology looked at or what psychology was concerned with. Whilst research in feminist psychology and the psychology of women was beginning to establish itself in British psychology at this time (see Burman, 1990; Wilkinson, 1986), the ideas raised in this research had been completely ignored in my degree. There had been little focus on the experiences of relevance in women's lives or of the role of gender on individuals' psychology.

In this respect I was extremely lucky to have the opportunity to carry out my dissertation on an issue which is a specific part of women's experience. I greatly enjoyed carrying out research on women because I thought it enabled me to bring together my interests in psychology, women's lives and feminism. However, as I carried out this research and prepared to extend it in my postgraduate work I began to realise that there were a number of difficulties with an approach which, whilst looking at previously invisible areas of

women's experiences, attempted to do so by 'adding women' into existing psychological theory and methodology.

Whilst my research on miscarriage had looked at women it had not taken gender into account. Instead it had been carried out from what psychology claims to be a 'gender neutral' perspective, which feminist critiques have now identified as actually being based upon patriarchal assumptions about women's lives (see Chapter Four). Thus whilst the research was based on women, in terms of the fact that miscarriage is only experienced by women, it was not based on any analysis of what 'being a woman' was about in terms of social constructions of womanhood and femininity. There was no exploration of what effect being unable to carry a baby full-term might have on how women feel about themselves in terms of their identity as women and how this identity is defined in relation to social constructions of femininity. There was thus a failure to consider the fact that society defines femininity in relation to her reproductive capabilities, so that women continue to be under a great deal of societal pressure to have children and womanhood is associated with motherhood (Nicolson, 1993a).

In coming to recognise the influence of gender power relations on women's experiences I was moving away from the conceptualising women as the same as men. There was thus a shift towards conceptualising women as experiencing the world differently to men because of the different social, cultural and historical contexts in which they live and which influence what it means to be a woman in contemporary Western society. This involves analysing the role of gender power relations within these contexts and the way in which the power asymmetries which exist in society between men and women influence women's experiences of both their social and personal worlds. It is important to note that this does not mean that I believe women to be intrinsically or inevitably different to men by virtue of their biological or sex differences but that women's experiences of the world and hence the psychology of women are different to men by virtue of gender differences which are determined by societal, cultural and historical conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity.

After I changed the focus of my PhD research and began to explore the perspective of feminist psychology, I became aware that my 'gut feelings' about the way in which psychology deals with women were related to an academic critique of psychology. This critique has identified the fact that mainstream psychology has traditionally either ignored experiences relevant to women's lives (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981) or has distorted female experience. This distortion has taken place through comparisons to male norms (Griffin, 1985, 1986; Gilligan, 1982) or through theories which emphasise women's biological and reproductive differences from men (Ussher, 1989; Gergen, 1990; Howell, 1981; Barnett

and Baruch, 1978). Such research calls for a new psychology which is based on women's accounts of their own experiences (Griffin, 1995; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Bowles and Klein, 1983) and where such experiences are seen as valid in their own right rather than being assessed in relation to accounts of male experiences. These points will be returned to in Chapter Four, in a discussion of feminist methodology and epistemology and the way in which the main body of the research incorporated this perspective into other theoretical perspectives.

## **2.2 Psychology as Divorced from Experience and Meaning**

The second problem I identified in mainstream psychology focused upon the way in which psychology is divorced from individuals' experiences and hence fails to explore the meaning which experiences have for individuals in the context of their own lives as told from their own perspectives.

My awareness of psychology as failing to explore individuals' personal experiences and understandings of those experiences began on my undergraduate degree, although this awareness was relatively unformulated at this stage. In common with many other psychology students (Hollway, 1989), I had decided to study for a psychology degree in order to 'understand people' in terms of the way people experienced themselves and their relationships with others. Unfortunately I found that psychology failed to live up to these expectations because of the way in which it reduces human experience to causal relationships between variables, denying both the complexity of personal experiences and the meaning which such experiences have for individuals. I thus found that 'understanding people' in terms of their own understandings of their lives is outside the realm of mainstream psychology. Whilst students of psychology may develop an understanding of these issues this is more likely to come from their own life experiences outside psychology rather than from the study of psychology itself.

My research on miscarriage brought this neglect of people's experiences into sharper focus. Whilst my dissertation potentially provided me with an opportunity to talk to people and find out about their lives, I found that the methods I was using were not designed with this object in mind. The use of structured interviews containing questions about the women's use of specific predefined cognitions resulted in women's experiences of miscarriage being framed within the hypotheses of the study rather than within the context on what she herself had experienced. Rather than allowing the woman to talk about what she saw as relevant to her adjustment to miscarriage, the research investigated adjustment in relation to prior theory about this adjustment. The resulting data from such research was thus not built upon individuals' own accounts of their experiences and hence potentially missed out large areas of experience which might be of equal or greater relevance to the research.



The women participating in the interviews carried out for my dissertation told me a great deal about their personal experiences of miscarriage. These narratives were usually given at the start of the interviews when the women were asked to briefly describe their experiences. This was merely intended as a means of 'establishing rapport' with the woman and as a way of embedding the questions about specific cognitions. For most of the women I interviewed, miscarriage had been an extremely important experience in their lives and they wanted to tell me exactly what had happened to them. This often resulted in long accounts of when, how and why they thought they had miscarried. To me these narratives were the most interesting parts of the interviews and seemed to be far more relevant than the formalised and standardised questions I asked in order to explore my hypotheses.

When I came to carry out the analysis of the interviews, the women's narratives were largely excluded as I carried out a content analysis of the transcripts searching for specific examples of the cognitions outlined in the research hypotheses. This content analysis resulted in percentage values relating to the use of particular cognitions which were then linked to the women's adjustment through statistical tests. The use of prior theory to analyse the women's accounts together with the reliance on numerical treatment of the data silenced the women's accounts. Whilst these narratives enabled me as a researcher to gain a clearer idea of what miscarriage had meant to them, the method of analysis meant that this went no further than the enrichment of my own personal understandings. Although the results of the study were disseminated in both journal (Tunaley, Slade and Duncan, 1993) and conference (Tunaley, Slade and Duncan, 1992a, 1992b) format, the numerical analysis again resulted in the women's stories being ignored.

As I planned the research for my PhD, I began to realise that locating this research within mainstream psychology would not allow me to prioritise women's own accounts of their experiences. Rather than the research exploring women's experiences at a deeper and more complex level, the analysis was to continue at a similar level but was to involve a much larger sample. Thus rather than 'going deeper' the research was simply to 'go broader'. At an academic level, I felt that in failing to take account of women's experiences from their own perspectives I was not 'telling the whole story' about these experiences and was instead presenting a partial account viewed from the perspective of prior theory. On a personal level, I felt a sense of guilt that whilst the women had provided me with details of a very upsetting and personal part of their lives, I was failing to respect the confidence the women had put in me to use these stories as fully as possible. I felt dishonest that the women's accounts were not to be used in as full a way as the women had perhaps intended.

As I changed the focus of my PhD research and began to learn more about qualitative methods I found many of these issues were dealt with in the perspective of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory develops the idea that social science research should aim to develop theories about people's experiences which are grounded in individuals' accounts of their own experiences. I also found Karen Henwood and Nick Pidgeon's (1992) work on grounded theory to be particularly useful at this stage of my research.

### **2.3. Power and Ethical Issues: Exploitation and Expert Status**

The third area of concern to emerge in the first few months of my PhD focused around issues of power in the research process. This involved an analysis of the power differentials involved in the interview and data analysis techniques of mainstream psychology.

My research on miscarriage used structured interviews to explore the cognitions which women use in adjusting to miscarriage. These interviews were carried out within strict formalised guidelines involving a series of predefined questions which were asked in exactly the same way and in the same order in each interview. Such an approach is seen as necessary within mainstream psychology in order to ensure that data is produced within the same conditions and so is directly comparable and statistically treatable.

I came to identify this approach as problematic because of its treatment of research participants. In order to avoid subjective bias infiltrating the interview, the researcher is advised to remain distanced from the participants. Whilst the participant is expected to obediently answer the interviewer's questions, the researcher is taught to avoid answering the participant's questions about the researcher's opinions or the aim of the research. Such an approach depersonalises the research process on behalf of both the researcher and the participant. It dismisses the interpersonal nature of the research encounter which is seen as simply involving the passage of information from the participant (the 'data provider') and the researcher (the 'data collector'). Further, in asking for the participants to provide personal information about their lives whilst advising the researcher to remain objective and unbiased (and hence provide no information about her own experiences, her opinions or the aims of the research) the researcher is placed in a position of power over the participant.

As I carried out interviews I learnt that to carry out interviews in accordance with these objective guidelines is not only depersonalising and disempowering, it is also extremely difficult to carry out in practice. In carrying out a research interview, the researcher is required to use her interpersonal skills to ensure the interview flows smoothly. To expect the researcher not to use these skills or to use them in exactly the same way in each

interview is impossible. I thus came to realise that there is a need to acknowledge the subjective nature of the interview process. Thus the interview should be conceptualised as a social encounter between two individuals with individual characteristics which cannot be removed from the interview situation.

Through my research experience I also found that power differentials enter research in the analysis process. This relates to my criticisms about the use of prior theory in looking at individual's experiences rather than building theory from their accounts. The imposition of prior meanings on individual's experiences involves the assertion that the researcher's interpretation of individual's experience is of more value than that of the individual. I found this status difference problematic because it implied a power differential in the research process where the participant was subordinate to the researcher.

As I developed my ideas about interpersonal relationships within the research process, I found the work of Oakley (1981) to be very useful. Oakley provides an insightful analysis of the interview process, based on her own experiences of interviewing women. This work forms part of the feminist critique of power relations within research which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. In addition the co-operative inquiry approach (Reason, 1988; Reason and Rowan, 1981) was also useful at this stage because of its analysis of power relations as well as its more general critique of positivist psychology. The co-operative inquiry approach was adopted in the Pilot Study of the thesis and hence is also discussed in Chapter Three.

### **3. THE TRANSITION TO QUALITATIVE FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY**

As a result of identifying problems in the mainstream psychological approach, I decided to change both the substantive and methodological focus of my study as well as my PhD supervisors. Methodologically, the changes involved shifting the research from the traditional quantitative framework of mainstream psychology to a qualitative interpretative framework which analysed individual's experiences from their own perspectives. This framework was developed throughout the thesis so that the Pilot Study (Chapter Three) is based on co-operative inquiry and feminist methodology approaches whereas the main studies of the thesis (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight) are based around a framework incorporating symbolic interactionism, feminist methodology, and social constructionist grounded theory.

In substantive terms my PhD changed direction because of potential problems with access to participants at the hospital where I had intended to carry out my research. It thus became necessary to either establish contacts at a different hospital or begin a project in a

different substantive area. I decided on the latter option and hence changed the focus of my PhD to the study of women, body size and food. This decision was based upon a number of reasons.

Firstly, I chose to study women, body size and food because of my personal interest in body size and food issues. This interest arose out of my own experiences of feeling unhappy with my body size and my subsequent struggles with food through diet and attempts at weight control. Carrying out research which one is personally interested in forms part of the feminist commitment to exploring one's own experiences as a valid research resource (Stanley and Wise, 1983). An awareness of my own experiences and perspective in relation to body size and food also forms part of my commitment to reflexivity in the research process which involves a process of conscious reflection upon one's own interests, values and perspectives in terms of their influence on the research process. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

A second reason for deciding to study women, body size and food relates to my interest in exploring issues which are of relevance in women's lives. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, dissatisfaction with body size, and the dieting behaviour which results from this, have been found to be experienced by more women than men. Studying body size and food therefore represents a way of redressing the emphasis which mainstream psychology has placed on the study of men's experiences (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981) through studying issues which concern women and which influence their sense of themselves and their relationships with others.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored the personal transitions involved in changing the focus of my research from mainstream social psychology to a qualitative feminist approach. It has raised a number of issues which inform the theoretical and methodological framework of the different studies of the thesis. Whilst these issues are discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters they can be summarised here as follows:

- Mainstream psychology fails to explore the role of gender and social context in individuals' experiences. In taking a qualitative feminist perspective, this thesis asserts that women's relationship to body size and food needs to be explored in relation to social constructions of femininity.

- In using a quantitative methodology, mainstream psychology fails to explore the meanings of individuals' experiences as explored from their own perspectives. When interview methodologies are used, participants are asked questions relating to prior theory and hypotheses which fails to explore what the participants see as relevant. Drawing on grounded theory, this thesis asserts that theory about individuals' experiences should be grounded in participants' accounts.
- The emphasis on objectivity in mainstream psychological research means that the research process can be depersonalising and disempowering for participants. This thesis attempts to develop a methodology which conceptualises the research process as a social and therefore subjective encounter between two individuals, each with their own characteristics. It also attempts to reduce the power differentials in the research process.

## CHAPTER TWO

# TOWARDS A FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO WOMEN, BODY SIZE AND FOOD

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the literature which has formed the basis of the approach adopted in this thesis. The chapter aims to identify how a qualitative feminist psychological approach can contribute to understandings of women's feelings about their bodies, and to briefly examine how these feelings have been understood within the social science literature. The literature on body size concerns has been located within a broad range of disciplines, including medicine, psychology and sociology. In each of these disciplines alternative theorisations and methodological perspectives have been employed so that there is little cross fertilisation between approaches. The aim here is to critically evaluate the issues identified in these approaches and to discuss the relevance of a qualitative feminist psychological approach in conceptualising women's experiences of body size in terms of social discourses which are actively incorporated into subjective meanings.

Women's relationship to body size has traditionally been conceptualised within a pathological and individualised framework. This perspective views the widespread dissatisfaction which women feel about their bodies as the result of 'problems' within the individual woman, which places responsibility and blame on women themselves. This chapter aims to shift this theorisation to a qualitative feminist psychological approach which explores women's concerns with their bodies in relation to the social, historical and cultural discourses surrounding body size, which are themselves structured in relation to discourses surrounding femininity and women's roles<sup>1</sup>. Rather than conceptualising women's feelings of unhappiness with their bodies in terms of an irrational or selfish preoccupation with their physical attractiveness, they are viewed in relation to a socially and historically constructed 'thin ideal' of female beauty which defines extreme thinness as the only acceptable size for women and which locates women's value and identity solely in relation to their physical appearance.

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'discourse' is defined here as an extra-locally organised framework of meanings which prescribe individuals' conduct and identities. The normative standards within these frameworks are constructed in relation to social institutions and relationships (see Henwood, 1993).

Whilst taking a cultural perspective, this chapter identifies the need for a psychological approach to the theorisation of women's concern with their body size. This is necessary in order to theorise how cultural discourses come to have subjective meaning for women. The theoretical approach developed in this thesis argues that there is a need to explore the subjective meanings of social discourses surrounding women and body size in terms of how these discourses are used by women and how they shape women's experiences of their bodies in the context of their lives.

## **2. MOVING AWAY FROM DISORDER: INVESTIGATING BODY SIZE AND FOOD FOR WOMEN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION**

The majority of women in Western societies feel a sense of dissatisfaction about the size and shape of their bodies, regarding them as unacceptably fat, repulsive and 'wrong'. Large scale surveys have found that between 55% (Cash, Winstead and Janda, 1986) and 75% (Wooley and Wooley, 1984) of contemporary Western women 'feel fat' and have a great fear of putting on weight. Smaller scale experimental studies have found that the majority of women feel dissatisfied with their bodies, because of the disparity they perceive between the size of their own bodies and the size they would like to be (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990; Rozin and Fallon, 1988; Fallon and Rozin, 1985; see also Polivy, Herman and Pliner, 1990 and Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984 for reviews). This concern about body size is not confined to women who are larger than average. The majority of women perceive themselves as 'too fat' and 'overweight' regardless of their actual size (Mable, Balance and Galgan, 1986; Mintz and Betz, 1986; Wooley and Wooley, 1984; Harmatz, 1987; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984).

The sense of 'wrongness' which surrounds women's feelings about their bodies results in a discourse of alteration and cultivation (Orbach, 1993; Ferguson, 1984) so that women feel that they must strive to 'improve' their bodies through reducing their size and hence making their bodies as small as possible. Consequently, large numbers of women have been found to restrict their food intake in order to lose weight. Dieting statistics show that ninety percent of women diet at some point in their lives with twenty six percent currently dieting to lose weight (French and Jeffery, 1994). These studies also show that forty percent of women report trying to lose weight at any one time, either through dieting and other weight loss methods. Again dieting is not restricted to 'overweight' women with sixty four percent of 'normal' weight women reporting dieting to lose weight (Jeffery et al., 1984)<sup>2</sup>. In addition sixteen percent of

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<sup>2</sup>In this thesis terms such as 'obese' or 'overweight' are avoided in describing the size of women's bodies. The term 'obese' is unacceptable because it can be interpreted as medicalising fatness, placing it within

'underweight' women (Stephenson et al., 1987) and twenty percent of 'underweight' adolescent girls (Moses, Banilivy and Lifshitz, 1989) report dieting to lose weight. Recent evidence has also shown that these figures are increasing (Horn and Anderson, 1993), with more and more women embarking on weight-reducing diets.

Dieting has been found to be particularly prevalent amongst adolescent girls and female college students. Thus seventy percent of teenage girls report trying to lose weight at some point in the past with incidence at any one time varying between thirty (Moses, Banilivy and Lifshitz, 1989; Johnson et al., 1983) and sixty two percent (Story et al., 1991). In addition, fifty to sixty one percent of college women report current dieting behaviours. There is now also concern that these behaviours are affecting children at a much younger age so that children as young as nine feel dissatisfied with their bodies and are engaging in dieting behaviour (Hill, Oliver and Rogers, 1992).

The majority of these studies have been based on both men and women and have found significant gender differences. Thus in comparison to women, men are less dissatisfied with their bodies, less likely to view their bodies as significantly larger than ideals and less likely than women to see themselves as overweight. In addition men are less likely than women to be dieting or attempting to lose weight through other methods. These gender differences are theorised in relation to the cultural discourses surrounding body size in section 4.2, where the discourses are theorised as being structured around gender power relations.

These statistics provide a powerful illustration of the distress and unhappiness which surrounds body size for women and the struggles with food and eating which these feelings cause. Despite these statistics, women's relationship to body size and food has received little research interest in mainstream psychological research (Bordo, 1993; Surrey, 1991; Orbach, 1988). There has been minimal consideration of the way in which a constant preoccupation with the size of one's body and the restriction of food intake affects a woman's sense of her self or her relationships with others.

The neglect of women's relationship to body size and food is in stark contrast to the fact that extensive research has been carried out on food and body size issues for individuals who are defined as 'eating disordered'. Eating disorders have been a major focus of attention for extensive numbers of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other health professionals for more than thirty years. This research has been driven by the desire to

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the sphere of pathology and disorder. Similarly the term 'overweight' is avoided as it involves the concept of 'ideal' weights for individuals, which can be seen as judging fatness as wrong or 'less than ideal'. Here the term 'fat' is reclaimed because, devoid of its negative connotations, it is a descriptive term which avoids the judgement involved in other terms (see Barron and Lear, 1989; Brown, 1985).



describe, and classify the 'pathological' attitudes which women diagnosed as eating disordered have towards their bodies and towards food and eating (Bordo, 1993). In addition, this academic interest is paralleled in the 'lurid and sensational' portrayal of eating disorders by the media with its emphasis on the 'obsessive' behaviour of those who are 'outside the norm' (Bordo, 1990). In contrast to the high profile of eating disordered populations, the concerns which women from non-disordered populations have towards body size and eating are seen as trivial and non-problematic (Surrey, 1991). The fact that the majority of women are dissatisfied with the size of their bodies has not led to further investigation and analysis.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the distress surrounding body size and food for women who are not diagnosed as having an eating disorder may not be as extreme as that involved in anorexia and bulimia, this thesis argues that women's relationship to body size requires further investigation. As Ogden proposes:

'One of the effects of this interest in extremes [in eating disorders] is that the excessive behaviour overshadows the importance of more moderate behaviours. The danger and drama associated with severe disorders trivialises the relevance of the more subtle difficulties. Perhaps what people should be interested in are the normal average things which affect more normal average people. The drama associated with eating disorders detracts from the effects of dieting which may not be so dramatic or threatening but which have an impact on more people's lives. The effects of dieting may not be as exciting or traumatic but they are still important and deserve to be understood.' (Ogden, 1992, p. 38).

This thesis proposes that women's feelings about their bodies are important to their sense of self, having a significant impact on women's sense of self worth and value. In addition, it argues that body size has a important role in women's relationships with others, particularly in their relationships with men. Women's relationship to body size should therefore be considered as important in the theorisation of female psychology and in theories of interpersonal and family relationships. Therefore, rather than a sole focus on the disordered attitudes which women have towards body size and food, research also needs to focus on the experiences of women in the general population. In accordance with this view, the research on which this thesis is based explores the experiences of women who are not defined as having an eating disorder and hence examines the meanings of body size for women in the general population.

This focus on women in the general population means that the review of the literature which follows examines the way in which 'non-disordered' women's relationship to body size and eating has been understood within social science research. The review argues that the emphasis on research on eating disorders has influenced the theoretical and methodological framework in which research on non-disordered populations has

been located. Eating disorders research has traditionally taken place within a medical framework, which locates women's attitudes and behaviours towards their size and their eating habits within an individual 'pathogenic' framework (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1992; White, 1991). The theoretical models which have been developed attempt to link eating disorders to biomedical, psychological or familial pathogenic causal factors (see Malson, 1992 for a review), locating anorexia and bulimia within the sphere of the individual or the individual's family (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1992). This focus can also be seen in research on non-disordered populations which had similarly focused on the individual, in isolation from a consideration of the influence of wider social and political forces on women's feelings about body size and eating. This emphasis on the individual is discussed in the next section.

### **3. BODY SIZE RESEARCH AND THE EMPHASIS ON THE INDIVIDUAL**

Traditional research on women's relationship to their body size has taken a pathological and individualised perspective. Drawing on eating disorders research, this approach conceptualises women's feelings of dissatisfaction with their size in terms of individual perceptual or cognitive deficits within the woman herself. Such deficits are conceptualised in terms of 'irrationality' and 'mental health problems' which pathologises and medicalises women's experiences. Women's feelings about their bodies are thus conceptualised as a 'problem' located within the individual, where the responsibility for such problems is placed firmly on women and within women's minds.

This emphasis on the individual can be seen in two different research areas. Firstly, in body size perception research which relates women's dissatisfaction with their bodies to their misperception of their size. Secondly, the emphasis on the individual can be seen in research which conceptualises dissatisfaction in terms of a 'mental health problem' which can be 'cured' through the treatment of women's irrational cognitions about their bodies.

#### **3.1 Body Size Perception: The Pathologisation of Weight Concerns**

Body size perception studies involve the assessment of individual's perceptions of their body size and the accuracy with which individual's are able to assess the size and shape of their own bodies. Many of these studies involve participants reporting their perceptions of how 'under' or 'over' weight they are and comparing these perceptions to the individual's weight (Harmatz, 1987; Mable, Balance and Galgan, 1986; Mintz and Betz, 1986; Wardle and Beales, 1986). In these studies body weight is assessed in relation to standardised 'ideal weight' tables. These ideals are often based on height-

weight tables such as those devised by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the United States, which are based on the longevity and weights of those insured by the company (Ogden, 1992). Other methods involve the use of distorting image techniques, where participants are presented with a distorted image of themselves which they are asked to adjust until it conforms to their perceptions of their size (Cash and Green, 1986; Garner et al., 1976; Shipman and Sohlkhah, 1967). Alternatively visual size estimation techniques are used where participants mark the width of various body parts on paper or movable bars (Dolan, Birtchnell and Lacey, 1987; Askevold, 1975).

This research has shown that the majority of women in Western societies have a tendency to overestimate their size, regarding themselves as fatter than they 'actually' are. There are also significant gender differences with women being more likely than men to see themselves as overweight, even if they are actually 'underweight' or of 'normal' weight (Harmatz, 1987; Mable, Balance and Galgan, 1986; Mintz and Betz, 1986). This research relates women's dissatisfaction with their body size to their misperception of their body size. Thus women are conceptualised as being unhappy about their bodies because of their own 'faulty' perceptions. It is thus a 'problem' located within individual women. Body size dissatisfaction is therefore personalised, so that it is related to a problem within the individual rather than to wider social and political influences.

The emphasis on the individual in these studies fails to take account of the fact that the majority of women in Western society tend to overestimate their size. According to the perspective discussed above, all women can therefore be defined as pathological because all have a deficiency in the way they perceive their size. Such a statistic questions the idea that body size dissatisfaction is a problem of the individual as well as failing to explain why so many women misperceive their size (Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1985).

Studies such as those described above present women as irrational and pathological because of the way they misperceive the size of their bodies. The fact that even women defined as 'underweight' feel that they are too fat constructs women's concerns about their bodies as having no relationship to any 'objective' reality, in terms of 'actually' being fat. Such an approach attempts to objectify what is essentially a subjective experience. In addition it dismisses and denies women's feelings of concern about their bodies, asserting that only women who are 'really' overweight have cause for feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. This approach fails to recognise that cultural discourses surrounding body size define the most desirable body size in terms of extreme thinness (Wiseman et al., 1992; Bordo, 1990; Morris, Cooper and Cooper, 1989; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Silverstein et al., 1986; Garner et al., 1980). This 'thin ideal' is thinner than both the majority of women in Western society (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980) and the ideal presented in life insurance height weight tables. When women's bodies are

assessed in reference to this 'thin ideal' the majority of women can be defined as overweight. Thus means that the whilst the research participants incorrectly define themselves as 'overweight' in relation to the standardised tables, they may be defining themselves correctly in relation to the cultural definition of what constitutes being 'overweight'.

Body size perception studies also involve the judgement of women as 'wrong' either in relation to their actual body size or because of their concerns about their size. The categorisation of women into the categories of 'overweight', 'normal weight' and 'underweight' judges women on the basis of their size and defines some women as 'more' or 'less' acceptable than others. The term 'overweight' implies that an individual is above some externally defined standard which defines that person as 'wrong' and as a 'problem' (Schoenfelder and Wiser, 1983). 'Overweight' women are thus judged for failing to be concerned about her body size. In contrast to this, 'underweight' women are judged because of the fact that they are concerned about being too fat when, again in accordance with the externally defined standards, they 'shouldn't be'. These women are described as 'irrational' and again are 'wrong' because they want to lose weight even though they are actually 'too thin'. Here then we see the way in which women are judged in accordance to their size and the amount of concern and attention they pay to the 'improvement' of their bodies. Women are criticised both for paying too much and too little attention to their size.

The emphasis on the individual in body size perception studies forms part of a wider discourse constructing women's concern with their physical appearance in terms of personal choice and personal responsibility. Women are conceptualised as being concerned about their appearance because of their own personal vanity and desire to be found attractive by others (Bordo, 1993; Berger, 1972). According to this perspective, women are their own 'worst enemies' because the unhappiness they feel about their bodies is their own fault for having 'chosen' to be concerned about these issues.

The emphasis on the individual and individual responsibility also relates to the way in which body size and dieting are culturally located within the sphere of personal control and achievement (Mayer, 1983). According to this discourse, the dissatisfaction which women feel with their bodies can be easily decreased by careful attention to one's diet in terms of the types and amounts of foods which one eats. Here body size is conceptualised in terms of an individual's 'eating style' so that whether an individual is fat or thin depends on their own control of their eating behaviour (Rothblum, 1992; 1990; Wooley, Wooley and Dyrenforth, 1980; Wooley and Wooley, 1979). Dissatisfaction with one's body can therefore be reduced by the individual herself, through embarking on a weight reducing diet. Because thinness can be achieved by

anybody who has the adequate will power and determination (Ogden, 1992; Mayer, 1983), dissatisfaction is the individual's own 'problem' through a lack of these personal qualities.

### **3.2 'Treating' Body Size Dissatisfaction: The Medicalisation of Weight Concerns**

A further example of the way in which mainstream psychological studies of body size have taken an individualised perspective can be seen in the development of 'treatment programmes' for women who are dissatisfied with their bodies. These programmes aim to help women develop a more positive body image so that they consequently feel less dissatisfied with their bodies. Such treatment programmes can be seen to represent a further 'medicalization' of women's relationships to their bodies, where experiences are labelled as 'disturbances' or 'mental health problems' (Rosen et al., 1990). For example, treatment programmes such as cognitive and cognitive-behavioural therapies (Rosen et al., 1990; Dworkin and Kerr, 1987) attempt to treat 'irrational' cognitions such as 'I'm fat therefore I'm worthless' through helping the 'client' to assess the reality of these cognitions and to replace them with (what the therapist considers to be) more positive and realistic cognitions.

Whilst concerns with body size and recurrent attempts to lose weight through dieting are a source of great pain for women and attempts to reduce this pain are obviously important (see Chapter Nine for a discussion of this issue in relation to the findings of the thesis), the representation of dissatisfaction in terms of a 'problem' within the individual woman fails to recognise the fact that women's dissatisfactions with their size are related to the social, historical and cultural context in which they live their lives. As will be discussed in section 4, cognitions such as 'I'm fat therefore I'm worthless' may actually parallel cultural attitudes towards female body size where women have traditionally been valued solely in terms of their resemblance to standards of female beauty, currently defined in terms of thinness (Bordo, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Orbach, 1993, 1988; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Brown, 1985). In addition, as discussed in section 6 below, cultural attitudes towards fatness have been found to involve negative stereotypes about fat people's psychological, social and physical characteristics (Rothblum, 1992, 1990; Bovey, 1989; Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Schoenfelder and Wieser, 1983) as well as discrimination against fat people at both an educational and occupational level (Rothblum et al., 1990; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984). In such a cultural context, cognitions equating fatness with a lack of worth and value may actually represent women's experiences of the world around them rather than the irrational thought patterns of a woman in need of psychological treatment.

### **3.3 Summary**

- In summary traditional research on women's relationship to their bodies conceptualises women's dissatisfaction with their bodies in terms of the individual. Dissatisfaction is thus conceptualised as related to deficiencies in the way a woman perceives her body, so that women who are not 'over-weight' perceive themselves as being so because of a distortion in their perceptions or cognitions. Women are subsequently medicalised by their relationship to body size, so that women who feel dissatisfied with their bodies are defined as having a mental health problem which needs to be treated. Such a perspective denies the fact that the majority of women feel dissatisfied with their bodies. It is the contention of this thesis that women's feelings about body size need to be related to the cultural factors surrounding body size and physical attractiveness and that these discourses need to be considered in relation to gender power relations. Thus rather than an emphasis on the individual there is a need for an approach which explores the role of social factors in the meanings which body size have to women.

## **4. CULTURAL DISCOURSES SURROUNDING BODY SIZE: THE THIN IDEAL, GENDER AND MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY**

In this section cultural theories of women's dissatisfaction with their body size are explored. Building on the critique of mainstream psychological studies of body size developed in the last section, it is argued that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies need to be assessed in relation to the social, historical and cultural discourses surrounding body size, female sexuality and women's role in society. These discourses involve a 'thin ideal' of body size which defines an increasingly thinner body as the most attractive and therefore acceptable size for a woman to be. In addition the thin ideal is combined with discourses which define attractiveness as an important part of the female role, so that women are defined in terms of their physical appearance.

Whilst mainstream psychology has now begun to take these cultural factors into account it has done so from a perspective which fails to explore the meanings of these factors, at either a cultural or individual level. It is argued that an approach is needed which analyses the symbolic meanings of the thin ideal, in terms of its relationship to cultural attitudes towards femininity and the female role, and which provides a framework which theorises the way in which such cultural discourses come to have subjective meaning for women in the context of their lives.

#### 4.1 The Cultural Discourse of the Thin Ideal

In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting, and deoderizing herself. (Dworkin, 1974, p.114).

The above quote outlines the way in which women's bodies are surrounded by a discourse of improvement, so that women's bodies are generally defined as unsatisfactory and 'wrong' and in need of alteration in order to transform them into 'satisfactory' bodies (Orbach, 1993). Here women's bodies are defined in relation to culturally defined standards of femininity and female beauty which define exactly how a woman should look in order to be judged as beautiful. Women are therefore assessed, and assess themselves, in relation to externally defined beauty standards (Bordo, 1993, 1990; Orbach, 1993, 1988; Ussher, 1989; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Brownmiller, 1984; Berger, 1972).

A major part of the 'beauty standards' which surround women's bodies consists of cultural requirements about the size and shape of woman's bodies, in terms of the amount of fat or excess flesh which is considered to be attractive. Throughout history specific parts of women's bodies have been regarded as either too large or too small (Bennett and Gurin, 1982), so that women have struggled to change the shape of their bodies through whatever means necessary (Ogden, 1992; Brownmiller, 1984). For example, Chinese women have traditionally been forced to bind their feet in order to develop the culturally valued small 'lotus blossom' shape (Dworkin, 1974). Alternatively in Victorian England women wore corsets to decrease the size of certain areas of their bodies and bustles to increase the size of other areas (Brownmiller, 1984). Again women changed their bodies in order to conform to contemporary ideals of female beauty.

More recent studies have shown that the contemporary Western ideal of female beauty involves a thin, fleshless body which is devoid of excess fat or flesh (Wiseman et al., 1992; Bordo, 1990; Morris, Cooper and Cooper, 1989; Silverstein, et al., 1986; Garner et al., 1980). This thin ideal of female beauty is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, originating in the 1920s 'flapper girl' (Bennett and Gurin, 1982) and becoming increasingly thinner since its re-emergence in the early 1960s (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980). In comparison to this, historical studies focusing on images of the 'ideal' female form found in paintings and sculpture (Clark, 1956) and illustrations of women's fashions (Hollander, 1978) have found that female beauty ideals in previous

centuries celebrated 'female fleshiness'. Here the naturally fatter areas of a woman's body such as the hips, thighs, and stomach (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984) were regarded as sexually attractive (Hollander, 1978; Clark, 1956).

#### 4.2 The Thin Ideal and Gender

The studies of beauty ideals reported above focused on the beauty ideals relating to women's bodies. It has been argued however that beauty ideals exist in relation to men and that men in Western societies also feel pressured to alter the size of their bodies (Ogden, 1992). Whilst this thesis acknowledges that men may also feel unhappy about their body size and physical appearance, it asserts that these issues are more of a concern for women than for men. This can be seen in the statistics relating to body size dissatisfaction and dieting behaviour (see section 2 above) which demonstrate that men are less dissatisfied with their bodies than women, less likely to view their bodies as significantly larger than ideals and less likely to see themselves as overweight than women. In addition men are less likely than women to diet or attempt to lose weight through other methods. It is the contention of this thesis that such gender differences can be explained in terms of the importance of attractiveness to female identity. Physical appearance and sexual attractiveness can be seen to play a more central role in cultural constructions of female identity and women's value (Bordo, 1993; Ussher, 1989).

Women's physical appearance is considered to be one of the most important parts of a woman's identity, she is defined and valued in physical terms (Berger, 1972). This means that women must attempt to prove their 'worth' as women through attempting to be as attractive as they possibly can. By contrast men's worth is not defined in terms of their attractiveness so that they have to pay less attention to the way that they look:

Whatever sartorial devices men have put on to bolster their body image - codpieces, elevated shoes, padded shoulders, a boxy jacket - these did not constrict or cause pain. The truth is, men have barely tampered with their bodies at all, historically, to make themselves more appealing to women. The development of biceps and pectorals is an honourable by-product of hard physical labour and aid to competitive feats of sport and strength. Muscle-bound body builders, the man in the elevated shoe or the baldy who wears a toupee have been grist for the jokester's mill under the masculine theory that real men do not trick themselves out to be pleasing. (They have better ways to prove their worth.) A woman, on the other hand, is expected to depend on tricks and suffering to prove her feminine nature, for beauty, as men have defined it for women, is an end in itself. (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 35).

Here then we see that body ideals are more salient in definitions of female worth and value. Whilst men's bodies may be valued for their physical effectiveness and 'action in the world', the female body is valued for its decorative nature and its ability to attract other people (Freedman, 1984). Women's bodies are presented as women's primary asset, primarily because it is through the attractiveness of their bodies that women 'catch



a man' and hence achieve happiness and fulfillment. This forms part of the way in which women's lives are confined to the roles of sexuality, reproduction and domesticity (Itzin, 1986, 1984) through women's continued economical dependence on men (Faludi, 1992) and the tendency for women's identities to be defined in relation to others (Orbach, 1993, 1988; Jordan et al., 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1978). 'Catching a man' can only be achieved if the woman scores highly enough on the cultural scale of attractiveness. Here women attempt to change their body to meet these standards in order to be 'marriageable material' and hence ensure their economic and social stability.

'The significant messages contained in the media warn the young woman to be afraid of her body because it can let her down; by becoming fat, emitting unpleasant odours and bleeding. At the same time she receives the message that her body is her passport to happiness: it is through her body that she entices a man, which should be her main objective. This attitude, which is instilled in adolescence, reverberates throughout a woman's life, resulting on constant worry over weight, appearance and a dissatisfaction with her body.' (Ussher, 1989, p. 38).

Attracting and maintaining a relationship with a male partner continues to depend on women's physical appearance since this is the main way in which female sexual attractiveness is defined and the main way in which women are therefore able to 'entice' a man. This is in contrast to male sexual attractiveness which is constructed in terms of non-physical variables such as economic status or intellectual capabilities which are valued in preference to judgements about men's physical attractiveness (Sontag, 1972).

Mainstream psychological research has failed to theorise the role of gender in women's dissatisfaction with their body size. As will be discussed below (section 4.3.2), recent research has taken sociocultural factors into account but has failed to theorise the role of gender in these factors. The analysis of sociocultural factors has focused on the identification of media ideals of body size. Although many studies of media ideals are based solely on images of women (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980), there is no explanation of why these ideals only apply to women. Similarly, there has been no discussion of why body size is particularly important to women despite extensive research documenting the significant differences between men and women's dissatisfaction with their bodies (see section 2). This forms part of a wider neglect of gender in mainstream psychological studies of body size as well as in psychology more generally (see Chapter Four).

The research carried out for this thesis aims to explore the role of gendered discourses surrounding body size and food in women's experiences of these issues. There is an exclusive focus on women so as to explore these discourses and experiences in more depth. The focus on women also relates to feminist critiques of mainstream psychology

which identifies the dismissal of issues of particular concern to women (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981) and the distortion of women's experiences through their comparison to male norms of behaviour (Griffin, 1985, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). From this perspective, the research focuses on women in order to attempt to begin the process of redressing the balance towards female experience (see Chapter Four for a further discussion of feminist methodology and epistemology)<sup>3</sup>.

Having defined the cultural discourse of the thin ideal and identified its relationship to gender power relations, there is a need to explore the way that the thin ideal has been conceptualised in mainstream psychology.

### **4.3 Psychological Theories of the Thin Ideal: Body Size and the Role of 'Cultural Factors'**

In more recent research within psychology there has been a shift from the individualised framework discussed in section 3 above to a focus on the role of 'external' cultural factors in women's feelings about their bodies. This research is problematic however because of the way in which mainstream psychology conceptualises sociocultural factors and the way that they influence individuals. Mainstream psychology conceptualises the sociocultural factors surrounding body size in terms of a media ideal of thinness which represents current aesthetic tastes and which 'indoctrinates' women by its pervasive presence. Such a conceptualisation fails to theorise the complex cultural symbolism of thinness and the way in which this symbolism comes to have subjective meaning for individual women. This point is made by Bordo (1993), in her examination of the way in which cultural factors have been addressed in research on eating disorders and on women's relationship to body size more generally:

'In no place was the meaning of the ideal of slenderness explored, either in the context of the anorectic's experiences or as a cultural formation that expresses ideas, anxieties, and social changes (some related to gender, some not) much deeper than the merely aesthetic. Rather, 'the media', 'Madison Avenue' and 'the fashion industry' typically were collectively constructed as the sole enemy - a whimsical and capricious enemy, capable of indoctrinating and tyrannizing passive and impressionable young girls by means of whatever imagery it arbitrarily decided to promote that season. *Why* thinness should have become such a dominant cultural ideal in the twentieth century remained unaddressed; the interpretation of representations was viewed as outside the domain of clinical investigation.' (Bordo, 1993, p. 46)

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<sup>3</sup>I have experienced some resistance to this focus on women, which has involved asked why I have failed to compare women's experiences to those of men. In focusing on women, I am not denying that men may experience unhappiness around body size and food issues. However I feel that an exclusive focus on women is justifiable because of the widespread significance of these issues in women's lives, its closeness to women's definitions of their sense of self, and because psychology has traditionally focused on male experience without the need for similar justification (Griffin, 1985, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

Mainstream psychology can thus be seen to neglect the meaning of the thin ideal at both a cultural or individual level. This neglect of meaning is explored in more detail below. It is argued that research on women's relationship to body size needs to explore the complexity behind the thin ideal, in terms of what thinness currently symbolises in Western culture, as well as the meaning which such ideals of thinness have for women. Thus there is a need to theorise the role of social factors at the same time as theorising the individual and the way in which individuals use social discourses which then come to have subjective meaning for women.

#### 4.3.1 The Neglect of Subjective Meaning

Mainstream psychological research on body size conceptualises sociocultural factors in terms of a model of social 'causation'. This conceptualises women's dissatisfaction with their bodies as being directly 'caused' by the thin ideal, the ideal is internalised by women and results in dissatisfaction with the body. Women are thus conceptualised as feeling that they are 'too fat' because they are continuously presented with an image of attractiveness which is defined in terms of thinness. Women compare their own bodies to this ideal and, because their bodies are not likely to match up to this ideal, feel that their bodies are unacceptable and in need of transformation and change (Lamb et al., 1993; Myers and Biocca, 1992; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Harmatz, 1987; Silverstein et al., 1986; Fallon and Rozin, 1985; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984). Thus the thin ideal is theorised as leading directly to dieting and other attempts at weight loss. As Garner et al. hypothesised:

Particularly during the last decade, there has appeared to be a shift from the voluptuous, curved figure to the angular, lean look of today. The impact of this changing idealized female shape is exemplified by the pervasiveness of dieting among women (Garner et al., 1980, p. 483)

In this quote then a connection is made between 'external' sociocultural factors and the high proportion of women currently dieting in Western societies. The assumption is that the message of the thin ideal is passively internalised by women so that there is a one-to-one correspondence between societal images and women's identity. Thus women see images of thinness in the media and internalise the message that this is the 'right way to look'. They then compare their own bodies to these images and mechanistically decide that their bodies are not 'thin enough'. This leads to dissatisfaction with the body which results in the behavioural response of 'pervasive dieting' (see Chapter Four for a further discussion of these issues).

Such a model is in strict accordance with the dualist view of self and society (see Chapter Four) which conceptualises the relationship between the individual and the social in terms

of a model of social causation so that women's feelings about their bodies are seen as being directly caused by social factors such as the societal emphasis on a thin ideal of beauty. Such a model involves no consideration of the interpretations which women make of the images of femininity presented to them in their social world. There is no recognition in these assumptions that women may reflect upon the images they see presented to them in the media and that they may then either reject or accept the images (see also Tunaley, Nicolson and Walsh, 1994). In addition to this there is no conceptualisation of the role of women's interactions with others and the role of their relationships with others.

This failure to explore subjective meanings forms part of the methodological approach adopted in mainstream psychology. The theorisation of body size dissatisfaction in terms of the internalisation of the thin ideal has led to a number of research studies which evaluate dissatisfaction with body size in terms of the differences between individuals' perceptions of their size and their internalised perceptions of what is the 'best' body size to be. This can be seen in the use of rating scales such as the Stunkard Body Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard, Sorenson and Schlusinger, 1983) which is used to calculate body size dissatisfaction by presenting participants with line drawings of body figures varying in size from very thin to very large (see Figure 1), with each figure being assigned a rating in the form of a number. Participants are then asked to indicate the figure which most closely corresponds to their perception of their own body size as well as the figure which they regard as their 'ideal' body size. Dissatisfaction with body size is then calculated by subtracting each participant's ideal figure rating from the rating of their own figure.

Studies using this methodology have found that women have a tendency to perceive their own size as significantly larger than their ideal size, whereas men's rating of their own bodies do not differ significantly from their ideal body size. These findings have been interpreted as indicating that women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than men (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Rozin and Fallon, 1988; Fallon and Rozin, 1985).

Studies such as those described above are based on the assumption that individuals internalise the thin ideal of beauty resulting in an internalised representation of the ideal body size which the individual subsequently wants to achieve. Thus it is assumed that because there is a divergence between individuals' perceptions of 'ideal' and 'current' body sizes, individuals are dissatisfied with their bodies. Whilst individuals may regard certain body sizes as ideal this does not automatically mean that these individuals actually want to achieve this size or that the divergence between the reality of an individual's body and the ideal body automatically results in feelings of dissatisfaction

with the body. Again there is the assumption that individuals do not reflect on the ideals presented to them and that they may chose not to feel dissatisfied with their bodies.

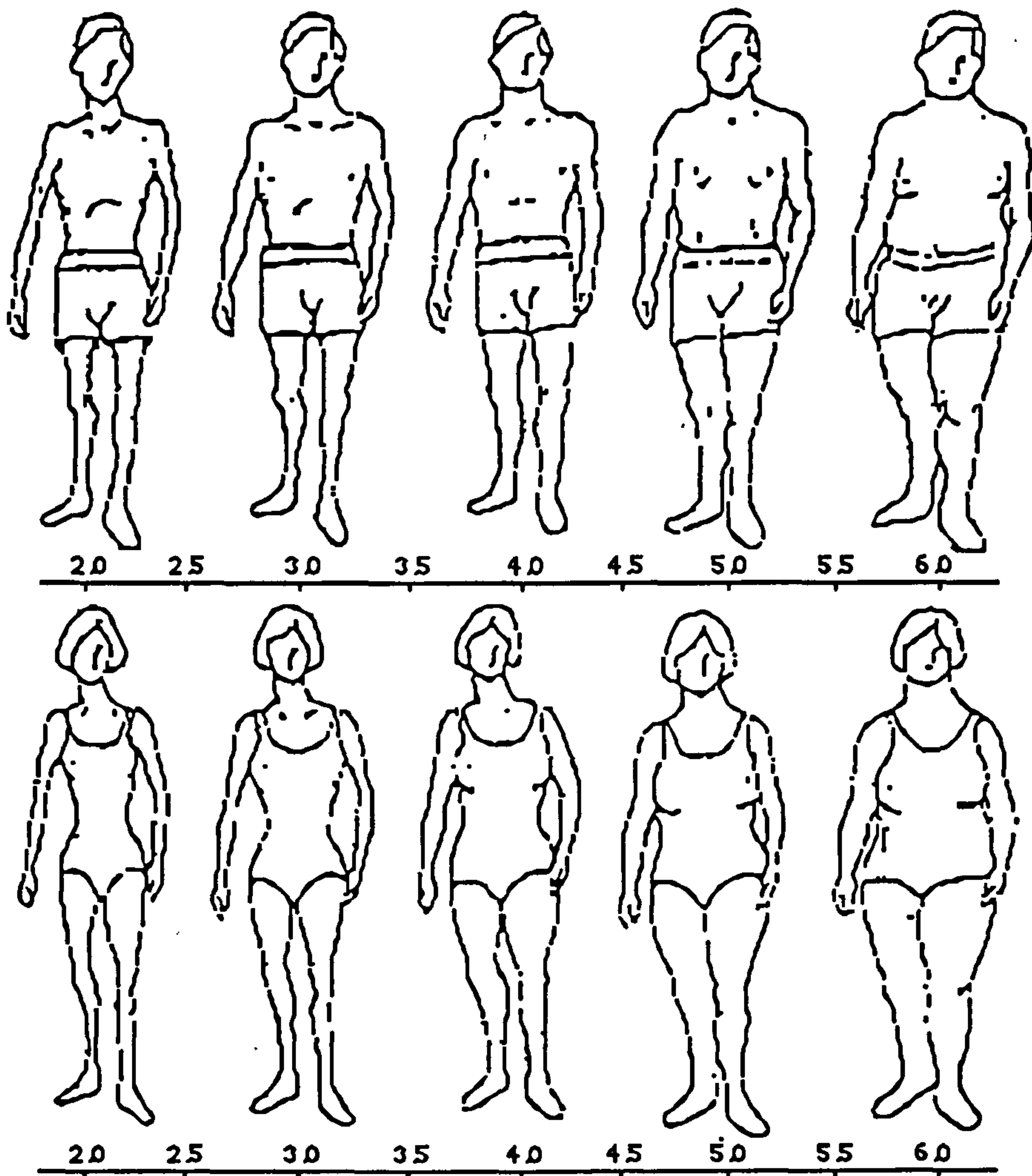


Figure 1. Stunkard Body Shape Figures Scale (from Lamb et al., 1993).

Research such as that described above cannot explore the meanings which sociocultural factors have on the subjective meanings of body size because of the methodological framework in which such research is based. The use of simplistic rating scales such as the scale described above means that there is no account of why body size is important to women, the role which body size plays in a woman's sense of herself and women's experiences of their bodies in their relationships with lovers, friends and family. Similarly, there is no exploration of the role of sociocultural factors in these meanings. Instead the individual's complex experiences in relation to body size are reduced to a numeric value equivalent to the size of the difference between the women's rating of her own body size and that of an ideal size. Such numeric values may reveal the extent of the dissatisfaction which individuals have with their bodies on an aggregate, generalised level, but they tell us very little about the individual experience of body size and the meaning it has in individuals' lives. Within such a framework the concept of 'body size dissatisfaction' can be seen to be a meaningless construct in terms of understanding what

individuals feel about the size of their bodies and the importance of their bodies in their lives. The construct of body size dissatisfaction can be seen to have been set up as a construct which defines what is worthy of investigation about body size without considering what such a construct means to those who are being assessed.

This failure to analyse meaning in body size research forms part of a general perspective within mainstream social psychology. As will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four, mainstream psychology has traditionally been located within a positivist paradigm which emphasises impartial observation through acontextual controlled experiments and the reliable and valid measurement and quantification of human behaviour in order to establish causal relationships between variables (Hollway, 1989; Bryman, 1988; Walker, 1985). Such a framework views the study of people as no different to the study of the 'objects' of the natural sciences, and hence fails to conceptualise human subjects as thinking, interpretative and reflective agents (Charmaz, 1990). Here there is a failure to recognise that individuals' feelings and behaviours are grounded in individuals' personal understandings of the world (see Chapter Four for a further discussion of these issues).

The approach developed in this thesis attempts to explore the subjective meanings of body size for women. Rather than examining women's dissatisfaction with their bodies in terms of experimental studies which provide impoverished data devoid of meaning, there is a focus on a qualitative interview methodology which aims to explore individual's own understandings of their experiences from their own perspectives. Such a methodology also facilitates the exploration of the way in which the meanings of body size are constructed in relation to social discourses which represents a shift from the conceptualisation of women's experiences in terms of the passive internalisation of social discourses. This theoretical perspective will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

#### 4.3.2 A Neglect of Cultural Meanings

Mainstream psychological studies which relate body size dissatisfaction to the thin ideal are also problematic because of their failure to analyse the cultural meanings of the thin ideal in terms of the symbolism of thinness and its relationship to cultural discourses. Such an approach takes no account of why such ideals exist in a particular socio-cultural context and why beauty ideals change over historical time. Thus whilst there is acknowledgement that the female beauty ideal has become increasingly thinner over recent years (Wiseman, et al., 1992; Garner, et al., 1980), there is no analysis of why the current ideal of female beauty involves extreme thinness. Hence there is no analysis of the cultural meanings which lie behind different body sizes and the way in which these meanings change over historical time.

The failure to analyse the cultural symbolism of the thin ideal relates to the way in which psychological research on body size has confined its examination of the thin ideal to the analysis of media images of women. Thus the thin ideal of female beauty is assumed to be produced and propagated solely by the media. This can be seen in the fact that the majority of studies examining cultural factors (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Rozin and Fallon, 1988; Fallon and Rozin, 1985) cite the work of Garner et al. (1980). This study found evidence of an increasingly thin ideal from changes in the body size and weight of Playboy magazine models and winners of the 'Miss America' beauty pageant between 1959 and 1978<sup>4</sup>. Thus in Garner et al.'s study cultural analysis was confined to the examination of the body size and weights of two groups of women assumed to represent the 'ideal' of female beauty. Such studies fail to explore the possibility that there are wider societal and cultural attitudes towards body size and beauty ideals and that there is a relationship between media images and cultural attitudes (Bordo, 1993). Hence the media are blamed for women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and no deeper cultural analysis is carried out. This 'media-blaming' can be seen in the following quote from an experimental study of female body size dissatisfaction:

How does a person develop their self-perception of their relative degree of under- or overweight? One important source of body size information in our society is the advertising industry's presentation of the ideal figure in the public media. The people presented in the various advertisements are idealized figures for the selling of a wide variety of products. The female figures in particular are abnormally thin and would be classified as falling in the lowest percentile of the population of females in weight and clothing size relative to height. The perception of just about all females, regardless of their actual weight, would be to see themselves as heavier than these idealized women .. Then, once they are unhappy with their perceived overweight, they are further deluged by ads from the dieting industry which seek to sell them the products which will make them look like the women in those advertisements. These ads, of course, use similarly ultra-thin models for their products as well. It is another vicious cycle in which women become caught in a never ending battle against their own normal body size, a battle in which the only winner is the seller of the products and the advertising agency handling their campaigns (Harmatz, 1987, p. 52).

This emphasis on media images of women presents the thin ideal as a simple but effective marketing ploy used by the dieting and fashion industries. As the thin ideal represents a size which is outside the norm of female body size it provides a demand for dieting products through the creation of an externally defined standard which women feel they must attain. The fact that the dieting industry profits from the media ideal of thinness is presented as one reason why such an ideal persists, so that the thin ideal is seen as a manufactured standard. In this analysis then the fact that the ideal of beauty is one of

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<sup>4</sup> This study has now been updated to include analyses from 1979 to 1988 (Wiseman et al., 1992). This analysis found that body size ideals were changing in accordance with the trend identified in Garner et al.'s (1980) study so that the ideal became increasingly thinner over this time period.

thinness is seen as related to business and profit margins rather than to the concept that thinness may have a cultural significance in contemporary Western society.

Whilst it is likely that media representations of women at the level of the mass media do have an effect on women's perceptions of their own bodies (Kilbourne, 1994; Ferguson, 1983; Umiker-Sebcok, 1981) and that the dieting industry does make a great deal of money from the representation of extremely thin models (Ogden, 1992; Chorlton, 1986), the restriction of sociocultural theories to such simplistic media analyses denies the broader cultural discourses surrounding body size and the complex relationship between media images and cultural discourse. As will be argued in section 5, the subjective meanings surrounding body size for women need to be considered in relation to the symbolic meanings of the contemporary 'thin ideal'. Thinness and fatness can be seen as symbolising particular cultural values, so that the fact that women are currently expected to be thin can be related to the current cultural discourses surrounding women and the female role (Bordo, 1993, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Bovey, 1989; Orbach, 1988; Fursland, 1987; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Brown, 1985; Bennett and Gurin, 1982).

In addition, the emphasis on media representations in body size research and on 'cultural' factors more generally denies the role which women's personal relationships play in their feelings about body size. Thus there is no account of the role of body size in women's sexual relationships and the importance of size in the way women are valued by men in heterosexual relationships. Hence the focus continues to be placed on the individual woman and on the way she is influenced by cultural factors, and there is no account of how men are influenced by these factors and the way this influences the way in which they regard women. There is a silence about the men in women's lives which needs to be addressed and built into theories about women's relationship to body size and food (Bordo, 1993).

## **5. THE CULTURAL SYMBOLISM OF BODY SIZE**

This thesis argues that the theorisation of women's relationship to body size in relation to the cultural discourses surrounding body size and the female body must go beyond a simple acknowledgement of the thin ideal to a perspective which includes an analysis of the cultural symbolism of body size and of the way in which this symbolism relates to gender and gender power relations. As discussed in section 4.1 above, a number of studies have now demonstrated that the contemporary Western ideal of thinness is a socially and historically constructed ideal because of the fact that this ideal has been shown to becoming increasingly thinner and because female beauty ideals have been shown to change radically from one historical time period to the next. In this section



these historical changes are explored in order to explain why current ideals of female attractiveness are thin ideals. The symbolism of thinness is explored together with the reasons why thinness is currently culturally valued. This involves a consideration of the role of gender and gender power relations in cultural discourses surrounding body size, linking women's dissatisfaction with their bodies to the discourses surrounding female sexuality and the female role.

## **5.1 The Thin Ideal as Freedom or Oppression: Women, Sexuality and Reproduction**

In this section the symbolism of thinness is explored in terms of the relationship between thinness and women's sexual and reproductive roles. Here thinness is related to discourses surrounding cultural definitions of the female role and the status of women in different historical periods. A number of different theories exist, which either conceptualise the thin ideal as liberating women, symbolising their reproductive and sexual freedom, or as oppressing women, symbolising their social control in relation to the threat of female empowerment. Body ideals are thus related to the changing social emphasis placed on women's sexual, reproductive and domestic roles and the way in which changes in these roles influence the power and control which women have over their lives.

### **5.1.1 Thinness as Sexual and Reproductive Liberation**

Historical theories have related changes in female body ideals to changing cultural attitudes towards female reproduction and sexuality. Here the natural 'fleshiness' of the female body, which is particularly concentrated on the reproductive areas of the hips, thighs and stomach (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984) has been hypothesised as symbolising the fertility of women's bodies (Bennett and Gurin, 1982). Thus the way that this fleshiness is valued in a particular socio-cultural period is theorised to relate to the way in which female reproduction is valued in the period.

This theory has been developed by Bennett and Gurin (1982) who explore the development of Western female beauty ideals from 1400 to the present day using the historical analyses of Clark (1956) and Hollander (1978). Bennett and Gurin (1982) define three different female beauty ideals corresponding to three different historical periods. The first ideal was prevalent between 1400 to around 1700 and involved a 'tummy centred' reproductive ideal which valued small breasts, lean thighs and a swelling stomach. This ideal can be related to the cultural importance which was placed on women's fertility in this time period. The second ideal, which became prevalent from 1700 to the early twentieth century, was a maternal beauty ideal which can be related to changes in the ideology of motherhood to involve a warmer and more domesticated attitude. In this historical period a conspicuous bosom and buttocks emphasised by a

small waist, which have been conceptualised as attributes of mothering rather than fertility, became the erotic ideal.

Thinness did not emerge as a desirable quality in women until the beginning of the twentieth century. Here the 1920s image of the 'flapper' emerged who was extremely thin with minimal breasts and buttocks. Bennett and Gurin (1982) relate this change in body ideals to turbulence in attitudes towards sex, sex roles and the status of women. Here the emergence of a thinner body ideal is described as paralleling women's greater sexual freedom and their movement away from reproductive and domestic roles. Hence the thin body of the flapper is conceptualised as projecting the message 'I am my own sexual boss, I am in control of myself, I am not a motherly, housewifely person' (Bennett and Gurin, 1982, p.208). Similarly, the emergence of the second wave of feminism and to women's developing sexual and reproductive freedom has been linked the development of the thin 'Twiggy' ideal of the 1960s. The Twiggy ideal replaced the more 'fleshy' ideal of the 1950s where women were encouraged to devote themselves to domesticity and reproduction.

According to this conceptualisation, the thin ideal is positive for women because it symbolises freedom and liberation. Women's desire to be thin is seen as a positive characteristic because it relates to a desire for freedom from reproduction and domesticity. Such a theory assumes that women in the late twentieth century have sexual and reproductive freedom and that such freedom is the result of society assimilating the aims and demands of the feminist movement. As will be discussed in section 5.1.2 below however, such a perspective has been problematised by feminist theorists who conceptualise the cultural demand for thinness in terms of the further oppression of women (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1990; Fursland, 1987; Mitchell, 1987; Brown, 1985; Chernin, 1983). Rather than being a symbol of freedom and emancipation, thinness is conceptualised as a further form of the social control of women.

### 5.1.2 Thinness as the Social Control of Women

The opposition to the theory that the thin ideal symbolises women's moves towards greater freedom and equality has involved a number of different theories. Thus rather than thinness symbolising sexual and reproductive freedom, it has been conceptualised as symbolising the control of women's sexual desires and sexual autonomy or a wider disempowerment of women as part of the violent backlash against the women's movement to remove women's bids for power and equality (Faludi, 1992).

#### *The Thin Ideal and Sexuality*

The thin ideal has been conceptualised as oppressive to women because of its control of women's sexual desires and sexual autonomy (Bordo, 1993; Fursland, 1987; Mitchell,

1987). On one level this is related to the fact that the thin ideal does not represent the body size of the majority of women in Western society. As discussed above, the body size and weight of Western women is actually increasing whilst thin ideals of sexual attractiveness continue to predominate (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980). This means that only a small proportion of women are defined as 'naturally' sexually attractive, with the remainder of the female population being defined as sexually unattractive (Mitchell, 1987). Thus the thin ideal can be seen to prevent women from feeling confident about their sexual attractiveness and from expressing their own sexuality in a confident and autonomous way. Rather than being positive for women as part of a growing sexual freedom and retreat from the domestic sphere, the thin ideal is conceptualised as a source of unhappiness and distress.

In addition to undermining women's confidence about their sexuality and sexual attractiveness, the thin ideal has been conceptualised as symbolising sexual innocence or a lack of sexual autonomy. Thus whilst the thin ideal may represent sexual freedom, in terms of freedom from reproduction, it can also be seen to represent the body of a sexually inexperienced prepubescent girl rather than that of a sexually maturing or mature woman (Brownmiller, 1984; Chernin, 1983; Dickenson, 1983; Sontag, 1972). This presentation of sexual attractiveness in terms of a thin and therefore 'young' ideal defines even fewer women as sexually attractive, so that older women are regarded as unattractive by virtue of their age. This point will be returned to in Chapter Five, in a discussion of the construction of sexual attractiveness across the life span and the role which this plays in women's feelings about their bodies. In terms of the debate discussed here, the construction of a young ideal means that women's bodies are valued for experiential and sexual ignorance, rather than for the wisdom and sexual knowledge which may come with maturity (Wolf, 1990). Again the thin ideal does not represent the sexual freedom of women but prevents women from feeling that they are sexually attractive and hence able to express themselves in a sexual way.

A further link which has been made between the thin ideal and the control of female sexuality refers to the mechanism whereby women attempt to achieve the thin ideal. Thus the denial and restraint of women's appetite for food which is necessary in order to lose weight has been related to cultural restrictions on women's appetites for sex (Bordo, 1993; Fursland, 1987). Fursland (1987) argues that the societal demands relating to the control of women's diet and body size parallel the demands which used to be made of women in relation to maintaining self control in the face of the temptations of pre-marital sex. The double standard which has traditionally permitted men to be involved in pre- and extra-marital sex can now be seen in relation to body size. Thus whilst men are allowed to have large bodies women are not and they are encouraged to control their appetites in order to make sure their bodies are of a minimal size.

*The Thin Ideal and the Disempowerment of Women*

The thin ideal has also been conceptualised as the oppression and control of women on a much broader level. Here the thin ideal is seen as a cultural response to the threat of female empowerment and emancipation, so that thin ideals can be seen to emerge after women gain a relative amount of power. Hence Wolf (1990) details the way in which dieting and thinness became emphasised when women were given the right to vote in the 1920s and when the second wave of feminism occurred in the 1960s. Thus rather than thinness symbolising women's freedom in terms of being embraced by women, it symbolises a political weapon against women's advancement. Consequently the thin ideal is particularly prevalent in the current cultural climate because the 'beauty myth' is the last remaining ideology of femininity which still has power to control women, thus replacing the myths of motherhood, domesticity, chastity and passivity (Wolf, 1990).

The thin ideal is theorised as controlling women and hence removing the threat of female emancipation through personalising the problems which women may encounter in their lives. The cultural presentation of weight loss as the solution to all women's problems prevents women from actually fighting their oppression and asserting and fighting for their rights:

In a [weight loss] class of this sort, women are directed to turn their dissatisfaction and depression toward their own bodies. They are encouraged to look at their large size as the cause of the failure they sustain in their lives. Consider what it means to persuade a woman who is depressed and sorrowful and disheartened by her entire life, that if only she succeeds in reducing herself, in becoming even less than she already is, she will be acceptable to this culture which cannot tolerate her if she is any larger or more developed than an adolescent girl. The radical protest she might utter, if she correctly understood the source of her despair and depression, has been directed toward herself and away from her culture and society. Now, she will not seek to change her culture so that it might accept her body; instead, she will spend the rest of her life in anguished failure at the effort to change her body so that it will be acceptable to her culture. (Chernin, 1983, p. 106).

In addition to diverting women from their oppression, the thin ideal prevents women from obtaining power because of the extreme difficulties involved in achieving the ideal. Women's bodies are naturally fatter than men's bodies and the percentage of fat increases with the reproductive milestones in women's lives such as puberty, pregnancy (for some women) and the menopause (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984). Achieving thinness thus requires increasingly large amounts of time and energy. In addition to this the sense of failure which surrounds women's attempts to lose weight results in serious effects on women's self esteem and self worth. This is explained by Brown (1985) in her examination of the thin ideal and the way in which this leads to the oppression and discrimination of fat women (see section 6, below):

[The] self-hatred attached to body size and eating habits is a most pernicious source of energy drain for women. It serves as a patriarchal psychic tapeworm, eating away at energy and self-love and reducing women's abilities to act powerfully. Fat discrimination is one form of discrimination that is still acceptable to practice, even in the feminist community (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983). What makes this self-hatred so prevalent? My thesis is that any phenomenon that exhibits such a nearly-universal negative impact on women is a manifestation of misogynist norms flowing from a culture where women are devalued and disempowered. My contention is that patriarchy has a stake in any process which leads women to increased visibility and personal power. (Brown, 1985, p. 63).

Brown (1985) relates the thin ideal to the amount of 'space' women are allowed to occupy in patriarchal culture. A thin ideal of beauty limits the physical space which women's bodies take up and hence symbolises women's invisibility and lack of power. Similarly the taboo against muscles in women, which are defined as 'unfeminine' and therefore unattractive symbolises women's powerlessness and dependency upon others. Such ideas have also been referred to by Orbach (1988) who asserts that as a response to the symbolic relationships between thinness, powerlessness and invisibility in the world, women may actually eat and put weight in order to subconsciously defy such attempts at social control. Here fatness is seen to symbolise a revolution against patriarchy and the thin ideal.

In summary, the distress and unhappiness surrounding body size suggests that the thin ideal does not represent a source of freedom and emancipation for women in contemporary Western society. It results in the personalisation of women's problems, so that any dissatisfaction which women feel with their lives becomes related to the fact that their bodies do not conform to culturally defined, but individually experienced, cultural ideals. Thus the thin ideal may *symbolise* freedom and equality for women, through presenting individuals with the possibility of achieving this freedom, but it does not represent the fact that freedom has been achieved for women at a wider societal level.

## **5.2 The Thin Ideal and the Self: Self Control and the Denial of Needs**

In addition to the above theories, the thin ideal has also been interpreted as symbolising cultural discourses surrounding ideals of 'the self' or of particular psychological characteristics. Thinness is theorised as being culturally valued because of the psychological characteristics which are necessary in order to achieve it. Thus thinness is not conceptualised as a physical ideal, where it is regarded as more attractive than other sizes, but as representative of a psychological ideal which is culturally valued in a particular historical period. These theories relate thinness to Western values surrounding the control and mastery of the self. The control of food intake necessary to achieve the thin ideal is prized because it represents the control and mastery of the self. These theories take no account of gender however or of the fact that women may be under

much greater pressure than men to conform to a thin ideal. Alternative theories therefore suggest that thinness is particularly important for women because it represents the denial of their own needs for food. This forms part of a discourse which defines a 'good wife and mother' in terms of self sacrifice and of meeting the needs of others before those of the self.

### 5.2.1 The Thin Ideal as Mastery of the Self

Historical analyses indicate that there is a Western tradition of valuing the restraint and mastery involved in the denial and control of food intake. This tradition can be traced back to earlier historical periods in which the regulation of food was associated with the mastery or purification of the self so that fasting and asceticism were regarded as providing a route to a kind of 'moral kudos' (Lawrence, 1979). Thus for the aristocracy of Ancient Greece, food was controlled as a sign of self mastery and moderation (Foucault, 1986 in Bordo, 1990) and, in Christian religious practices of the Middle Ages, fasting was aimed at the purification and domination of the flesh, which was regarded as corrupting the soul (Bynum, 1987; Bell, 1985). Much of contemporary attitudes towards food control today can thus be seen to have their roots in the Protestant ethic of ascetic impulse control and the virtues of self denial, where gluttony and sloth were regarded as wicked and sinful (Bovey, 1989). Women were seen as particularly in need of self control of the body because of the fact that they were considered to be 'closer to nature' and hence prone to moral weakness and the particular uncleanness of their bodies (Fursland, 1987).

The link between religious belief and attitudes towards the body has been argued as still existing today. Thus contemporary dieting rituals have been theorised as having strong religious overtones (Bovey, 1989), where fatness is equated with sin, shame and self-hatred (see section 6 below). Diet groups such as Weight Watchers are run on the lines of individual 'confessions' at weigh-in periods, 'penance' when weight gain is announced and 'absolution' after penitence is shown (Bovey, 1989). The religious theme is also seen in representations of food and eating, where certain foods are labelled as 'temptations' and as 'naughty but nice' and women are tempted to eat forbidden foods with slogans such as 'be a devil' (Bordo, 1993; Bovey, 1989).

Whilst such theories link the contemporary emphasis on thinness to historical attitudes towards food and eating, they do not provide any theorisation of the fact that women experience more pressure to be thin than men. In failing to account for gender, these studies do not theorise why women might be more likely to be affected by puritanical attitudes towards eating. A more explicit analysis of the role of gender involves a consideration of cultural discourses surrounding women's roles as the providers of food for others and the conflict which this creates over their own and others' needs.

### 5.2.2 The Thin Ideal and the Denial of Women's Needs

Theories linking the thin ideal to the cultural valuing of certain psychological characteristics of women explain the thin ideal in terms of cultural discourses surrounding women's role in meeting the needs of themselves and others. The fact that women are valued if their bodies conform to the thin ideal of beauty is explained in terms of the value attached to women's denial of their needs for food and hence their needs for nurturance and care. This denial of needs forms part of a wider discourse surrounding femininity and the female role which asserts that women should meet the needs of others before those of the self and hence should nurture others but not the self through the provision of food (Orbach, 1993, 1988; Brown, 1985). Women are thus taught to vicariously fulfill their own needs through fulfilling the needs of others (Orbach, 1993).

According to this theory, thin women are valued in current Western society because they do not meet their needs through food. Correspondingly, the cultural prejudice against fat women (see section 6, below) can be explained in terms of the fact that fat women are perceived as breaking the rules through nurturing themselves rather than others through food. Eating is fundamentally about meeting one's own needs as experienced through the sensation of hunger:

A woman who spends time and energy on her own pleasure by identifying the flavours that appeal to her, and who does not fall into the classic woman's role of cooking to please only the palates of those whose nurturance she is mandated to perform, but rather prepares foods that are nourishing to her own body and spirit has engaged in an act of quiet revolution. She has made her nurturing needs equal to those of others at an extremely basic level. (Brown, 1985, p. 65).

The fact that women are expected to deny their own needs for food and, therefore, their needs for nurturance and care results in women experiencing a sense of confusion and contradiction around food. Women are taught to regard food as an important part of their roles as wives and mothers, where failing to provide food for their families would represent a failure to provide them with love and care. Here food represents pleasure and enjoyment as well as being an important source of health and fitness. For women however, food may be experienced as 'bad' or 'wrong'. Women are supposed to avoid food in order to achieve a thin body and hence they learn that food should not meet their own physical or emotional needs:

The thin aesthetic which has dominated the last 20 years has put women in the impossible position of feeling that they must curb their appetites and their food intake. They must do this at the same time that they feed others and express their care and concern for them through the food they prepare and serve. In other words, women absorb a powerfully contradictory message vis á vis food and eating. It is good for others but bad for the woman herself; healthy for others, harmful to the woman herself; full of love and nurturance for others, full of self indulgence for herself (Orbach, 1988, p. 20).

The link between thinness and the taboo against meeting needs has also been observed in relation to cultural discourses surrounding women's sexuality (Fursland, 1987). As discussed in section 5.1.2, the thin ideal has been conceptualised as representing the control of female sexuality through the setting of rigid ideals of beauty which define the majority of women as sexually unattractive and hence exclude many women from sexual confidence and autonomy. Again there is a taboo against women meeting their needs. Here the thin ideal results in women being unable to meet their own sexual needs as well as being unable to meet their needs for food in order to achieve the thin ideal. Thus both 'sexual autonomy', in terms of meeting one's own needs for sexual pleasure, and 'food autonomy', in terms of eating whatever one desires rather than eating in response to cultural demands and rules, can be seen as being controlled through the cultural demand that women do not meet their own needs but meet the needs of others:

No wonder that attitudes to women eating reflect attitudes to women's sexuality. And no wonder that there are injunctions regulating our eating as well as our sexuality - extremes are not tolerated. In sexual activity celibacy and frigidity on the one hand and 'promiscuity' on the other are taboo, while in eating behaviour anorexia and 'obesity' are treated. Sex and eating are, however, about meeting needs. And whereas men are encouraged to meet their needs, women are defined as 'need meeters' whose needs are usually denied or subverted. But we *do* have needs; it's only that we aren't allowed to acknowledge them. Faking orgasm is like saying we've had enough to eat when we haven't. And both are the result of feeling ashamed of having these needs. (Fursland, 1987, p. 18).

The thin ideal of female beauty can therefore be seen to represent the denial of women's needs for food and nurturance. In addition to this, women attempt to change the size of their bodies in order to meet culturally defined standards of female beauty. Hence conforming to the thin ideal can be conceptualised in terms of meeting the needs and standards of others. A large part of this involves meeting the standards of men as women attempt to achieve a body regarded as sexually attractive by men in order to 'catch a man' (see section 4.2 above). This focus on meeting the needs of others, both through her body size and the food that women prepare for others, may result in women having a lack of awareness of their own needs:



One of the important issues [in women's relationship to body size] is the shift from internal to external standards. As the emphasis on meeting rigid and extreme external standards increases, there can be a very serious diminution in awareness of and a lack of attention to one's own inner experiences. Hilda Bruch, in her brilliant analysis of anorexia, points to this phenomenon as a basic definition of anorexia - the girls' loss of ability to be aware of her own inner hunger states. Current research indicates that hunger mechanisms may be very delicate and precarious for all human beings following starvation or any tampering with metabolic function. This shift in young women may reflect the tendency for women to be highly responsive to meeting the standards and norms expected by important people in their lives. Pleasing or giving to others may become more important than learning to listen to oneself. *The loss of the inner voice, of the awareness of one's own needs, desires, or interests in the effort to respond to external expectations is a crucial issue in understanding basic aspects of women's psychological development.* The push towards rigid and chronic dieting, as well as the emphasis on meeting culturally defined standards, may be an important factor in this critical loss of a basic sense of self. (Surrey, 1991, p. 243, emphasis as in original).

The emphasis placed on meeting the needs of others before those of the self means that women may be criticised when they appear to 'please themselves' rather than 'pleasing others'. It is ironic that women's preoccupation with their size is often conceptualised in terms of 'pleasing the self' as part of the discourse which defines women's dissatisfaction as the result of their own vanity (see section 3.1). Here body concerns are conceptualised in terms of selfishness because they supposedly involve 'pleasing the self'. This is clearly illustrated by the following quote from Hilde Bruch:

'It is impossible to assess the cost in serenity, relaxation and efficiency of this abnormal, over-slim, fashionable appearance. It produces serious psychological tensions to feel compelled to be thinner than one's natural make-up and style of living demand. There is a great deal of talk about the weakness and overindulgence of overweight people who eat too much. Very little is said about the selfishness and self-indulgence involved in a life which makes one's appearance the center of all values, and subordinates all other considerations to it.' (Bruch, 1973, p.198).

In this quote, women's preoccupation with body size and appearance is again conceptualised in terms of selfishness and preoccupation with the self. No reference is made to the fact that women are brought up to regard their appearance as their most important asset in a culture which sexualises and commodifies women's bodies (Bordo, 1993) or to the fact that women's bodies are conceptualised as in constant need of alteration and cultivation (Orbach, 1993; Ferguson, 1984). Women's feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies and their attempts to shape their bodies to conform to ideals of female beauty and femininity are not analysed in relation to the role of male desires and expectations or the influence of cultural pressures which women are under to meet these desires. Only when these issues are considered can women's 'selfish' attempts to transform themselves into perfect images of physical beauty be more

accurately defined as efforts to please other people in their lives as well as to conform to culturally prescribed standards of appropriate female behaviour.

### **5.3 Summary**

In summary, the thin ideal can be linked to a number of different theories regarding the cultural symbolism of thinness and the way in which this symbolism links to gender and gender power relations. The thin ideal can be conceptualised as representing the disempowerment and social control of women, either through the control of their sexuality, of their needs for food and nurturance, or of their feelings about themselves and the problems in their lives. A consideration of these theories indicates the complexity of the cultural meanings surrounding body size and food which are likely to result in body size and food having a rich complexity of meanings for individual women. This represents a shift from the analysis of sociocultural factors in mainstream psychology which identifies the existence of a 'thin ideal' but which fails to explore the symbolism behind thinness and the way in which this symbolism relates to contemporary cultural attitudes and preoccupations.

At the same time however, the analysis of complex cultural meanings of body size does not theorise how these meanings come to have an individual meaning for women in terms of their own understandings and experiences of their bodies and the food that they eat. As in mainstream psychology, the absence of analysis of the relationship between individual and society implies an assumption of passive internalisation of societal discourses. Again this takes no account of the fact that women may actively reflect upon such discourses so that they come to have individual meaning in their lives or so that such discourses may be actively challenged or resisted by women. This issue is returned to in section 7.

## **6. CULTURAL DISCOURSES SURROUNDING FATNESS: OPPRESSION, PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION**

This section of the chapter examines cultural discourses surrounding fatness, arguing that women's relationship to their body size needs to be conceptualised in terms of the oppression and prejudice surrounding fat people. Whilst some cultural discourses define thinness in terms of the most attractive and acceptable body size to be, other discourses also denigrate fatness, conceptualising it in terms of psychological, social and physical inferiority. The existence of such discourses adds a further layer of complexity to women's relationships to their bodies. Thus whilst women may want to be thin in order to be valued and regarded as attractive, they may also want to lose weight because they want to avoid the negative attitudes towards fatness in our society. This may mean that

body size is experienced differently for those women who are defined as 'fat' and those who are not.

### **6.1 Negative Stereotypes of Fatness: Psychological, Social and Physical Inferiority**

Substantial evidence now exists to suggest that there is considerable prejudice and discrimination towards fatness in contemporary Western society. This treatment of fat people has been termed 'fat oppression' by a number of writers (Rothblum, 1992, 1990; Bovey, 1989; Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Brown, 1985; Schoenfelder and Wieser, 1983) who aim to challenge many of the myths surrounding the causes and effects of fatness, and in doing so, empower fat women to challenge the negative attitudes which they encounter (Barron and Lear, 1989).

The oppression of fat people involves the association of fatness with a number of negative psychological and social characteristics so that fat people are conceptualised as inferior to thin people. Studies of the stereotypes associated with fatness have found these stereotypes to define fatness in terms of unattractiveness, laziness, stupidity, lack of control, depression and low self esteem (Tiggemann and Rothblum, 1988; Worsley, 1979). Fat people are also perceived as more lonely and less likely to have friends than people of average weight (Harris and Smith, 1983).

Such attitudes towards fatness have been found to begin early in childhood, with children being found to have preferences for thin bodies and to reject chubby ones (Lerner, 1973; Lerner and Gellert, 1969) as well as preferring thin as opposed to fat toys (Wooley, Wooley and Dyrenforth, 1980). In a range of now-classic studies comparing pictures of fat children, children of average size and children with a range of physical disabilities (such as a missing hand or a facial deformity), the obese children were rated as the least attractive (Goodman, et al., 1963; Richardson et al., 1961). As with adults, children again characterise fat people in negative terms, regarding them as cheats or as dirty, argumentative, lazy, sloppy, mean and stupid (Staffieri, 1972, 1967).

The prejudiced attitudes which exist towards fat people have again been related to the cultural discourses surrounding the control of food intake and the way in which such control symbolises self control and self mastery (see section 5.2). Fatness is traditionally associated with over-eating (Mayer, 1983; Wooley, Wooley and Dyrenforth, 1980; Wooley and Wooley, 1979) which is conceptualised in terms of greediness and gluttony. Such gluttony is assumed to be the cause of fatness which, as we have seen (section 3.1), places the responsibility and blame for fatness on the individual. In turn this over-indulgence is associated with fat people's 'nature' or

'personality' which is characterised in terms of a lack of self control and an inherent weakness and ineffectiveness (Mayer, 1983).

Studies of fat stereotypes are based on attitudes towards men and women but they do not analyse gender differences. This means there is little exploration of whether fat women experience different level of prejudice than fat men. Stereotypes of fatness involve the judgement of individuals solely on the basis of their size, so that the body of the fat person is seen as revealing everything about them in terms of their psychological and social characteristics. This treatment of fat people can be seen as a more extreme version of the way in which women are defined and valued in terms of their physical appearance (see section 4.2). This emphasis on women's appearance suggests that fat women are likely to be judged more harshly than fat men because of their size. Fat women may be conceived as being either 'unnatural' or 'unfeminine' because it is assumed that their body size indicates that they are not interested in their sexual appearance or in establishing relationships with men (Mable-Lois and Aldebaran, 1983). These suggestions are partly backed up by research on the discrimination of fat people in employment and education. As will be discussed in the following section, this research has examined gender differences and has found that women receive more discrimination than do men.

## **6.2 The Discrimination of Fat Women: Gender, Employment and Education**

In addition to the negative stereotypes surrounding fat people, research has demonstrated that fat people also experience discrimination because of their size. This discrimination can be seen at the level of both education and employment. Canning and Mayer's (1966) study of high school graduates investigated the effects of body size on gaining entrance to college. Significant discrimination was found to exist against fat women. Only thirty two percent of women rated as medically 'obese' went to college, compared with fifty two percent of non 'obese' women. The 'obese' women were found to be no different to the non obese women on measures of intelligence and achievement and there were no difference in the percentage who actually applied for college. These statistics can be compared to fifty three percent of non 'obese' men and fifty percent of 'obese' men, a difference which is not statistically significant.

Women defined as 'obese' have also been found to be less economically successful than non 'obese' women, so that they are less likely to achieve higher socio-economic status than their parents than are thinner women. By comparison no significant differences were found between the socio-economic status of 'obese' and non 'obese' men (Goldblatt, Moore and Stunkard, 1965). In a more recent study Rothblum et al. (1990) found 'very obese' women (defined as fifty percent above the 'ideal' weight) to report

more employment discrimination than non 'obese' women. This group of women reported discrimination in terms of not being hired, failing to obtain promotion or pay rises, as well as being fired or pressured to resign. This all occurred within the context of being urged to lose weight within the work situation.

Studies of gender differences in employment discrimination therefore illustrate that whilst the discourse of 'fat is bad' relates to both men and women, it is particularly applied to fat women.

### **6.3 Fatness, Health and Health Care**

The prejudice and discrimination of fat people can be related to the range of negative stereotypes surrounding their physical, social and psychological characteristics. On another level however, fatness is often regarded as negative because of its associations with a wide range of health problems (Bovey, 1989; Wooley, Wooley and Dyrenforth, 1980). This emphasis on the health problems associated with fatness can be related to the increasing awareness in western culture of 'healthy eating' and physical exercise with thinness representing an ideal of health and physical fitness as well as a beauty ideal (Mitchell, 1987). This in turn has influenced the beauty ideal which has changed from being merely slim or thin to being 'toned' and 'in shape' (Bordo, 1990). Thus it is no longer acceptable to be simply thin, women now have to ensure their flesh is muscled and taut rather than 'wobbly' or 'flabby'.

Mayer (1983) argues that main reason for fat oppression is the feelings of disgust and revulsion which people feel towards the appearance of fat people. She asserts that the concern expressed about the health of fat people and the way in which fat people are advised to lose weight 'for their own good' serves to detract attention from the actual concern for fat people's appearance. In addition Mayer and other writers have argued that fatness is not unhealthy per se and that the combined physical and psychological effects of dieting and fat discrimination may actually cause many of the health problems traditionally associated with fatness (see Rothblum, 1990; Wooley, Wooley and Dyrenforth, 1980; Wooley and Wooley, 1979 for reviews of this literature).

Other research has shown that fat women actually receive poorer medical care than do thinner women. In a survey of 200 fat women, Bovey (1989) found that many fat women reported being frightened of visiting their doctors because of the repeated lectures about their weight which they received and the way in which all their health problems were blamed on their weight. Studies of health professionals have shown that they also hold stereotypical and negative attitudes towards fat people. Mental health professionals have thus been found to be more likely to rate fat patients as being agitated, emotional, or as hypochondriacs (Young and Powell, 1985). For example,

Maddox and Liederman (1969) found that doctors rated fat people as awkward, weak willed and ugly. Similarly, studies of the attitudes of medical students have found that fat patients are regarded as more ugly, awkward, weak, sad, unsuccessful, lacking in self control and medically more difficult to manage than non-fat patients (Blumberg and Mellis, 1985). This evidence questions the idea that pressure is placed on fat people to lose weight out of a concern for their health and suggests instead that this pressure arises out of the desire to see fat people become more attractive and hence less physically repulsive.

#### **6.4 Summary**

In summary fatness can be seen to be surrounded by negative stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice, so that fat people experience a great sense of pressure in relation to the size of their bodies. The existence of prejudice and discrimination against fat people adds a further layer of complexity to women's relationships to their bodies. Thus whilst women may want to be thin in order to be valued and regarded as attractive, they may also want to lose weight because they want to avoid the negative attitudes towards fatness in Western society.

The increasingly thinner ideal of body size (see section 4.1) in Western societies may mean that more and more women are being defined, and defining themselves, as 'fat'. Whilst not all of these women may experience the negative attitudes surrounding fatness in their relationships with others, it may be that these women construct their bodies in relation to the negative discourses surrounding fatness. Thus when women assert that they feel 'too fat' they may not simply be valuing themselves in relation to the lack of positive characteristics associated with thinness, but may also be denigrating themselves in relation to the negative stereotypes associated with fatness.

Alternatively, the cultural discourses surrounding fatness may mean that body size is experienced differently for those women who are defined as 'fat' and those who are not. Whilst the majority of women in Western society fail to conform to the contemporary ideal of thinness (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980), the subjective meanings of body size may be dependent upon the divergence between the size of women's bodies and the thin ideal. In contrast to the body perception studies reported in section 3.1 above, this theorisation is not presented to suggest that the feelings which 'thinner' women feel about their body size are 'irrational'. Nor is it intended to deny the pain involved in such feelings. Instead it is based on the recognition that there may be a variety of experiences of body size for women, so that the subjective meanings of size vary with the cultural discourses surrounding different body sizes in Western society.

## **7. SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE NEED FOR A QUALITATIVE FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This thesis aims to explore women's relationship to body size and food in relation to the subjective meanings of their bodies in terms of women's own understandings of what body size means for them, the role which body size plays in women's sense of self and its role in her relationships with others. This chapter has argued that these subjective experiences need to be conceptualised in relation to cultural discourses surrounding body size and the way in which such discourses relate to discourses surrounding femininity and the female role. There needs to be an analysis of how women construct their experiences in relation to these discourses and how they come to have subjective meaning for women. The review of previous research on women's relationship to body size has illustrated its failure to take this perspective.

Within mainstream psychology, women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is theorised in terms of the individual, where dissatisfaction is seen as the result of deficiencies in women, or in terms of the 'social', where dissatisfaction is theorised as the result of the internalisation of socio-cultural factors surrounding body size. The use of quantitative experimental methods in both these approaches means that there is a failure to conceptualise women's feelings about their bodies in terms of the subjective meanings of body size. Assessing women's feelings through rating scales and questionnaires denies the complexity of individuals' experiences, reducing them to numerical values which fail to explore the understandings which individuals have of their experiences and the meanings which they attach to these experiences.

In addition to this, research based on sociocultural theories of body size dissatisfaction has focused on 'the social' to the detriment of the individual. In theorising the importance of cultural factors, there has been a neglect of subjective experience and a lack of theorisation of the individual. Within mainstream psychology, body size dissatisfaction has been theorised in terms of the internalisation of social factors in a model of social causation which fails to explore the meaning which such factors have in individuals lives and the process of reflection upon such discourses. Thus whilst sociocultural theories of body size provide a shift away from the emphasis on the individual, these theories are problematic because of the absence of the theorisation of the meaning which such discourses have for the individual.

This chapter has also explored the symbolism of body size and hence has attempted a deeper cultural analysis than mainstream psychological research. The analysis of the cultural symbolism or meanings behind the thin ideal conceptualised contemporary emphasis on thinness in relation to the cultural discourses surrounding sexuality,

women's role in society and the discourses surrounding psychological factors of the control and the denial of physical and emotional needs. Again however such theories are incomplete because of their failure to theorise the meaning which such complex and contradictory discourses have for the individual.

This thesis conceptualises the subjective meanings surrounding body size for women in terms of a model which highlights the role of sociocultural discourses on these meanings but which theorises the influence of these discourses in terms of a process of interaction with these discourses (either in women's relationships with others or through internal interaction with the self) and active reflection upon discourses. Thus there is a shift both from a model of the individual isolated from social discourses and from a model of women internalising social discourses without any reflection upon these discourses. There is an attempt to theorise the meanings of body size in terms of an interactive model between the individual, her personal relationships and the sociocultural context in which individual women live their lives. This is theorised in terms of symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) which is combined with feminist methodology and epistemology (Griffin, 1995; Henwood, 1993; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986) and social constructionist grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Smith, 1993; Charmaz, 1990). These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the literature surrounding women's relationship to body size. The following points have been made:

- Despite the widespread dissatisfaction which women feel about the size and shape of their bodies, there has been little research on these issues within mainstream psychology. In contrast, extensive research has been carried out on eating disordered populations with the aim of describing and classifying the 'pathological' attitudes towards body size and food involved in anorexia and bulimia. This thesis asserts that an approach which explores the meanings of body size and food for women who are not diagnosed as having an eating disorder is needed, with a focus on women from the general population. This represents a shift away from a framework based on the pathology of the individual.
- Moving the emphasis away from the individual results in the conceptualisation of women's relationship to body size and food in terms of social discourses surrounding body size and food which are themselves structured around gender power relations. This represents a shift from the emphasis of traditional body size dissatisfaction



research which has taken an individualised perspective, focusing on deficiencies in women's perceptions or cognitions about their body size.

- Mainstream psychology has conceptualised the social discourses surrounding women's relationship to body size in terms of a 'thin ideal' discourse, which defines thinness as the most attractive and most healthy size. This thesis expands this analysis to involve an analysis of the role of gender in the thin ideal, which identifies the way in which women are valued in terms of their physical appearance and hence their ability to 'catch' and 'keep' a man. In addition, the cultural symbolism of thinness is considered and related to contemporary attitudes towards women's sexuality, the changing status of women in relation to the second wave of feminism, and to discourses surrounding the control and denial of women's physical and emotional needs.
- The meaning of body size and food for women also need to be examined in relation to the prejudice and discrimination towards fat people, which define fatness in terms of social, psychological and physical inferiority and which denies fat people access to education and employment. This prejudice can be seen as particularly applied to fat women who are judged in relation to the discourse which primarily values women in terms of their attractiveness. These discourses may result in a range of different meanings surrounding body size and food for women depending on their size.
- On a methodological level, previous research on body size has failed to explore the meanings of body size for women. It has reduced the complexity of these meanings to numerical values through the use of simplistic questionnaires and rating scales. This thesis argues that women's relationship to body size and food needs to be explored through an emphasis on the understandings which individuals have of their experiences and the meanings of their experiences in relation to women's sense of themselves and their relationships with others.
- The subjective meanings surrounding body size and food need to be conceptualised in relation to a model of interaction and active reflection upon social discourses. This represents a shift from the model of the individual isolated from social context and from a model of social causation where women internalise social discourses without any reflection upon these discourses. There is an attempt to theorise the meanings of body size in terms of an interactive model between the individual, her personal relationships and the sociocultural context in which individual women live. This is theorised in terms of symbolic interactionist perspective which is combined with feminist methodology and epistemology and social constructionist grounded theory.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **PILOT STUDY: DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND EXPLORING RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents data from the Pilot Study of the thesis which focuses upon two successive group interviews carried out with three women in their early twenties. Whilst the Pilot Study was carried out as a self contained research project, it also serves as an introduction to the thesis research as a whole. The study therefore has two aims. Firstly, it aims to explore the substantive issues raised in Chapter Two, exploring the women's feelings about the size of their bodies, the meaning of the women's bodies in their relationships with other people, and the way in which the women's feelings about their bodies were related to their eating habits and the meanings associated with food. There is a focus on the subjective meanings of body size for women and the way in which these meanings relate to the cultural discourses surrounding body size. The substantive themes generated from the study lead onto the identification of the research questions and design of the main study of the thesis.

Secondly, the Pilot Study aims to explore the methods and epistemology behind qualitative psychological research, building on the issues identified in Chapter One and Chapter Two. This firstly involves an exploration of qualitative epistemology and methodology with its emphasis on exploring individual's experiences from their own perspectives, drawing on grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Secondly, there is an exploration of the subjective nature of research which is conceptualised as being influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and the social, historical and cultural context in which the researcher is based (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). Thirdly, there is an exploration of the power asymmetries present in traditional psychological research together with a discussion of possible ways to reduce these power differentials. This involves a consideration of feminist methodology (e.g. Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 1981) and the 'respondent validation' method developed in the co-operative inquiry approach (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Reason, 1988)

The chapter is organised around four main sections. The first section explores the theoretical and methodological issues of the study, as discussed above, in order to set the design and methodology of the study in context. The second section outline the research design and procedure of the study. This includes a discussion of the decision to use semi-structured group interviews, to include myself the researcher in the interview process through a sharing of my own experiences with the women in the group, and the decision to incorporate the process of 'respondent validation' into the research which involved taking the analysis of the women's experiences back to the group in order to obtain their comments and personal interpretations.

The third section of the chapter presents the thematic analysis of the interviews carried out with the women. The analysis is arranged around a number of analytic themes and includes an analysis of the initial interview with the women, together with a discussion of the women's reactions to this analysis which were explored in the second interview.

The fourth section of the chapter deals with the substantive, theoretical and methodological implications of the Pilot Study. Substantively, this involves an exploration of the role of social context in the women's accounts of their experiences surrounding food and body size which in turn leads to the identification of emerging research questions for the main body of the research. On a theoretical and methodological level, there is a discussion of the methodology employed in the Pilot Study and a consideration of whether this methodology met the aims which it was designed to meet. This involves a critique of the method of 'respondent validation' as outlined in the co-operative inquiry approach which centres around the validity of this method in reducing power differentials in the research process as well as examining the theoretical assumptions of which this method is based. The implications of these findings for the substantive, theoretical and methodological framework of the main study are then explored.

## **2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

This section introduces the methods and epistemology behind qualitative psychological research and outlines the theoretical and methodological aims of the Pilot Study. Building on the personal critique of mainstream psychology developed in Chapter One, it firstly highlights the need for a research methodology which avoids traditional psychology's dismissal or distortion of women's experiences and which therefore explores women's experiences of food and body size from their own viewpoints, in order to understand the meanings which such experiences have to the women in the context of their own lives.

Secondly, the theoretical framework of the Pilot Study challenges the conceptualisation of research as an objective process and asserts that scientific research is actually influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher which is in turn influenced by the power relations and social context in which the researcher is based. Thirdly, the role of the research participant is explored with the assertion that the emphasis on objective research results in the depersonalisation of the research encounter and the disempowerment of the research participant. This involves drawing on feminist approaches to research practice (Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 1981) as well as incorporating specific components of the co-operative inquiry approach (Reason, 1988; Reason and Rowan, 1981) into the methodology of the study.

### **2.1 Exploring Women's Experience from their own Perspectives**

The research carried out for the Pilot Study aims to explore the meanings of food and body for women and to explore these meanings through analysing women's own accounts of their experiences. As discussed in Chapter Two (section 3), such a perspective represents a shift from the positivist framework of traditional psychological research on body size. This research ignores the meanings of individuals' experiences through reducing them to numerical values and statistical relationships between variables (Hollway, 1989; Bryman, 1988; Walker, 1985; Harré and Secord, 1972). Rather than breaking down human behaviour into causal relationships between variables, this research attempts to explore the full complexity of human experience in terms of the actual meanings of these experiences to the individuals concerned. This involves exploring individuals' lives through the exploration of individuals' own accounts of their experiences. These ideas are explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

The methods of traditional quantitative psychology can also be seen to ignore areas of individuals' experiences. As introduced in Chapter One, traditional psychology employs the hypothetico-deductive method which involves the generation of hypotheses based on theoretical 'hunches' and the testing of these hypotheses through tightly controlled experiments (Bryman, 1988). Thus, in research using an interview methodology, the interviews are structured around a question answer format where the questions are based around the predefined research hypotheses. This methodology means that the research only explores what the researcher specifies as relevant to the research topic and hence the research is only able to measure the extent, distribution or intensity of the variables defined as important at the start of the research (Maynard, 1994). Such research potentially misses out large areas of experience which might be of equal or greater relevance to the research as well as dismissing those experiences which the research participants themselves regard as relevant to the research topic (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

An analysis of feminist critiques of psychology emphasises the particular importance of exploring women's experiences from their own perspectives. Mainstream psychology has traditionally either ignored experiences relevant to women's lives (Ussher, 1989; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981) or has distorted female experience in comparisons to male norms (Griffin, 1986, 1985; Gilligan, 1982). This treatment of female experience means that emphasis needs to be placed on basing psychology on women's accounts of their own experiences (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Bowles and Klein, 1983; Roberts, 1981) so that such experiences are seen as valid in their own right rather than being assessed in relation to accounts of male experiences (see Chapter Four for a further discussion of feminist methodology and epistemology).

In response to this critique, this study aims to develop a theory about the meanings surrounding food and body size for women which is based on or 'grounded' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in women's accounts of their experiences. This involves the development of a relatively unstructured interview methodology which allows women to talk about their experiences from their own perspectives rather than from the perspective of predefined research questions. In addition a group interview methodology is used in order to provide an informal and relaxed environment allowing the participants to explore their experiences as easily as possible. In addition to this the analysis stage of the research involves the use of a grounded theory methodology (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to build a theory which is 'grounded' in the women's accounts of their experiences rather than categorising accounts in relation to predefined categories based on prior theory.

## **2.2 Exploring the Role of Researcher: Knowledge, Subjectivity and Power**

The second aim of the Pilot Study is to explore the role of the researcher in the research process. Traditional psychology conceptualises the researcher as an objective observer, measurer or tester who produces value free knowledge which is free from subjective bias (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Hollway, 1989; Harding, 1987). The researcher is thus trained in 'scientific' methods which remove subjective bias from all stages of the research process. In the interview for example, researchers are trained to carry out interviews within strict formalised guidelines involving a series of predefined questions which are presented in an identical format in each interview. This ensures the interview data is produced under identical conditions so that it is therefore directly comparable and statistically treatable (Oakley, 1981). This requires interviewers to be emotionally detached and distanced from their subjects, treating each subject in exactly the same way to avoid subjective bias infiltrating the interview through revealing the aims of the

research or through offering accounts of her own opinions, experiences or knowledge (Oakley, 1981).

This study is carried out from the perspective that knowledge is socially constructed rather than objective and value free and is therefore influenced by the researcher's own subjectivity as well as the power relations present in a given socio-cultural context (Griffin, 1995; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). The identification of the way in which mainstream psychology has ignored or distorted female experience (Griffin, 1986, 1995; Ussher, 1989; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Gilligan, 1982) has highlighted the way in which the researcher's identity, interests, philosophical stance and biographical experiences influence the research process (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Smith, 1993; Charmaz, 1990), which in turn are influenced by the concerns of the dominant groups in society (Griffin, 1995; Nicolson, 1992b, 1993; Harding, 1987). Knowledge is thus conceptualised as the product of a particular socio-cultural context structured by unequal power relations based around gender, class, sexuality and age (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

From this perspective the researcher is conceptualised as an interactive interpreter rather than an objective measurer (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992). Research is conceptualised as involving the subjectivity of the researcher at all levels of the research including hypothesis selection, data collection and data analysis. The recognition of the subjective nature of research leads to a need for reflexivity in the research process, where the researcher reflects upon the contribution which her own values, interests and identity make to the research process (Griffin, 1995; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990).

An additional outcome of the recognition of the subjective nature of research relates to the conceptualisation of the interview process and the researcher's role within this process. Rather than conceptualising the interview as an exercise in data collection where the participant passively gives out information and the researcher collects it, there is a shift to conceptualising the interview as a form of interaction between two individuals with their own subjectivities (Smith, 1993; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992). This issue is explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

### **2.3 Power in the Research Process: Feminist and Co-operative Inquiry Approaches**

A further aim of this study is to explore the role of the research participant with the assertion that the emphasis on objective research creates power asymmetries in research relationships so that the researcher is defined as the powerful expert and the participant as a powerless source of data (Maynard, 1994). For example, feminist critics such as

Oakley (1981) and Harding (1987) have outlined the way in which the label of 'expert' allows the researcher access to the personal experiences of research participants whilst legitimately avoiding revealing any of her own experiences or opinions. By contrast the role of the participant in the research process is characterised as that of a passive data source who is expected to obediently answer the research questions without being informed of the aims of the research or the researcher's opinions about the research questions. The ethics of this objectification of research participants are also taken up in the co-operative inquiry approach which asserts that research participants should have the right to contribute to the knowledge which is generated about them as well as to be aware of the research findings which are eventually generated from the research in which they have participated (Heron, 1981).

Feminist researchers have attempted to reduce power asymmetries in the research process through advocating the development of genuine and non-exploitative relationships between researcher and participant (Griffin, 1995; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Harding, 1987). Rather than developing a relationship with the participant for the sole purpose of establishing rapport with the participant so that they provide relevant data, it is asserted that feminist researchers should develop research relationships where researcher and participant share information and experiences. By sharing her experiences with the participant the researcher places herself in the same vulnerable position as the participant and the research encounter is about sharing personal experiences rather than the researcher judging or assessing the research participant.

A further attempt to reduce power differentials is found in the co-operative inquiry approach (Reason, 1988; Reason and Rowan, 1981):

Traditional research on persons is also a way of exercising power over persons. The experimental subjects of course agree voluntarily to be subjects, but thereafter they do what they are asked to do in accordance with principles not frequently disclosed to them and in accordance with decisions made unilaterally by the researchers ... Research then becomes another agent of authoritarian social control. Knowledge and power are all on the side of the researchers and their political masters, and none is on the side of those who provide the data and are subject to its subsequent application. (Heron, 1981, p. 34).

This approach suggests that power differentials in the research process can be reduced through breaking down the boundaries between researcher and participant. In its fullest form this involves the removal of the distinction between the researcher and the participant so that both are redefined as co-researchers and co-subjects (Heron, 1981) with both actively participating in all stages of the research process. Here both researcher and researched contribute to the 'action' of the research, producing data relating to the subject of the research investigation, as well as to the 'inquiry' side of the research,

involving the formulation of hypotheses, data analysis and the drawing up of conclusions.

The research carried out in this study attempts to minimise power differences through a combination of feminist and co-operative inquiry methods. This firstly involves reducing the distance between researcher and researched through the researcher participating in the data-production side of the research process. This involves the researcher (me) contributing to the research through accounts of her own experiences (see section 3.4.1 below). In addition, this methodology is also adopted in an attempt to facilitate the women's own exploration of their own experiences through the creation of a relaxed and non-threatening research encounter where the women do not feel that they are being judged or assessed in relation to their accounts of their experiences. This is particularly important in relation to research of a personal or upsetting nature, such as research on body size issues.

A further attempt to reduce the power differentials in the research process involves the use of a process referred to as 'respondent validation' (Smith, 1993, 1990) in the co-operative inquiry approach. This process relates to the commitment to including the participant in the research process and to the recognition of the participants right to be aware of and comment on the analysis of the data which they have contributed to the research project. Respondent validation thus involves a cyclical approach to research (Heron, 1981) where the analysis arising from the research is returned to the participants in order to invite the participant to reflect upon the analysis of the research data and to assent or dissent with the analysis. Following this the researcher and participant negotiate until agreement is reached (see Heron, 1981).

### **3. DESIGN, RECRUITMENT AND PROCEDURE.**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The Pilot Study was designed with the three methodological aims described above. The study was designed around two group interviews, with an interval of one month between them. The decision to carry out group interviews related to two factors. Firstly, it was felt that women would find it easier to talk about their experiences in a group rather than in a one-to-one situation. It was felt that a group interview methodology would provide an informal and relaxed environment allowing the participants to explore their experiences as easily as possible. This forms part of the commitment to exploring the meanings of individuals' experiences from their own perspectives. At the same time however it was decided that carrying out interviews between women who did not know each other might raise problems relating to intimacy and safety. The group was therefore



made up of three women and myself, all of whom were close friends. Secondly, it was felt that a group situation would reduce the concept of the interview as a 'question answer' format which involved the researcher asking questions of the interview in the traditional power relationship. The design was therefore felt to provide a informal and relaxed environment in which the participants could explore their experiences and which also avoided the power differentials involved in a traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship.

The first interview aimed to explore the women's personal experiences of body size and food from their own perspectives and hence was designed to facilitate the women's reflection upon these experiences. The interview was not structured around set questions but was designed to allow the women to explore the areas of their experience which they saw as relevant to the research topic. In addition to this I also identified a number of themes which I thought the discussion might cover. These themes were derived from my initial reading around the issues surrounding women, food and body size and included childhood experiences of body size; experiences of body size in relation to one's different relationships with partners, friends or family; the relation of eating to one's mood; and experiences of food within the family. Whilst I had these themes in mind and was aware of them throughout the interview these themes were not vital to the interview in terms of testing specific research hypotheses nor were they automatically introduced in a structured way. Instead these themes were there to be introduced if the women were nervous or found it difficult to raise their own discussion themes.

The second interview was based around the discussion of the analysis of the first interview and involved the process of respondent validation discussed in section 2.2. The interview was structured around the examination of the analytic themes which emerged from the first interview. The interview involved a discussion of these themes with the discussions based around the women's agreement or disagreement with the interpretations of their accounts in the second interview.

### **3.2 Sample Criteria and Recruitment**

The decision to base the research on group interviews with close friends meant that the only sample criteria of the study was that the women were all close friends of myself and each other. Recruitment therefore involved informing a number of my close friends about the aims of the Pilot Study and asking if they would be willing to take part.

The women were told that their participation would involve taking part in two group interviews, with the first interview involving the discussion of personal experiences of issues relating to food and body size and the second interview involving their reflection and comments upon the analysis of themes raised in the first interview. They were also

told that the interviews would each last about one hour and that they would be audio-taped with their permission. A total of three women agreed to participate, after which a mutually convenient time and location for the first interview was arranged.

### **3.3 Participant Characteristics**

A total of three women participated in the two group interviews. Two of the women were twenty two and one was twenty one. The women and I were all close friends as we had all shared a house together in the final year of our undergraduate degrees. All the women had social science degrees and had graduated approximately one year before the interviews took place. The women were all now working as unpaid volunteers in order to gain experience for beginning in their chosen careers. The women planned to work in housing, social work and environmental / conservation work.

Two of the three women were now living in rented accommodation which they shared with friends. Neither of these women had a current partner. The third woman lived in a rented flat with her current boyfriend who she had been seeing for around one year. All the women defined themselves as heterosexual. The women had lived independently from their families since they had left home to come to university but were all in frequent contact with their families. Two of the women's parents were still married with the third woman's parents divorcing early in her life although her mother had subsequently remarried and divorced for a second time. One of the women was an only child with the remaining two women having one or two brothers.

All of the women were white and came from middle class backgrounds with their fathers being employed as accountants and solicitors and their mothers as secretaries, probation officers and teachers. One of the women's fathers no longer worked due to a long term illness.

Individual biographical details about the women participating in the Pilot Study are available in Appendix Three.

### **3.4 Procedure**

#### **3.4.1 The Interview Process**

The interviews took place in the evening with the first interview being held at my home and the second at the home of one of the participants. In both cases the interviews were held in a room which provided a quiet environment for the interviews to take place and where the women could talk about their feelings without interruption. The format of the interviews was slightly different in each of the two interviews due to the different aims of the interviews.

### Interview One

The first interview began with a brief introduction to the research. They were informed that I was interested in exploring issues surrounding women's relationship to their bodies and to the food that they ate and that I was interested in talking about the women's personal experiences, thoughts and feelings about these issues. In fact the women were already familiar with my research having discussed it with me on several previous occasions.

Following this the women were informed that the interview would be based around the areas of their own experience which they saw as relevant to issues surrounding body size and food. It was thus explained that the interview would be relatively unstructured by which I meant that I did not have specific questions which I wanted to ask but that there were a number of main areas which I thought the discussion might include. It was then explained that the interview would probably last for around one hour but that it could go on for as long as the women themselves wanted. This was followed by obtaining the participant's consent to audio-tape the interview, with the women being assured that the interviews would be confidential and anonymous with all identifiers being removed from the interview transcripts. After this the tape recorder was switched on and the interview was begun.

The interview began with an exploratory question which was selected to start the interview and encourage the women to talk about their feelings in an interview situation. This question involved exploring the women's understandings of what being 'fat' and 'thin' meant in the context of their own and other people's lives. This was designed to introduce the women to thinking about their personal experiences of body size but also enabled them to approach this through considering the meanings of fatness and thinness at the more general (and therefore less personal) level of body size stereotypes and socio-cultural aspects of size (see Chapter Two). Following this the women were encouraged to take control of the interview themselves and introduce their own points for discussion. In addition to this I occasionally guided the women onto a new area after it seemed that one area had been discussed and the women were unsure what to discuss next. The interview therefore involved a combination of the women introducing their own themes as well as different themes being introduced when there was a pause in the women's accounts. In addition the women asked questions of each other as issues which interested them came up as a result of their discussions. These questions involved the women asking for the other women's opinions on a specific issue or involved one woman in the group asking another about past experiences which she felt were relevant to the discussion.

As part of the attempt to reduce power asymmetries in the research process the researcher participated in the data-production side of the research process. This involved the researcher (me) contributing to the research through accounts of her own experiences. This was managed through presenting my experiences at what seemed to be relevant points in the interview such as when they contributed to what the other participants were saying. I also used parts of my experience to question the other participants' accounts such as when they discussed experiences which differed from my own. At the same time however I tried not to talk about my own experiences at the expense of the other women in the study as I was primarily interested in their experiences. This is reflected in the analysis which is not specifically based on my account but which includes my experiences if they form part of the thematic analysis. In addition the women in the group occasionally specifically asked me to recount areas of my experience because they felt that it related to the discussion currently taking place.

The interview was brought to a close when it appeared that the women were becoming tired and less focused and when all the areas which I had initially wanted to cover had been discussed. At this point the tape recorder was switched off. The interview lasted for around an hour and a half. Following the interview it was transcribed and analysed (see below) in preparation for the second interview which involved obtaining the participant's opinions of this analysis.

### Interview Two

The second interview was carried out approximately one month after the first interview. It was held at the home of one of the women (Kate) because of space problems at my own home which would have made the interview difficult to carry out. Unfortunately this had the disadvantage that Kate had to answer a phone call half way through the interview which meant she was absent from some of the interview.

The interview began with an explanation that the format of the interview would involve presenting the analysis of the first interview to the participants in order to obtain their opinions about the analysis. Although this had been explained in the first interview I explained it once again to ensure the participants were completely clear about the purpose of both the interviews. Each participant was then given a copy of the interview analysis as well as a copy of the interview transcript. The analysis presented to the women consisted of a written description of five main themes which emerged from the transcript of the first interview (see below) with each theme being illustrated by a number of examples from the transcript. Each example was given a page number relating to its location in the transcript so that the women could refer to the transcript in order to set the example in context. The women read quickly through the analysis before the interview

started. After obtaining the participants' permission to audio-tape the interview, the tape recorder was switched on.

The interview began by describing the first theme outlined in the analysis report. The women were able to read about this theme in the report as well as look at the examples of the theme from the transcript. There was then a discussion of each theme which involved the women reflecting upon the analysis. This reflection involved the women discussing whether the interpretations of their accounts contained in the analysis represented their feelings on the subject. A process of negotiation took place where the women's explained why they agreed or disagreed with the analysis, after which a new interpretation of the women's accounts was negotiated. In addition the women were encouraged to explore any other experiences or feelings which they considered to be relevant to the analysis of the first interview as well as to discuss any new areas which they saw as relevant to the subject area.

### 3.4.2 Analysis

The analysis took place in two stages, involving the analysis of the first and second interviews. Both stages of the analysis began with the transcription of the audio-tapes of the interviews. This involved fully transcribing all that the women said verbatim (including any repetitions of words) as well as noting pauses, laughter, or interruptions. Transcribing the tapes took a considerable amount of time and the repeated playing of the tapes resulted in my becoming extremely familiar with the data. This was the first stage of analysis process as I began the process of identifying themes in the women's accounts.

To protect the participants' anonymity, the women were all given pseudonyms in the transcripts of the interviews. These pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter.

The first stage of the analysis involved analysing the first interview which involved the identification of themes in the transcript. This involved the use of a grounded theory type method (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, 1995; Bryman, 1988). The theoretical issues behind this method are discussed in section 2.1. In this section the practical applications of this method are discussed.

Analysis began by familiarising myself fully with the transcripts which was achieved through carrying out several readings of each transcript, underlining relevant passages in the text and adding comments in the margins. This was followed by the gradual identification of a number of analytic themes in the data which corresponded to particular passages from the text. These themes emerged from the data rather than being identified in response to specific questions or lines of inquiry. After all the transcripts had been

read and re-read and themes identified, a more detailed analysis of the themes was carried out. This involved looking at all the instances within the theme and carrying out a process of comparison, looking for similarities and differences. Gradually this was built up into a theorisation about the theme.

After the completion of the analysis of the first interview it was presented in written report format in the second group interview of the study (as described in section 3.4.1). Following the second interview it was transcribed fully as above. The second stage of the analysis involved the analysis of this transcript. This involved looking at the women's discussions about the results of the first analysis and noting their assessments of the accuracy of these results. As stated above this represented an attempt to reduce the power differentials in the research process through attempting to avoid the 'interpretative privilege' of the researcher and hence valuing the interpretations of the participants in addition to those of the researcher.

In addition to this, it was also necessary to carry out further analysis of the first interview. This was necessary for two reasons. Firstly a number of the contradictions were found in the women's discussions of the first analysis, such as in the women's accounts of their feelings about their bodies when they were in a relationship (see section 4.1.2). Here the women disagreed with the analysis of the first interview by presenting different versions of their experiences to those presented in the first interview. These contradictions were analysed and added to the analysis as a whole. Secondly the analysis of the second interview introduced themes which had been observed in the first interview but which had not been drawn out in the preliminary analysis. There was thus a return to the first interview in an attempt to review these themes.

In summary, the analysis presented in this chapter represents an amalgamation of the first interview analysis, an analysis of the women reaction's to this first analysis (i.e. an analysis of the second interview) and a comparison of these reactions to the accounts given by the women in the first interview. Rather than present these analyses separately, they are combined and referred to at pertinent points in order to provide a smooth presentation of the results of the study.

In the analysis which follows each of the pieces of text from the transcripts are labelled with an identifier. This identifier consists of two parts. The first part consists of either T1 or T2, indicating whether the text comes from interview one or two. The second part of the identifier relates to the page number in the transcript from which the piece of text comes and so is of the form P33 for example.

#### **4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS**

The analysis of the two interviews is split into three main sections, where each section discusses a theme or a collection of related themes. The first section focuses on the way in which the women's experiences of their body size were linked to their feelings about their sexual attractiveness and the way in which this influenced their feelings about sexual relationships and sexual activity. The second section centres around the women's eating habits in terms of the women's rules about food and the control which they attempted to exercise over their eating habits. In both these themes there is a discussion of the contradictions contained in the women's accounts, particularly in relation to the contradictions between the women's personal feelings about food and body size and their political beliefs about these issues. These beliefs involved the rejection of the pressure on women to lose weight in order to conform to the thin ideal of female beauty which was defined as existing at both a societal level and at the level of relationships.

The third section of the analysis discusses a further contradiction in the women's accounts and relates to the women's attitudes towards extreme fatness or obesity. These attitudes were in direct contradiction to the women's political beliefs so that the women judged fat people in a negative way and held fat prejudiced views which their political beliefs would suggest that they would reject.

##### **4.1 Experiences of Body Size: Heterosexuality, Self Consciousness and Scrutiny**

This section explores the women's personal experiences of body size in relation to their feelings about their bodies and the part which their bodies played in their relationships with other people. In particular this involves looking at the women's feelings about their sexual attractiveness and the way in which this influenced their feelings about sexual relationships and sexual activity. Firstly there is a discussion of the emphasis which the women placed on their bodies in sexual situations and the way in which the women associated thinness with sexual attractiveness and hence the sexual desire of their partners. Secondly, there is an analysis of the way in which the women's feelings about the sexual attractiveness of their bodies were dependent on the assessments of other people (especially their partners) so that the women assessed their own bodies in relation to the assessments of other people.

At the same time as acknowledging the role which other people's opinions played in their feelings about their body size, the women challenged the emphasis placed on their bodies by other people and the way in which they felt they were judged in relation to their body size. There was thus a contradiction between the women's personal feelings about food and body size and their political beliefs about these issues. This created confusion for the

women as they attempted to reconcile their resistance of being valued solely in terms of their attractiveness with their personal feelings of self consciousness and inadequacy about their bodies and their sexual attractiveness.

#### 4. 1.1 Sexual Relationships and Sexual Attractiveness: The Need for Confirmation

The women's feelings about their bodies were related to their feelings about their sexuality and sexual attractiveness. The women felt self conscious about their bodies in sexual situations because they felt their bodies were being compared to idealised definitions of the 'sexually desirable woman'. This ideal was felt to be defined in terms of extreme thinness and the women felt that they were unattractive and sexually undesirable if their bodies did not conform to this ideal.

In addition to their own scrutiny of their bodies the women felt their bodies were being judged by their partners which resulted in feelings of being 'on show'. This was particularly the case when the women were at the start of a sexual relationship when the women felt particularly vulnerable about their body size. Once the women were in relationships however their feelings of self consciousness decreased because being in a relationship confirmed the women's attractiveness. The women relied upon their partners for confirmation of their attractiveness which was necessary in order for the women to feel desirable and hence feel confident about sex. This reliance on the confirmation of their attractiveness illustrates the way in which the women looked at their bodies through the 'eyes of others' so that their perceptions of their size were created through their experience of how others see, judge and define their bodies.

The following quote illustrates the way in which the women felt their body size influenced their feelings about their sexual attractiveness and their confidence about sex:

- JILL                    Do you think it really affects how you feel like sexually then?
- JO                        Yes I do
- EMMA                    Yeah ( ) well no once you get in a relationship I don't think it affects it at all
- JO                        It does if you go out with someone who fucking tells you
- EMMA                    Well yeah if they're ( ) it depends yeah ( ) if its not bothering them it doesn't bother me but if its obviously bothering them
- KATE                    How do you know its bothering them?
- JILL                    But sometimes you start to imagine its bothering them



- EMMA I think before I take my clothes off that its going to bother them and I get a bit shy
- KATE But then when they get into it you think 'Oh it obviously doesn't bother them'
- EMMA Once they get into it I suppose
- JILL Once you're actually in the act of it you sort of think (laughs) 'Well they seem to be enjoying it sort of thing so it obviously doesn't matter' (T1, P42).

In this passage the women discuss their feelings of self consciousness about their bodies which are particularly emphasised at the start of sexual relationships. Here sexual encounters are characterised by the women feeling that they were being evaluated in relation to their body size and that their size is very important to their partner's enjoyment of the encounter. It is only if the woman's partner indicates in some way that he finds her body attractive and desirable that the woman is able to relax and feel more confident about her body and hence enjoy the sexual encounter herself. Here then the women define the attractiveness of their bodies in relation to their partner's definitions of their attractiveness. If the woman's partner finds her body attractive then the woman herself begins to feel that she may be attractive and desirable.

In addition to this the quote demonstrates the way in which the women considered their sexual attractiveness to be solely defined in relation to their bodies (and specifically their body size). Thus the women considered that they were desired by men solely on a physical level in relation to a norm or standard of female beauty which they must meet in order to be desirable. The women did not consider the sexual desire of men to be aroused by anything other than their physical attractiveness. Leading on from this, the women were also focused on their partner's sexual pleasure rather than on their own arousal and enjoyment of the sexual experience. Hence the women were concerned about whether their bodies met their partner's expectations and needs for sexual arousal but did not consider the sexual attractiveness of partner's body in their own arousal and enjoyment. First and foremost the women focused on their bodies and whether their bodies looked desirable to their partners.

The following quote again illustrates the way in which the women's enjoyment of sex was based on their feelings about their bodies:

- JILL Do you think that it affects like how you get into sex or whatever ( ) how you're feeling about your body?
- JO I really think that it does ( ) to me it does
- EMMA Its confidence isn't it I used to feel a lot lot more sexy when I was thinner ( ) a lot

more confident in sex basically because you think you're more desirable

JO                    Yeah I remember every year saying to myself if I felt slimmer I'd feel much happier about sex and I actually do still believe that I ( ) that I feel ugly and therefore don't feel desirable and therefore don't (T1, P45)

In this quote confidence and enjoyment of sex is primarily related to confidence about the size of one's body and hence one's sexual attractiveness. Again the focus in sex is on the woman's body and whether or not her body is desirable to her partner rather than on the woman's own feelings of arousal.

In the following extract we see a further example of the way in which the women's feelings of confidence about their body size were dependent upon the opinions of sexual partners. In this quote Kate discusses the way in which her feelings of self consciousness about her body decreased as her relationship with her current partner relationship developed:

KATE                    Its amazing your lover or boyfriend's opinion of your body affects you though because if like ( ) like now I'm going out with someone, with John obviously, its quite its good and everything then I feel really happy about myself ( ) and I don't seem to make as much effort with myself either 'cos I don't really care any more ( ) well I do but I just sort of think ( ) well I feel fine and I look fine and I feel really happy about the way I look even though I probably don't look any different to the way when I thought I looked absolutely dreadful if you see what I mean and so I'm now quite comfortable in myself

JO                      But that's because you've got that security through another person

KATE                    Yeah

JO                      And I think that so many people are dependent on that ( ) like however confident in like whatever you can be ( ) someone else's opinion in that situation matters so much

KATE                    Yeah it makes such a massive difference ( ) yeah it does and now I sort of like quite like my body its quite sort of like oh well you know ( ) I mean I'm not trying to be really sort of you know (Jo: No no no) but you you just feel quite happy about it

JILL                    Yeah

KATE                    I've always sort of wanted to cover it up or whatever

- JILL            You even look at it through different eyes I think in that sort of situation 'cos they say something like Oh you know
- KATE            Yeah you feel quite sexy just because he says you feel sexy
- JILL            And you're sort of looking down on yourself and thinking 'Ooo gosh' you know
- JO                Its the worse thing looking down on yourself though I must say though (T<sub>1</sub>, P31).

In this passage we see that Kate's feelings about her body size were changed by being in a relationship. Kate feels happier about her body because being in a relationship confirms the fact that she is attractive. Being in a relationship is thus about feeling secure about one's attractiveness where this security comes from the fact that one is desired by a man. As seen at the end of the passage attractiveness is again defined in relation to the opinions of men rather than women. Here being found attractive by a man (particularly on a permanent basis as represented by being in a long term relationship) results in a re-evaluation of one's body size. Thus whilst Kate did not feel sexually attractive before her current relationship her perception of her body is now changed by the fact that her boyfriend finds her attractive. This is emphasised by the concept of looking at one's body through 'different eyes' following comments about one's body by one's boyfriend.

This quote is also interesting in relation to Kate's references to how she feels about herself and how she feels about her body. In saying 'I no longer makes as much effort with myself' Kate refers to no longer making much effort with her body yet this is phrased in terms of her self. Thus the concept of feeling better about one's body is used interchangeably with the concept of feeling better about one's self. Such confusion of terms indicates the strong relationship between women's feelings about their bodies and their sense of self more generally and the way in which these concepts are interchangeable for some women.

The reliance on the opinion of men for the confirmation of one's sexual attractiveness was part of a wider discourse about the way in which women's perceptions of their body size and their feelings about their size were determined by the comments of other people. This can be seen in the following quote when Kate talks about a childhood experience when her perceptions of her size were completely changed because of a negative appraisal of her body made by her friend's mother:

- KATE            I always remember trying on this dress and it was like we were doing this play or something like that and it was a really tiny dress for a little girl or something and I was what about 10 or something and I couldn't get into this dress and erm and my friend who was a year

older than me couldn't get into it either but when she was my age she could you see and her mother said something like 'Oh well Anna could get into this dress when she was your age, you're a lot fatter than you look aren't you' or something like that and that's a really vivid memory of somebody saying and then I remember thinking 'God I'm fat' and I didn't you know really really think or know about it (T1, P14).

This excerpt shows the way in which the women's perceptions of their own bodies are created through their experience of how others see, judge and define their bodies. Kate's feelings of self consciousness about her body in childhood stemmed from this experience where her body size suddenly became problematic. Until this point in her life Kate had not realised that her body was different to anybody else's or that there was anything 'wrong' with the size of her body. It was only when somebody made negative comments about her body that Kate was confronted with the idea that she may be fat and this changed her perceptions of her size as she looked at her body through the judgmental eyes of another person. Here then women look at their bodies from the 'outside' or through the eyes of others. Their bodies are defined and judged by other people and these judgements are used by the women in order to form her own judgement of her body.

In summary the women in the discussion group were extremely aware of the size of their bodies and felt unhappy and self conscious that their bodies were 'too fat'. Being fat was associated with sexual unattractiveness and hence with being sexually undesirable. These associations or meanings of fatness resulted in the women feeling anxious about their bodies in sexual activity because the women perceived their partners to judge their sexual attractiveness by these standards. The women relied on their partners to confirm that their bodies were sexually attractive. This formed part of a wider phenomena where the women assessed their size and attractiveness through the eyes of others having no independent sense of these things in isolation from the definitions of other people.

#### 4.1.2 The Rejection of Confirmation: Tensions between Personal Experiences and Political Beliefs.

Whilst the women acknowledged the role of their partner's opinions in their feelings about their body size they also challenged the judgement of their bodies by their partners. This related to the women's political beliefs which involved the rejection of the pressure on women to lose weight in order to conform to the thin ideal of female beauty. This was often discussed in relation to a developmental discourse where the women asserted that whilst they had been influenced by the opinions of boyfriends in adolescence they were now much more assertive and confident in challenging and rejecting their partner's attitudes towards their bodies.

Whilst the women used this developmental discourse to point out a transition in their personal experience the analysis of their feelings about their sexual attractiveness (as above) contradicts this idea of transition. There was thus a direct contradiction between the women's personal experiences of their body size and their political beliefs about body size. This created confusion for the women as they attempted to reconcile their resistance of being valued solely in terms of their attractiveness with their personal feelings of self consciousness and inadequacy about their own bodies and sexual attractiveness.

In the following passage we see the anger and resentment the women felt at the way their partners valued them in terms of their body size:

EMMA                   Someone said that to me before ( ) 'Think you should lose half a stone'

JILL                    Have they?

JO                      Who said that to you?

JILL                    My dad said that to me

EMMA                   My first boyfriend

JO                      Yeah your first boyfriend sounds a bit like mine ( ) and then you see you were really slim then weren't you?

EMMA                   Yeah I wasn't fat at all

JO                      And I was slimmer

EMMA                   That's why I was really embarrassed when I saw him like a year and a half later after we'd finished

JILL                    What did he say to you?

EMMA                   I think he did actually yeah I think he said ( ) yeah 'You've put weight on' cos I had and I was wearing shorts and I knew when I saw him he'd mention 'cos he used to mention it

JILL                    Its like they think they've got this right or that they need to say it so that you diet or whatever

JO                      Well its so much like you're the possession like they want you to look good to fit their ideal image of what they feel they deserve sort of thing ( ) this is what I got from him ( ) well this is what I felt I got from him (T1, P50).

In this quote we see the anger the women felt about the way in which their partner's assumed the right to criticise the women's bodies and advise them to lose weight. The women felt that their bodies were regarded as possessions by their partners who therefore felt that their opinion of her body size was more important than any opinions

she might have on the matter. In addition to this Jo indicates the way in which the emphasis her boyfriend placed on her body size made her feel she was primarily valued for the way that she looked. Rather than her boyfriend accepting Jo's body as it was and valuing additional aspects of her identity he focused on the way that she looked as the most important thing about her.

Jo's sense of anger at her boyfriend described in the above quote is also discussed in the next excerpt. In this passage however we gain a sense of the way in which this anger can remain hidden for women so that rather than directly expressing this anger through challenging the negative comments which partners can make about one's size the anger expressed through hidden defiance:

JO                    I think it was suddenly at 18 or 17 I think when I started going out with somebody and he used to tell me that I was too heavy I should lose half a stone or something then I got more into chocolate and sweets and stuff like that

KATE                Once he told you that

JO                    I don't I don't know if it was once he told me that but I did

KATE                What once he told you that you thought 'Right I'm going to eat more sweets'

JO                    Yeah but I can remember that he used to say things like that and I've got a really vivid image of him being in the bath and me sneaking into his bedroom and getting like 2 biscuits and like that was just him I remember doing it as like a thing on him like 'Ha ha ha I'm eating these biscuits and you don't know' and it was really (.) That was just like a reaction to what he said and I was just like reacting to it, do you see what I mean, and I can remember that really vividly (T1, P15).

This excerpt illustrates the feelings of resentment which Jo felt in adolescence at the way her body was judged by her boyfriend. Whilst she felt this resentment she was not able to voice it through directly challenging her boyfriend's opinions or through asserting her right to be whatever size she wanted to be. Instead she responded with an act of defiance which expressed her anger but which enabled her to do so in a hidden and secret way.

The anger and resentment the women felt towards their partners was also extended to involve a sense of anger at societal pressures to be thin which were identified as being directed at women generally. The women asserted that the majority of women have a preoccupation with their body size and rejected this preoccupation as obsessive and extreme. This is illustrated in the following quote:

- JO But its got to extremes like being overweight is like its got to extremes, like even if you're a little bit you feel ugly because of it, everyone is obsessed with weight even if they're fairly slim its still like - not obsessed not everyone's obsessed - but everyone is aware of it
- KATE Thinks about it
- JO Is conscious of their body
- EMMA Yeah everyone talks about it a lot don't they 'cos you can't I don't think you could ever say that no-one finds it important 'cos like you always say "Oh I've put loads of weight on recently" (Jo: Yeah) or whatever lots of people you know
- JO But I do think its the same with some men as well though I mean I know men who have been like a stone overweight and they've like jogged and done this and that and dieted and etc. 'cos they want to be like you know slimmer
- KATE I suppose so yeah
- JO I think its just too much of a (laughs) preoccupation with our western society (T1, P9).

In this quote then Jo points out the way in which even people who are an 'average' size are obsessed with their size and feel pressured to lose weight. She relates this to a social focus on achieving a thin body.

In opposition to this pressure the women stated that women should not be pressured to lose weight or be valued by others in terms of their size. This can be seen below:

- JO an argument would be an argument is 'Don't be don't be affected by it you are what you are. You've a lot more to yourself than your body weight etc. You're not, you don't want to go on a diet because like its stupid its actually not you enjoy eating food' I mean there's a massive and I mean that is like part of a feminist sort of theory (T2, P23).

In this excerpt Jo asserts that she is 'more than her body' and that she should be valued as a person whatever size she is. She therefore rejects the concept of dieting to lose weight and asserts that she will not deny herself the pleasure she derives from eating food. This rejection of diets will be returned to in section 4.2.3. It also interesting that in this quote Jo directly relates her rejection of the pressure on women to be thin to feminist theory and feminist ideas. The reference to such ideas are often implicit in the interviews because of the fact that the interviews were carried out between friends. This meant that

the women were familiar with the fact that the women in the group had feminist ideals and hence such ideas were often not emphasised in the interview.

The women's rejection of the pressure on them to lose weight also involved their rejection of the idea that thin necessarily equates with sexual attractiveness and fatness with sexual unattractiveness. This involved the women in redefining female attractiveness so that women who were described as 'big' were claimed to be just as attractive as their thinner counterparts:

- JO                    Yeah but I think women actually (.) I know this is me being (.) maybe I'm being wrong (.) but I think that for a start biologically women are fatter than men in terms of they are supposed to have more padding here there and everywhere (.) and I also think that a lot of big women who look really attractive who I think are really attractive I've never seen a big man who I thought was attractive
- JILL                Well is that because you're just looking at the opposite sex and that might be what men think
- JO                    No no I don't think it is I think that big women
- JILL                So you think its because women are naturally big so big women naturally (.) are beautiful
- KATE                Big women can look attractive to a lot of men though can't they?
- JO                    Big women can look absolutely stunning
- KATE                I remember something on the telly with men saying (.) with a lot of men 'I prefer big women I like something to get hold of' as they keep saying (T1, P50).

In this quote then the women reject what they regard as a societal judgement upon big women where all big women are regarded as unattractive and hence sexually undesirable. Here the definition of female beauty is redefined to include many different sizes of women so that big women are also regarded as physically attractive.

It is interesting that the women in the discussion group did not reject the importance of being considered attractive in their lives. One would think that the rejection of the idea that women should be valued in terms of their bodies would also involve the rejection of the idea that women must be attractive. Thus in the above quote rather than rejecting the importance of being considered attractive by a man the women assert that in actual fact men do find big women attractive. In addition to this the women asserted that it should be up to a woman of any size to define herself as attractive rather than relying on the opinions of other people.



### 4.1.3 Dealing with Contradictions: Reconciliation and Acknowledgement of Inconsistencies in Accounts

The contradiction between the women's accounts of their feelings about their own bodies and their assertions that they should not be pressured to feel this way indicates a tension between the women's personal experiences and their political beliefs and commitments. Whilst the women were able to reject the thin ideal of female beauty and the pressure upon women to conform to this ideal on a political level they found it extremely difficult to apply these beliefs to their own lives. Such difficulties are likely to relate to the pervasiveness of the thin ideal at the societal and relationship levels identified by the women.

One way in which the women attempted to deal with this contradiction was through the use of a developmental discourse which enabled the women to relativise their feelings about their bodies and hence reduce the contradiction. Thus the women asserted that they were less conscious about their body size than they had been in adolescence when sexuality had been a particularly salient issue in their lives. In adolescence the women had also been more affected by judgements made about their bodies. These developmental comparisons enabled the women to construct their current feelings as less extreme so that there was not such an obvious contradiction between political beliefs and personal experiences. Alternatively the women acknowledged the contradictions in their accounts or indicated their awareness of these contradictions. Thus they expressed guilt at the fact that they were still concerned about their body size despite their political principles. This indicates that the women experienced tension at the divergence of personal politics and personal experiences.

The use of the developmental discourse is illustrated below:

JO I always remember when I was about 15 erm everyone always used to tell me I was really lanky because I was quite tall and I was quite ( ) like my arms and legs were quite thin and I can always remember this bloke who liked me at the time putting his arms around me and going 'Oh you're quite chunky really aren't you' or something

JILL And how did you feel when he said that?

JO Well I was in a way I was more conscious of if someone did that now I'd probably be quite defensive about or quite cool about it in that you know that's the way I am sort of thing take it or leave it. Whereas then I was far more like 'Oh my god I've got this fat stomach' sort of thing ( ) I would never like ( ) I mean I was ( ) slim apart from this stomach but I'd never have gone in a bikini or

anything in front of my school friends like all the rest of them did. (T1, P13).

In this quote we see the comparisons which the women made between their current attitudes towards body size and the attitudes they had in adolescence. Thus in adolescence Jo was much influenced by the negative comments of others towards her size with these comments resulting in her feeling that her body was fat and hence sexually unattractive and unacceptable. By contrast Jo now feels that she would be much more dismissive of such comments. Thus she would assert the fact that she was not prepared to change her body because of a partner's negative comments and that her partner should accept her body for what it is rather than expecting her to change it. There is thus an assertion of autonomy and the right to have whatever body size one personally wants to have.

In addition to this the women occasionally showed an awareness of the contradictions in their accounts, expressing guilt at the fact that they were still concerned about their body size despite their political principles. This indicates that the women experienced tension at the divergence of personal politics and personal experiences. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

- JO                    I would still hate the idea ( ) for me it hasn't like cropped up but like walking around ( ) being in this really natural relationship where you walk around all the time naked
- JILL                Yeah in the house or whatever
- JO                    I wouldn't be able to handle that 'cos I wouldn't be able to sit down
- KATE                Don't you think you would eventually though I mean
- JO                    Well that you see this is awful but that would depend on the person or whatever and that's really bad on me 'cos that's saying that what they think of me (T1, P45).

In this passage Jo reflects upon her account and criticises herself for the fact that her feelings about her body do rely on male opinion. The fact that Jo feels that she should not feel this way suggests that she is assessing her experience in relation to a feminist discourse which states that men should not think they have the right to comment on women's bodies. Here Jo experiences a tension between her political beliefs and her personal feelings and experiences.

This tension is also expressed in a more implicit form in the following quote. This excerpt comes from the second interview where the analysis of the relationship between

the women's body size and their feelings about their sexual attractiveness and sexual confidence was returned to the women for their comment. As can be seen from the excerpt there was general agreement with the basic findings of this analysis but an interesting contradiction arose in relation to women's comments on certain parts of the analysis:

- JILL                   First that you seem to think that how how how you rely - about your body affects how you feel about your sexuality erm and that it makes you feel sort of if you feel you feel less desirable and less confident that you're sort of sexually attractive (.)
- EMMA                   Yeah in the initial stage
- JILL                   Yeah yeah sort of put that I put self confidence yeah the first time yeah for the first time and that you well all of us 'cos there's a lot of me in here that we sort of rely on other people's well I hate that word but you know whoever the boyfriend or whatever you rely on male opinion of of of your body sort of before you can feel kind of relaxed about it
- EMMA                   Yeah
- JILL                   So like 'cos you were saying Kate here that now that you're going out with someone that you feel really happy about it and everything
- KATE                   Yeah but I didn't really feel unhappy about it before (T2, P18).

The most important part of this quote is the very last line where Kate rejects the analysis of the way in which her feelings about her body size were changed by the experience of being in a long term relationship. Looking back to Kate's comments in the first interview this rejection of the analysis represents a contradiction to the account in the first interview where she stated that 'I feel really happy about the way I look even though I probably don't look any different to the way when I thought I looked absolutely dreadful if you see what I mean and so I'm now quite comfortable in myself' (see section 4.1.1).

An analysis of this contradiction is useful if we consider possible reasons why Kate rejects the analysis of the fact that her feelings about her body size were changed by being in a relationship. If she agreed with this analysis Kate would be presented as being overly dependent on male opinion about her feelings about her body size. This again presents a tension in relation to her resistance of the importance of male opinion and body size and her awareness of the similar opinions of the other women in the group (who are her close friends). Kate's attempts to reconcile her political resistance of the emphasis placed on women's body with her personal feelings about her body result in the contradiction between her two accounts.

This comparison between Kate's accounts of her feelings is not carried out in order to demonstrate the irrational nature of the inconsistencies in Kate's account. Nor is it presented in order to decide in which of her two versions of her experiences she was 'lying' and in which version she was 'telling the truth'. Instead the different versions of her experiences are presented in order to illustrate the confusion between Kate's political beliefs and her personal experiences. The inconsistencies are pointed out to illustrate the way in which the women were attempting to reconcile their political or 'feminist' beliefs about women and body size with their own feelings about their own body size. Whilst the women do reject male opinion and men's right to comment on their size and attractiveness they are nevertheless caught up in the social and relational context which produces such definitions of female identity and value. Thus whilst the women rejected this social discourse about women, the discourse is so pervasive that it continues to be difficult for the women to escape from this discourse in terms of the way they define their own sense of self and their own feelings about their bodies. These issues are returned to in section 5.

#### 4.1.4 Summary

In summary the women in the discussion group presented contradictory accounts of their experiences of their body size in relation to their feelings about their sexual attractiveness and sexual relationships. On one level the women were self conscious about their bodies in sexual encounters because they felt that their bodies may not match up to their partner's definitions of what constitutes a sexually desirable woman. The women felt that they were too fat and this made them uncomfortable with their bodies and their participation in sex. Here the women can be seen to be constructing their feelings about their bodies in relation to a social discourse surrounding body size which defines thinness as the most attractive body size.

On another level the women rejected the way in which men attempt to define and judge women in terms of their body size and asserted that they were now much more assertive in refusing to lose weight in order to match up to the thin ideal which men may expect. The women were thus caught between their own feelings of inadequacy about their bodies, which were assessed in relation to the pervasive influence of the thin ideal, and their own rejection of this ideal which they attempted to formulate in their own political beliefs about women, food and body size. These contradictions were also found in other parts of the interviews and were thus an integral part of the women's understandings and experiences of their bodies and the food that they ate.

The contradictions in the women's accounts relate to the power of the discourse of the thin ideal. Thus whilst the women rejected this discourse, the power of it meant that it

was extremely difficult for the women to avoid assessing their bodies in relation to it. Whilst the women formulated an alternative discourse to the thin ideal, they were unable to sustain this discourse throughout their accounts.

## **4.2 Personal Experiences of Eating and Weight Control**

This section explores the women's eating habits in terms of the women's accounts of the control they exerted over their eating habits and the relation of this control to body size. The analysis begins with a discussion of the rules used by the women in relation to their food intake in terms of the amounts and types of food that they felt they should and shouldn't eat. The rules surrounding the women's eating habits resulted in certain foods being labelled as either 'good' or 'bad' with the women subsequently feeling that they themselves were good or bad after eating these foods.

This analysis is followed by a discussion of the way in which the women used foods to meet emotional needs because of the symbolic meanings which surround food. This involved the women breaking their food rules and eating foods defined as bad because of the other meanings associated with such foods. Finally there is an analysis of the women's conceptualisation of 'dieting behaviour' which explores the distinctions which the women drew between dieting and their own control of food. This analysis involves a focus upon the contradictions between the women's political beliefs involving the rejection of dieting and the women's own feelings about their bodies which they felt were in need of control and restriction.

### 4.2.1 Eating Rules: 'Proper Meals' and the Control of Food Intake

In the following analysis the women's eating habits are explored in terms of the rules and regulations the women used to control what they did and did not eat. These rules involved the women in controlling their eating on an everyday level and included restrictions on the amounts and types of foods that they ate. Certain foods were defined as 'good' and 'bad' with 'good eating' defined as the eating of a 'proper meal' or 'plateful' and 'bad eating' defined as eating more than this or eating between meals. The definition of good and bad foods resulted in different emotions being associated with food. Thus eating good foods made the women feel virtuous at their ability to resist the 'temptation' of forbidden foods. On the opposite side to this the women felt guilty and ashamed when they broke their eating rules and ate the foods which they defined as bad for them.

In the first quote we see the way in which the women defined the characteristics of forbidden or 'bad' foods:

JILL                      Wonder why its sweet things?

- EMMA Well its not particularly with me
- JO Well its not its just crap food well its chocolate ( ) I suppose
- KATE Its packets of crisps with me
- JILL Alright so its basically just things that are fatty
- KATE Are fatty I suppose unhealthy
- EMMA Yeah
- KATE And that you don't need they're not a necessity
- EMMA Yeah they're a luxury (T1, P14)

In this quote we see that there were a number of food rules which the women used to decide what foods they ate. In this quote these rules are based on the healthiness or unhealthiness of different foods. Thus the women felt that foods such as chocolate or crisps were forbidden because they were unhealthy foods or 'crap' foods which did not have any real nutritional value. An additional rule used in the above quote is based on the necessity of foods. The women defined forbidden foods as those which were not necessary and hence those which were luxury items. This relates to the women's definitions of healthy eating which involved the eating of 'proper meals'. The women felt that eating properly involved simply eating these meals and not eating any extras after or between meals. This is illustrated in the following extract:

- EMMA Yeah it is its things that are luxuries rather than ( ) I mean you don't feel bad about having your sandwich at dinner
- KATE No yeah its extra things that aren't really necessary
- JO But then you probably don't feel bad if you have a sandwich and a packet of crisps and that's your lunch sort of thing you don't feel bad I think its more probably like if you're eating in between
- EMMA Between meals (T1, P14).

Here then the women elaborate on the idea that eating properly involves not eating between meals. Thus even though these meals may include foods which would be identified as unhealthy if they were eaten between meals they are permissible if they are eaten as part of a meal. These rules relate to the concept of overeating so that eating 'three meals a day' is defined as an acceptable level of eating whereas eating beyond these meals is defined as overeating. This results in feelings of 'badness' and guilt for the women because their behaviour is defined as overeating and hence as greedy and wrong.

The feelings of guilt and self-indulgence experienced by the women when they ate bad foods were mirrored by feelings of achievement and virtuousness when the women were able to resist the temptation of forbidden foods:

JO                    I like eating healthily though - I don't feel right if I don't eat a proper healthy meal

EMMA                Yeah I quite like it 'cos in the summer I can do it better you feel quite good afterwards like I haven't eaten any chocolate for over a week

KATE                Yeah

EMMA                It does give you a good feeling when you control your food I think (T1, P12)

In this quote then we see the way in which the women associated controlling their eating habits with 'feeling good'. Here self control over eating is regarded as a virtue so that the women feel that the sacrifices they made in denying themselves the foods which they enjoy to eat (which are usually defined as bad foods) were worthwhile.

#### 4.2.2 'Breaking the Rules': Symbolic Meanings of Food

This section explores the different meanings of foods beyond the dichotomous meanings of 'good' and 'bad' as discussed above. The different meanings associated with certain foods resulted in the women breaking the rules and restrictions they placed on their eating habits and eating those foods they defined as forbidden. In these situations the rules which the women ordinarily placed on different foods were over-ridden because of the deeper symbolic meanings which such foods had for the women.

The analysis which follows describes two different situations where the women broke the rules. These situations firstly included those where the women felt down or depressed. In these situations the women rejected eating proper healthy meals because such meals were associated with feelings of happiness and sociability. The women did not want to eat such food because their depressed mood did not match such a meaning. Alternatively the women broke their eating rules when they felt they deserved a reward for some achievement they had made. Here the meaning of eating was defined in terms of 'treating the self' where eating bad foods provided the women with a sense of pleasure and enjoyment which came largely from the fact these foods were illicit and forbidden. In these situations then we see the way in which the women's moods influenced what they ate and the way in which different food meant different things to the women depending on the mood they were in.

In the following quote the women discuss the way in which their eating habits changed when they felt down or depressed:

- EMMA            I just eat like peanut butter on toast basically and I'll be quite happy eating that for every meal
- JILL            'Right yeah
- EMMA            Unless someone else cooks it in which case I'd eat it maybe I don't know
- JILL            Does that mean you eat more when you're happy then
- EMMA            Probably yeah 'cos there's a limit to how much peanut butter you can eat really isn't there?
- JO                But there's ever such a calorie content if you eat crap maybe even if you eat less
- KATE            Its just that you don't feel like embarking on a really hearty meal and sitting down and you know
- JO                Or you want to eat chocolate
- EMMA            I suppose eating a good meal's associated with having a good time and like sitting down and being sociable and good meals are like that aren't they? (T1, P12)

At the start of the quote Emma explains that when she is down she no longer eats the 'proper meals' which she thinks are healthy and 'good'. Instead she eats 'crap' food which represents snack food rather than a proper meal. Thus eating peanut butter on toast which is normally eaten at breakfast time or as a quick snack between meals is not regarded as 'eating properly' because it does not fulfil the requirements of a 'proper meal'. In addition to this we see that proper meals are associated with feeling happy and 'having a good time'. They represent social occasions where one sits down with friends or relatives to enjoy a good 'hearty' meal.

For Emma then feeling depressed means that the normal rules about good and bad eating are replaced because of the more symbolic meanings associated with such foods. Feeling down means Emma cannot face the implications of good food, she wants to eat bad food because this enables her to escape the hearty, happy implications of proper meals which do not match her depressed mood.

As well as breaking their eating rules when they were depressed the women also ate 'bad' foods when they felt they deserved a reward. Here the association of food with enjoying oneself and feeling pleasure became more important than the definition of foods as good and bad:



- KATE           Its kind of like a bit of a naughty treat isn't it and it makes you feel good because it just
- JO               That's why its bad though ( ) if you didn't think of chocolate and things like a naughty treat
- KATE           It would be a bit boring probably wouldn't it?
- JO               Well yeah I mean I think that's why ( ) I don't like to keep making distinctions between males and females but a lot of males would probably eat chocolate every day and its not anything to them its not a big its not like I always feel that with girls more if you buy a bar of chocolate or something then its like you know its being sinful or something
- KATE           Yeah
- EMMA           I just I think like I do it when I've deserved it like when I've had a busy day at work we'll go 'Right I think we deserve some cakes, girls' (T1, P13).

In this quote we see the way in which eating 'bad foods' makes the women feel as if they are doing something 'naughty' and 'sinful' because of the forbidden nature of such foods. The fact that these foods are forbidden means they are eaten when the women feel they have been extraordinarily 'good' and hence they allow themselves to break their ordinary restrictions on the food that they eat. Thus eating forbidden foods represented something 'out of the ordinary' and hence provided a feeling of reward for the women.

#### 4.2.3 Dieting versus 'Cutting Down': Distinctions between Different Eating behaviours

An important issue to emerge from the Pilot Study involves the participants' views about dieting and weight control. Whilst the women controlled their food intake according to their rules about good and bad eating, they did not define this control as dieting with all the women asserting that they had never been on a 'proper' diet. The women's distinctions between food control and dieting was based around their definition of dieting as extreme, obsessive and rigid involving deprivation of food below a survivable level. By contrast the women defined their own control of food as much less extreme and serious so that it could be characterised within the boundaries of normal behaviour carried out by the majority of the population on an everyday level.

The distinction between everyday control of food and dieting is illustrated in the following passage:

- KATE           I think a lot of people sort of they know that if they eat a lot its well I suppose me really I'm talking about like if I eat a lot it does affect how my body or whatever I do put on

weight but not to the extent that anybody would notice if you see what I mean so like people say 'Oh you can eat what you like and you don't put on weight' whereas I know that I do and I do to a certain extent control my eating but I don't go on a diet or anything I just think 'Right I'm going to stop pigging my face for a while' because I've just been eating ridiculous amounts of food and if I was

JILL                    So what's the difference?

KATE                    Well if I went on a proper diet if I took a conscious decision to go on a diet and I measured my calorie intake and I took I made sure I only took whatever it was and I ate a really small amount then I'd be on a diet but a lot of the time I get into phases where instead of just eating my meal and having done with it I want more and more and more and I eat a real lot and then people sort of say 'Well it doesn't matter you can eat what you like' but to me it does matter because my stomach gets bigger and my bottom gets bigger just you know just like with everybody else presumably and so you just consciously well almost subconsciously just stop stop doing that but it isn't sort of 'Right well I'm on a diet' (T1, P36).

In this quote Kate discusses the way in which she imposes control over what she eats in order to control her weight. This involves cutting down on her food intake until the weight is lost. However Kate distinguishes this behaviour from actual dieting because of differences in the amounts involved in her food control and in the 'seriousness' of this control. Thus Kate does not define her control of food as dieting because dieting is defined as cutting down the amount of food eaten to a very small amount. Kate defines her own eating habits as involving eating 'ridiculous amounts' and hence when she does cut down she is not cutting down to the small amount of food involved in being 'on a diet'. Thus Kate's behaviour is firstly defined as normal and rational so that food is reduced to eating a 'sensible' amount whereas dieting is defined as extreme and therefore abnormal and irrational because it involves depriving the body of the food it really needs. Secondly dieting is defined as involved a conscious decision whereas Kate's behaviour is 'almost subconscious'. This again reduces the extreme nature of her own behaviour and presents it as a normal and everyday activity.

This presentation of food control as a normal and everyday occurrence is reinforced in the following quote:

KATE                    By going on a diet I mean that its thinking about every meal that you have and you think that you're going to have such and such and such and such and I'm not going to eat this that and the other whereas I never do that I

just ( ) just slightly control the amounts I suppose

JILL But I mean one definition one way to describe

JO But I think we all do that though I do that I mean there's loads of times when (Kate: Yeah yeah) I think 'Oh..'

JILL I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that I'm just sort of trying to get the definition of dieting 'cos like there's one definition of dieting which is called restrictive eating now what I would say you are doing

JO No because I actually think that very a huge majority of people would do that there's loads of times when you might think 'Oh I could just eat a chocolate bar now' but you wouldn't because you think 'Oh its not necessary blah blah blah' its not that you're oh I don't know but I also I think with a diet with a diet you actually do if you follow a diet then you're actually using eating less calories than an average person will eat 'cos that's what that's what most diets are aren't they they're eating under your average 'cos that's the only way supposedly supposed to eat weight (laughs) eat weight lose ( ) weight

KATE But then yeah if you go back

JILL But isn't it that what you're doing though 'cos your cutting down on what you eat

KATE Yeah but I'm not cutting it down below an average level if you see what I mean I don't know I never count them but I presume what I'm doing is cutting down from a high level to an average level rather than from an average level below to an amount which I don't think's enough to keep you going

JILL So you're eating enough to satisfy your hunger

JO Still being healthy like still eat a plateful of

KATE Yeah but I'm just not going over the top (JO: Exactly that's what I'd say) which I do sometimes even when I feel quite full I then think 'Oh I'll have something else I don't care I'll have something else' and then I realise that I'm getting a bit fat or fatter and then I think 'Right well I'll just eat my meals and have enough food' I never think that I'm not going to (T1, P36).

In this excerpt dieting is again defined as much more serious and extreme than the cutting down of food intake carried out by the women. Thus dieting involves being obsessed by the control of one's food so that one is consciously aware of what one should and should

not eat. This is reinforced by Jo who refers to the fact that the huge majority of people are similarly involved in controlling their food intake but that these people are not all on diets.

The above passage is also important because it refers to the concept of necessity in the women's control of food. As discussed in section 4.3.1, this concept ran throughout the women's discussions of what one should and shouldn't eat and involved the women in defining 'eating properly' as only eating what is necessary in order to survive. This generally involved eating three meals a day with no eating between meals as well as only eating a 'proper meal' at these times. This involved eating a plateful of healthy food as described by Jo in the excerpt above. Eating more than is necessary was thus presented as wrong and the women felt that they therefore needed to keep a control of their urges to eat anything beyond what is necessary. On the other side of this attempt to avoid overeating the above quote shows that dieting was regarded by the women as under-eating. Thus dieting again involves deprivation where one denies oneself enough food to 'live on'.

The distinctions which the women made between dieting and cutting down involved the women in a process of balancing their control of their food intake. Whilst the women acknowledged that there is some degree of control involved in cutting down this was not seen as involving as much control as dieting. Some degree of control was seen as necessary because otherwise the women would be 'out-of-control' of their eating which would indicate greediness and over indulgence. However dieting was defined as involving too much control and hence as rigid and obsessive.

#### 4.2.4 Dealing with Contradictions: Losing Weight or Looking After One's Health?

When this analysis was returned to the women in the second interview the women again emphasised the differences between dieting and the everyday control of food. They rejected the analysis which drew parallels between these two behaviours. In this interview the reasons behind the differentiation between dieting and everyday food control became more apparent. This reason related to the women's rejection of dieting which existed on a political level. Dieting was rejected because it was seen as a component of the pressure on women to be thin which the women rejected as oppressive. In addition dieting was seen as a futile and ineffective behaviour which did not result in the weight loss desired by its proponents.

The following excerpt illustrates the women's rejection of diets in terms of their rejection of the pressure placed on women to diet in order to lose weight:

JILL

What do you think's wrong with dieting then?

- JO                   It doesn't work mainly
- JILL                 Right
- EMMA                I don't see why you should have to diet
- JO                   No (T2, P17)

In this quote the women reject dieting for two reasons. Firstly there is the rejection of the idea that one should have to diet because one does not conform to the thin ideal of female beauty. This refers back to the women's rejection of male opinion in the women's feelings about their sexual attractiveness. This rejection of the thin ideal remains fairly implicit in her account however, both because of the way in which the rejection of the thin ideal has been discussed in the first interview and because of the fact that the discussion is carried out between friends. Here Emma assumes that we know what she means by this statement and this assumption is justified by the fact that no-one in the group (including myself) questions Emma about her statement. The second reason the women gave for rejecting diets is given here by Jo who asserts that 'diets don't work'. This is added to by the next passage:

- JO                   Diets generally erm diets generally if you go on a diet like the Cambridge diet or whatever they're generally far below the calorie intake that you should that you should normally eat 'cos well they don't work
- JILL                 Right but right okay
- KATE                Right yeah
- JO                   But trying to cut down isn't a rigid thing is it so its not a diet you just think to yourself that you'll try not to have to eat you know between meals and things but that's not really a diet I don't think 'cos its not something that's rigid its not something that you stick to or you got it all sort of sorted out in your brain I must have this for breakfast this for lunch and (T2, P28)

In this quote then Jo rejects diets because she does not believe that they are effective in bringing about weight loss. Diets are defined as involving extreme reduction of food intake such as that involved in 'crash diets' where women lose large amounts of weight through cutting down their food to a very low level. In comparison to this Jo defines the 'cutting down' behaviour which she is involved in as more effective in that it represents a more gradual form of weight loss.

The quote above also demonstrates the distinctions which the women made between their own behaviour and proper dieting. Here diets are defined as extreme behaviours which represent abnormal behaviour which do not bear any resemblance to Jo's 'cutting down'.

Thus whilst 'cutting down' is a fairly casual process where the women try not to follow the food rules defined above, dieting is extreme and rigid involving a set program which one follows and which defines exactly what one will and will not eat for each meal each day.

The contradiction between the women's rejection of diets and their own behaviour is that the women's control of their own eating habits was carried out for the purpose of weight control. Thus whilst the women rejected dieting because it involved submitting to pressure to conform to the thin ideal, they continued to control their own food intake because they felt fat and wanted to lose weight. Thus again there is a contradiction between the women's political beliefs and personal feelings and practices.

When made aware of this contradiction in the second interview the women responded by emphasising the concept of health in their eating control. Thus whilst the women continued to acknowledge that they controlled their eating in order to lose weight they added that their attempts to cut down their food intake represented their concerns about their health and that food control was necessary in order to remain healthy.

In the following quote the women reflect upon the possible contradictions between rejecting dieting on a political level and controlling their weight through food restriction. Here the concept of health is introduced as a possible way of reconciling this contradiction:

JO                    If I was really going to do something about if I was worried about my weight I would exercise I wouldn't cut down on food

EMMA                I want to do I would I would want to do both

JO                    But your you know your attitudes changed 'cos when you were in the first year you were slim so you used to say that you thought it was really stupid watching your weight

EMMA                No I used to say it was really stupid to diet which I still do I would never sort of diet and go on a calorie controlled diet or anything

JO                    No no

JILL                 But what's the difference 'cos you're still doing that now 'cos its the same argument I'm sorry but if you're cutting down you're still dieting

EMMA                I'm only stopping eating crisps and not having egg mayonnaise everyday for my dinner 'cos its really fattening I mean its not like a huge thing but like buying sort of light

- KATE            Yeah but its the same principle sort of thing  
isn't it
- EMMA            Its not 'cos 'cos its not making me hungry I'm  
not hungry I'm not uncomfortable
- JILL             Right
- KATE            Yeah you're not cutting it down to a level  
where you know like you're
- EMMA            I'm not suffering from it at all I'm just not  
being quite so greedy
- KATE            No that's exactly what that's what I do as  
well
- EMMA            Which is all to do with my health and the way  
I look and health as much as anything I think  
as much as not wanting to get fat (T<sub>2</sub>, P20).

In this quote Emma reiterates the arguments for the distinction between cutting down and dieting in response to the identification of possible contradiction by Jo. Thus again she points out that her behaviour is not as extreme as dieting and simply involves a slight control or restriction of what she eats. Diets are rejected because they involve deprivation and hunger causing the woman to suffer. At the end of the quote Emma attempts to reconcile the contradiction in her account by introducing the concept of health. Thus she asserts that she controls her food intake in order to look after her health as well as to ensure that she does not get fat. This represents an attempt to negotiate between political beliefs and personal feelings and behaviours. Emma negotiates the fact that she rejects the idea that women should be pressured to diet because they are fat with the fact that she herself diets to lose weight by introducing the idea of health.

It is interesting that whilst controlling one's food intake for weight loss reasons was problematised by the women, the concept of food control for health reasons was presented as unproblematic. Thus the pursuit of 'good health' was presented in terms of duty by the women in a way that the pursuit of thinness was not. This is also seen in the following excerpt from Kate:

- KATE            I don't think that that you should necessarily  
you see it all comes down to what's a diet and  
what isn't. I don't think you should  
necessarily go on a diet to lose weight but I  
do think you should control what you eat to  
some sort of extent in that I don't think you  
should go out and eat chips every day and like  
eat really fatty things

Here then the women resolve their distinctions between their own behaviour and their rejection of dieting. Thus diets are acceptable and even advisable if they are carried out for health reasons but are not if carried out in order to lose weight. This was also referred

to in interview one where the women discuss their rejection of diets but the fact that this rejection only extends towards people who are not endangering their health by their weight. Thus dieting is again defined as acceptable if it relates to one's health:

- JILL                    So where does it come in then that you should lose weight I mean this is going back to what Kate said I mean you know
- KATE                    You mean at what level do you have to reach?
- JILL                    At what level?
- JO                        Well I suppose when it the doctor thinks its a threat to your health
- KATE                    When it becomes a threat to your health (T1, P34).

#### 4.2.5 Summary

In summary, the women controlled their eating habits through the use of a number of food rules which defined different foods as 'good' and 'bad'. Whilst this control of food intake was carried out in order to control body size, the women rejected the analysis that their eating behaviour could be defined as dieting. In comparison to the everyday and 'normal' nature of their own food control, the women defined dieting as extreme and obsessive. This differentiation of different eating behaviours again related to the women's political beliefs so that again there were contradictions between the women's personal behaviours and political beliefs. The women introduced the concept of health to further differentiate between everyday food control and dieting, with health being more a more acceptable reason for going on a diet than a desire to lose weight for beauty reasons.

### **4.3 Attitudes Towards Obesity: Prejudice and the Judgement Of 'Fat' Women**

In this section a further contradiction in the women's attitudes towards body size and diet will be explored. As we have seen (section 4.1.2) the women rejected what they identified as a relational and social pressure upon women to conform to a thin ideal of female beauty, asserting that women should cease to regard themselves as too fat because they do not conform to this ideal. Despite this political consciousness the women continued to make distinctions between women on the grounds of their size so that whilst it was seen as acceptable for 'big' women to reject the need to lose weight this acceptance was not extended to those women who were defined as 'obese' or 'really fat'. Thus whilst the women asserted that 'big' women are attractive and desirable they retained the attitude that fatness is undesirable, unattractive and unhealthy. In maintaining a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable degrees of fatness the women continued



to have the prejudiced and judgmental attitude towards body size which they had apparently rejected in their political awareness and beliefs.

In addition to the contradiction between the women's political awareness and their prejudiced attitudes towards fatness the women were also judgmental of the way in which other women continued to be unaware of the oppression they were under in their acceptance of the thin ideal and their desire to be thin. This judgement took place regardless of the fact that they themselves continued to feel unhappy with the size of their bodies and the fact that they were still reliant on the approval of others to make them feel that their bodies were attractive and therefore acceptable.

The following quote illustrates the distinction drawn between women of different degrees of fatness. Here Jo differentiates between women who are merely big and women who are extremely fat or obese:

JO                    I think that I'm just trying to say that I think its quite important to draw a distinction between saying what you mean by fat because I think a lot of the problems are sort of with people who are a stone two stone overweight something like that

JILL                What do you mean by problems?

JO                    Well in terms of image etc. etc.

JILL                So what about fat people?

JO                    Well I but I mean there's a difference well I would ( ) you ( ) that's what I'm saying you ( ) people would still call them fat but if you're drawing a distinction between really fat and slim then that's not so much what I'm saying is that there are a lot of women who are say 2 stone or whatever overweight there are a hell of a lot of women and so its actually quite common but its still seen as like there's still some sort of stigma about it (T<sub>1</sub>, P21).

In this quote Jo again refers to the fact that anyone who is not extremely slim is currently referred to as 'fat' in our society. Women are assessed in relation to a thin norm of size which few women's bodies actually conform to and which does not relate to the reality of women's bodies. This means that there are great variations in size across those identified as 'fat people', ranging from those who are one or two stones overweight to those who are extremely obese. In this excerpt Jo rejects the idea that women who are only one or two stones 'overweight' should feel that too fat and that they need to lose weight. Whilst there is a sense of empathy with big women because of the societal pressure or 'stigma' upon them, the pressures and problems facing 'really fat' women are not considered in

this quote. Thus the women are not stating the idea that pressurising women to lose weight *per se* is wrong but that the identification of 'big' women as fat and in need of weight loss is wrong.

In part this failure to consider the pressures upon fat women is explained by the fact that none of the women in the discussion were defined as being in the 'fat' category of body size, although Emma and Jo described themselves as 'big'. Thus the women identified with the problems of big women because this was the group to which they felt they belonged and which they therefore had knowledge of. However in later quotes it seems that this empathy with big women but not with fat women was extended further into prejudice against and judgement of fat people. Fat people were defined as being unacceptably fat because their body size was both unattractive and unhealthy. This is seen in the following excerpt:

KATE                   Its really difficult to see somebody who's really fat as being attractive I always find if somebody's who's like

JO                       But what about a person who's plump then? Who's fattish

KATE                   Oh you can see them as being attractive

JO                       Yeah there's a difference between

KATE                   Yeah that's something we should discuss actually there is a difference

JO                       Yeah but obesity is very unattractive and its also very unhealthy but I don't think that that's so much the issue anyway I think its this people being like a stone or so overweight because I don't think anybody would argue that if you're obese then for one thing you're very unhealthy and for another thing it is quite unattractive its not saying that big people are unattractive its saying that rolls and rolls of fat are unattractive sort of thing there is a definite difference (T1, P31).

The quote begins with a statement from Kate which involves her defining fat people as unattractive but which also expresses her feelings of guilt about such a definition. Thus she states that she 'finds it difficult' to find fat people attractive which suggests that she feels a tension between how she should feel and how she really feels. This relates again to the women's awareness of the 'politically correct' attitude towards body size and the way in which this often created conflict for the women as they attempted to reconcile political beliefs with actual personal experiences.

Whilst this excerpt begins with a discussion about the attractiveness of people of different sizes, later discussion in the quote is about health. This relates to a similar switch in relation to the women's discussion of dieting where health was introduced as a means of legitimating the women's control of their own weight when their political beliefs rejected dieting and pressures upon women to lose weight (section 4.2.4). Hence in this quote prejudice against fat people is legitimised by the fact that fatness is sanctioned because of its effects on health rather than beauty. It is thus admissible to assert that someone should lose weight if this is based on the grounds of health.

At the end of the quote however Jo returns to the issue of attractiveness and we gain a sense of her feelings of disgust and revulsion towards fatness as seen in her statement about 'rolls and rolls of fat'. This is also seen in her next turn where she describes fat people as 'lolling themselves around' which again represents a negative portrayal of fat people. Here Jo also normalises and hence legitimates these feelings by asserting that such feelings are widespread and commonplace. Hence again she is not presented as prejudiced or judgmental.

In addition to drawing distinctions between big and fat people on the basis of beauty or health, the women also drew a distinction on the basis of the causes of 'bigness' versus 'fatness'. Fat women were seen as eating far more than overweight women as well as being out of control of food. In the following quote Jo refers to this lack of control when she talks about stomach stapling which is seen as being necessary to control the eating habits of obese people:

Jo                            They can't control it themselves they're going to have some external means of doing so but I mean there's been I've heard horrific cases of women who had like their staple their stomach's stapled about 4 times which is really bad because they keep like they have them stapled and then and then they eat still eat and it comes undone and they have it done again and apparently its a really nasty thing anyway (T<sub>1</sub>, P22).

In discussing how fat women might lose the excess fat they carried around the group referred to a norm of eating, a standard calorific level which all people should attempt to stick to. It was felt that fat women ate far above this calorific level whereas overweight people did not. This meant that it was far easier for fat people to lose weight as they were able to simply cut their calorific intake and the weight would be lost. For 'big' people who were seen as not eating above the calorific standard dieting was much harder:

JO                            If you're really obese then it actually doesn't take that much 'cos a lot of people like with diets actually go under the amount of calorie intake they're supposed to have

don't they to lose weight then if you're obese then you could still be having like one-and-a-half times would you should calorie intake whatever it is for an average person and you'd still lose weight (T<sub>1</sub>, P22).

Taking this analysis back to the group there was some agreement with this interpretation. A discussion followed about whether over eating was a cause of obesity. Emma suggested that overeating may not be a cause but that fatness is simply an example of human variability.

EMMA Well there's bound to be like erm in the whole range of human sizes there's bound to be people who are naturally that big there must be [ ] There's people who are really tall and really thin people who are small and quite big there must I mean not many there must be I mean not many obviously 'cos we're going to a real extreme here (Emma, T<sub>2</sub>, p27).

But others in the group did not accept this and again asserted that over eating was a causal factor.

JO Yeah I know that you can have like 3 people and the thinnest person has double the amount of calories than the biggest person and that's like is to do with metabolic weight but I don't think that that that it can be that extreme

JILL You still think the fat person eats more?

JO I think someone who is very very big does yeah ( ) definitely (T<sub>2</sub>, P28).

In summary then the women made great distinctions between different body sizes so that a person could either be of an acceptable or an unacceptable size. Thus whilst the women rejected the restriction upon women's size this rejection only applied to women who had not crossed the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable fatness. Women who were over this boundary were seen as very different to other women in terms of the aetiology of their body size and the problems which their size might bring them. It seems that the prejudice which exists against fat people in western society was still present in these women.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This section of the chapter summarises the main findings of the Pilot Study and explores their implications for the thesis as a whole. These implications involve the identification

of emerging substantive research questions about women's relationship to food and their bodies which will be more fully explored in Chapter Five and the main studies of the thesis (Chapters Five, Six and Seven). In addition to this there is a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications of the study which involves a critique of the utility of group interviews and respondent validation in meeting the methodological and theoretical aims of the Pilot Study.

### **5.1 Summary of Research Findings: Identifying Emerging Research Questions**

The main finding of the Pilot Study centres around the identification of contradictions and tensions in the women's accounts. These contradictions relate to the presence of three different and opposing themes which ran through the women's accounts. The first theme related to the women's political beliefs and involved the rejection of the pressure placed upon women to conform to the thin ideal of female beauty. The second theme was related to the women's personal experiences of body size and food with the women reporting feelings of unhappiness about the size of their bodies and attempting to control their eating in order to control their size. They were therefore oppressed by the very same forces which they rejected in their political beliefs. The third theme involved the judgement of individuals on the basis of their size with the women defining fat people as less attractive, less healthy and less 'in control' than their thinner counterparts, which again contradicted the women's commitment to resisting the pressures upon women to conform to the thin ideal.

Each of the three themes identified above can be related to the social discourses surrounding women, food and body size discussed in Chapter Two. Thus the women's feelings of unhappiness about the size of their bodies can be related to the contemporary socio-cultural discourse which emphasises the importance of a 'thin ideal' of body size emphasised in definitions of femininity and women's 'worth' (Bordo, 1993, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Orbach, 1988; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984; Bennett and Gurin, 1982; Garner et al., 1980). Similarly the women's attitudes towards obesity can be related to the attitudes identified in feminist analyses of the fat prejudice and discrimination which exists in contemporary Western societies (Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Rothblum, 1992; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984; Schoenfelder and Wieser, 1983). Finally, the women's rejection of the thin ideal relates to the influence of feminist ideology on the women's lives as part of the feminist rejection of the definition of the female body as a sexual object for the use of men (Wolf, 1990; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Orbach, 1988).

The identification of the influence of social context on the women's experiences of food and body size leads to a number of theoretical and substantive questions which are

explored in the three main studies of the thesis. Theoretically, questions are raised about the theorisation of subjectivity and the way in which social discourses surrounding the female body relate to women's feelings about themselves and the meanings which food and body size have for women. On a substantive level, the findings of the Pilot Study raise questions about the role of cohort and age factors on the meanings of body size and food for women, leading to the need for a life span approach to the exploration of women's relationship to body size and food.

### 5.1.1 Subjective Meanings and the Theorisation of Active Reflection upon Social Discourses

As discussed in Chapter Two, studies of women's relationship to food and body size theorise the individual either in isolation from social context so that the influence of social context and gender power relations generally remains unacknowledged (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1992; White, 1991, see Chapter Two, section 2) or in terms of the passive internalisation of socio-cultural influences (e.g. Fallon and Rozin, 1988; Fallon and Rozin, 1985; Garner et al., 1980; see Chapter Two, section 4.2 and Chapter Four, section 3.1). The presence of contradictions in the women's accounts suggest that the women were involved in reflection upon social discourses rather than simple internalisation (see p.133, Chapter Four for a definition of 'social discourse' and the use of this term within a symbolic interactionist framework). In addition to this the women's identification of these contradictions and their attempts to 'repair' their accounts to reduce or reconcile the contradictions illustrates that the women reflected upon the implications of the different discourses in their accounts. This reflection upon discourses will be returned to in Chapter Four where a symbolic interactionist perspective is used to theorise subjectivity in terms of an active process of reflection upon discourses rather than a passive internalisation or positioning between discourses.

### 5.1.2 The Influence of Changing Cultural Discourses on the Meanings of Body Size and Food

Substantively, the identification of the role of social context in young, white, middle class women's experiences of food and body size leads to a consideration of the role of culture, class and age in women's relationship to food and their bodies. These considerations involve questioning how changes in culture, class and age would change women's experiences of their bodies and the food that they eat. For example, would historical and cultural changes in the social construction of femininity change the tensions and contradictions found in the Pilot Study centring around the role of the female body in definitions of women? The women in the Pilot Study were born in the 1970s and hence grew up under the influence of the second wave of feminism whose beginnings date back to the 1960s. By comparison, women who are now in their sixties and seventies were in their thirties and forties when feminism began to have its influence. This leads to the

question of how women of different ages define femininity and how this influences their feelings about their bodies.

### 5.1.3 The Influence of Age Factors on the Meanings of Body Size and Food

Such considerations introduce the concept of age into the emerging research questions. As well as considering the role of changing cultural influences on women's experiences there is also a need to explore the effect of ageing on women's experiences. Thus what are the effects of the societal assumptions about the sexuality and sexual attractiveness of older women on women's feelings about their body size and the food that they eat? Also what are the effects of actual body changes on women's experiences of their bodies, relating to the weight gain associated with ageing and the other changes of the body which come about as the body matures?

The literature surrounding women's relationship to their bodies and food does not deal with the experiences of women across the life span. Instead there is a focus on the experiences of women in adolescence and early adulthood, particularly white, middle class college students in their late teens or early twenties (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984). There has been little research into women who are in different social classes, different phases of the life cycle or different ethnic backgrounds. In the research carried out for the main body of the thesis there is a focus on the exploration of the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women at different points in the life span, focusing on three different age groups of women. These issues will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five, where the emerging research questions identified in this chapter will be more fully formulated in order to lead onto the main studies of the thesis (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight).

## **5.2 Critique of Research Methodology: Group Interviews and Respondent Validation**

This section presents a critique of the methodology developed in the Pilot Study in order to assess whether the theoretical aims of the methodology were met. The critique discusses the value of group interviews in terms of their use in the exploration of women's experiences as told from their own perspectives and then focuses on the concept of respondent validation and its role in the reduction of power differentials in the research process.

### 5.2.1 The Group Interview

The Pilot Study used a group interview methodology because it was hypothesised that this would provide an environment which allowed the participants to explore their experiences in an informal and relaxed environment which also avoided the power

differentials involved in a traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship. The two group interviews carried out for the study were extremely fluid and free flowing allowing the women to explore personal aspects of their experiences without awkwardness or embarrassment. This relaxed atmosphere is likely to have been a result of the fact that the women were all close friends as well as the fact that the research involved group interviews.

A drawback of the group methodology was the fact that the interviews did not allow an in depth exploration of the women's experiences. The interviews involved jumping from one woman to another, with the women interrupting and talking over each other. This allowed little time for reflection upon experiences beyond a superficial level and sometimes meant that the quieter women in the group were not given the space to recount their experiences. This raises questions about the power differentials involved in group interviews. Rather than simply reducing the power differentials between researcher and participant, the group interview involved different types of power relationships between the different participants in the group. This suggests that a more complex consideration of power differentials in the research process is needed.

After a consideration of these issues a decision was made to adopt an individual interview methodology in the main studies of the thesis. It was decided that individual interviews would allow the women to explore personal experiences in more depth than a group interview would allow (see Chapters Six, Seven and Eight for a discussion of the methodology used in the main studies).

### 5.2.2 The Respondent Validation Method.

The Pilot Study used the method of respondent validation in an attempt to reduce power differentials in the research process. In practice however, a number of difficulties were experienced in carrying out the respondent validation method which led to the identification of a number of problems in the method. These problems centred around the claims the method makes to reduce power differentials in research and the theoretical assumptions on which the method is based.

One of the difficulties experienced in carrying out the respondent validation method involved the process of reaching agreement between researcher and participant over the data analysis. This was seen, for example, in the analysis of the distinctions the women made between their control of their eating habits and their definitions of dieting behaviour (see section 4.2.3 above). The analysis returned to the women in the second interview involved the assertion that the women's behaviour actually represented a form of dieting behaviour. However the women did not agree with this analysis and were adamant that their behaviour could not be defined as dieting. In this situation I was faced with the



dilemma of valuing the participant's interpretations, in accordance with the aim of reducing power differentials, or whether to stand by my original analysis. Reflection upon this dilemma led to the identification of a number of problems in valuing the participant's interpretation over that of the researcher as outlined in the respondent validation approach (Reason, 1988; Reason and Rowan, 1981).

*Taking Accounts at 'Face Value': Hidden Meanings and the Deconstruction of Accounts*

Firstly, the respondent validation method involves the assumption that the participant's interpretation of her account represents all that can be gleaned from the account of her experiences. Such an approach denies the complexity and multi-levelled structure of individuals' accounts (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995) as well as the researcher's role in revealing the nature of these accounts (see below). As discussed above the participants' accounts were constructed in relation to social and cultural frameworks and the power relations contained within these frameworks. This does not mean however that participants necessarily interpret their experiences in relation to these frameworks. In fact other research indicates that but women themselves may not understand their experiences in these terms, preferring instead to view their experiences in personal or interpersonal framework (see Dryden, 1989; Curric, 1988).

An example of this in this study relates to the women's use of a health discourse to describe their eating habits and to define them as different to dieting behaviour. Here the women constructed their concern with health as an individual issue rather than as influenced by social discourses surrounding healthy eating. If an analysis involving the influence of social discourses had been returned to the group it would probably have been rejected by the women because they regarded this part of their experience in individual terms.

Qualitative analysis of interview data involves an attempt to point out the participants' understandings of their experiences. This would therefore involve pointing out the distinction which the women made between their 'cutting down' behaviour and dieting for example. However the analysis goes far beyond the faithful reproduction of participants' accounts to deconstruct the hidden meanings contained in these accounts. This deconstruction should not be denigrated on the grounds that it involves the researcher in asserting power over the participant because the identification of the operation of structural factors on women's experiences may actually serve to empower women at a broader structural level which goes beyond the interpersonal dynamics of the interview situation.

The analysis of hidden meanings also involves the analysis of contradictions in participants' accounts. As discussed in section 4.1.3 above, the participants in the Pilot

Study sometimes rejected the analysis of the interview by presenting a different account of their experiences in the second interview. This was seen, for example, in Kate's rejection of the analysis which related her increased confidence about her body and sexual attractiveness to the fact that she was currently in a long term relationship (see section 4.1.3, above). Kate rejected this analysis through presenting a different account of her experiences which enabled her to assert that she was not dependent on her boyfriend's opinion of her body in order to feel sexually attractive.

In this situation the researcher adopting a respondent validation approach is faced with the problem of deciding which of the participant's two accounts should be regarded as the 'true' experience and in which of the two interviews the participant was 'lying'? As argued in section 4.1.3 this contradiction in Kate's account relates to her attempts to reconcile her political beliefs with her feelings about her sexuality and sexual relationships. In this case then, neither of her two versions of her account can be presented as more or less true than the other because both accounts represent the complexity of meanings surrounding body size for Kate. In attempting to validate data analysis through respondent validation, the co-operative inquiry approach does not provide a method for theorising these complex meanings. There is no analysis of the inconsistencies in individual's accounts and the way in which they should be treated. Again the approach is limited by its assumption of 'true' experience which takes no account of the construction of accounts around complex levels of meaning.

### *Subjectivity in the Research Process*

The respondent validation method is also problematic because it fails to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and the interpretative nature of knowledge production. The co-operative inquiry approach is based on the assumption that it is possible to develop a 'real' theory about individual's experiences which corresponds to the individual's interpretation of what their experiences meant to them. It is assumed that this theory can be obtained by identifying themes in individuals' accounts and checking the truth of these themes with the individuals concerned. Such an approach denies the researcher's involvement in the analysis of data and assumes that thematic analysis simply emerges from the data via a process of induction. Such a criticism has also been made in reference to grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). The analysis of interview data therefore involves a process of interpretation where the researcher assesses what the participant has said and interprets this in relation to her values, interests, which are influenced by the social context and power relations in which the researcher is located. When this subjectivity is acknowledged the method of respondent validation becomes problematic.

Recognising the role of the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process has implications for the reduction of power differentials in the research process. In identifying the contribution which the researcher's knowledge and values make to the research process, the differences between the researcher and the participant in these areas become important. In attempting to create non-exploitative research relationships where researcher and participant share common experiences, it may be an illusion to assume that both possess equal levels of knowledge, skills and experience with which to analyse the research material (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Gelsthorpe, 1990, in Maynard, 1994). Thus in the example given above the women who participated did not share the researcher's knowledge of the literature surrounding food and body size and they did not therefore bring this knowledge to the analysis of their experiences. It should therefore be acknowledged that blurring the boundaries between researcher and respondent by involving the researcher in data production and returning the analysis to participants for validation does not necessarily reduce power differentials in the research process. The differing levels of expertise which inevitably exist between researcher and participant cannot simply be ignored and the effects of these differences in expertise in terms of their influence on the analysis of data needs to be explored.

The acknowledgement of the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the research process leads to the need for reflexivity in the research process. This involves a process of 'personal reflexivity' where the researcher reflects upon her own contribution to the research (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 19912; Smith, 1992; Charmaz, 1990) and 'functional reflexivity' where the researcher reflects upon the assumptions and biases upon which mainstream psychology is based and the interests which these assumptions serve in a social and cultural context (Griffin, 1995). These ideas are explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion this chapter has presented the findings of the Pilot Study of the thesis and has identified a number of substantive, theoretical and methodological issues which are have implications for the remainder of the thesis. These issues can be identified as follows:

- Substantively, the Pilot Study has implications for the research questions of the main study through the identification of the role of social context and gender power relations in women's experiences of food and body size. The Pilot Study has identified the emerging research questions of the main studies of the thesis which centre around the exploration of the subjective meanings of body size and food for

women across the life span and the relationship of these meanings to changing cultural discourses and to discourses surrounding ageing. These issues are explored in more detail in Chapter Five, which explores previous research on body size and food across the life span as well as literature examining cultural discourses surrounding ageing.

- Theoretically, the study has outlined an emerging model of subjectivity which conceptualises women's experiences as being shaped by social, cultural and historical discourses through a process of active reflection upon discourses rather than a passive internalisation of such discourses. This forms part of the theoretical framework of the main study (see Chapter Four) which goes on to draw upon the theory of subjectivity outlined in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969).
- Methodologically, the Pilot Study has explored the potential contribution of group interviews to the exploration of women's experiences of food and body size from their own perspectives and to the reduction of power differentials in the research process. Group interviews were valuable in facilitating the free-flowing discussion of personal issues between participants, although this may also be dependent on the closeness of the relationships between the members of the group. However group interviews may also produce 'power relations' between participants so that not all members of the group may be able to explore their experiences on a detailed level. The experiences of carrying out group interviews resulted in individual interviews being used in the main studies of the thesis.
- A further methodological issue concerns the effectiveness of the respondent validation method as a method of qualitative analysis and as a technique for reducing the power differentials in the research process. The respondent validation method has been problematised in relation to its failure to recognise the role of hidden meanings and deconstruction in qualitative analysis which therefore questions the idea of taking participants' accounts at face value. In addition the subjectivity of the research process is not considered in terms of the conceptualisation of the interview process as an interactive process and the analysis as a interpretative process. This has implications for the development of the methodology of the main studies which is discussed in Chapter Four.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM, FEMINISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST GROUNDED THEORY**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the three main studies of the research (Chapter Six, Seven and Eight). Building on the critiques developed in the previous chapters, it aims to shift the theorisation of women's relationship to body size and food from a positivist framework, which objectively measures relationships between variables, to a framework which investigates the subjective meanings of body size and food for women at different stages of the life span. These subjective meanings are explored in relation to social discourses surrounding body size, female identity and ageing in terms of exploring how such discourses come to have individual meaning for women.

This conceptualisation involves locating the research in the philosophical and theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) and using the method described in the social constructionist formulation of grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). In addition this research is carried out from a feminist-standpoint, in that it develops a methodology which meets the aims of feminist standpoint research. This involves a commitment to analysing women's own accounts as a way of exploring female experience and a commitment to carrying out research which aims to both challenge the power asymmetries existing for women in society and to minimise the power differentials present in the research process (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1991).

In drawing on the symbolic interactionist tradition, the theoretical rationale developed in this chapter challenges the dualism between the individual and the 'social' which is present in mainstream social psychology as well as in new theoretical developments in psychology. This dualism is firstly discussed in relation to the model of the passive individual present in mainstream and feminist theories of internalisation, which conceptualises the 'social' as impinging on the individual (Hollway, 1989). Secondly, dualism is identified in relation to discourse analysis and post-structuralism (Potter and

Wetherell, 1987) which conceptualises the individual as determined by social discourses.

As an alternative to these perspectives, this chapter develops a model of an active, reflective individual who is influenced by social discourses but who constructs the meaning of her experiences through a process of interaction whereby discourses are actively incorporated into subjectivity (Smith, 1993; Hewitt, 1984; Leonard, 1984). Rather than individual and society being conceptualised as separate, they are seen to be involved in a dynamic process of interaction so that they both produce and reproduce each other. Thus the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food are seen as being produced by, and simultaneously reproducing, social structure.

In locating subjectivity within an analysis of the meanings which individual construct and reconstruct from the social, individual and biographical experiences of their own lives, this thesis investigates women's experiences of their bodies from a position of critical realism. Rather than exploring experience at a purely descriptive level as suggested in phenomenological (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1962) and some feminist approaches (Stanley and Wise, 1983, see Hollway, 1989), it is argued that women's accounts of their experiences need to be theorised as constructions brought about in a process of interaction between researcher and researched but which nevertheless have some root in the participants' own experiences and interpretations of the world.

## 2. THEORETICAL DEBATES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind (Lord Kelvin, quoted in Harvey, 1969, p. 307-8).

The interpretative task cannot be accomplished by observing the individual as a complex mechanism geared to respond to certain conditions in certain ways; rather we have to get inside the forms of life and the socially normative regularities in which the person's activity takes shape. This requires a kind of understanding called *verstehen* in which, through an empathetic and imaginative identification with the subject, the observer makes sense of what she or he is doing. Such an approach to human behaviour can be sensitive to the subtleties of the situation of a person in a way that an attempt to distil and isolate a surveyable number of subjective independent variables cannot be. (Gillett, 1995, p. 112).

The two quotes above illustrate the different epistemologies currently employed in social psychology. The first quote, from the nineteenth century physicist Lord Kelvin, is illustrative of the dominant positivist paradigm in psychology with its reliance on

measurement and quantification. In exploring the subjective meanings of body size and food for women across the life span, this thesis develops an epistemological framework as described in the second quote which is representative of the qualitative or interpretative paradigm. The aim of this section is to outline these two different paradigms in order to describe their status in contemporary social psychology and to introduce the debates which currently exist around them. This will begin with an outline of the main characteristics of the positivist paradigm and of the main criticisms against it. Whilst similar points have been discussed in previous chapters they are brought together here in order to provide a coherent background against which the approaches in the qualitative paradigm can be discussed.

## **2.1 Social Psychology and Positivism**

Mainstream psychology has traditionally been located within a positivist model of scientific inquiry based on a model of knowledge production generally assumed to be used in the natural sciences (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Holloway, 1989; Bryman, 1988). Positivism views knowledge production as progressing through impartial, value-free observation; reliable and valid measurement of behaviour; and controlled experiments which break behaviour down into constituent parts (or variables) in order to assess the relationship between them (Hollway, 1989; Walker, 1985). It is a reductionist paradigm in its proposal that it possible to fully understand complex human behaviour in terms of chains of universally applicable laws of cause and effect.

The emphasis on rigour, objectivity and measurement in the positivist model results in an emphasis on numeric data which can then be manipulated through statistical analysis. Qualitative data in the form of spoken or written text has thus traditionally been regarded as exploratory and preparative (being used in pilot studies, for example) because of its ability to throw up theoretical 'hunches' which can then be more rigorously tested through quantitative research (Bryman, 1988).

The theoretical model developed in this chapter arises out of the critique of positivism developed in the social sciences. These debates have their origins in sociological debates in the 1960s, as part of the 'crisis in social psychology' debates of the 1970s (Harre and Secord, 1972) and in feminist critiques of the social sciences (Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981) which also began in the 1970s.

Within social psychology, the critique of positivism and the development of alternative approaches began with the 'crisis in social psychology' debates which were originally outlined in the pioneering work of Harré and Secord's (1972) 'The Explanation of Social Behaviour'. Harré and Secord highlighted the problematic nature of the

experimental paradigm used in psychology with its reliance on a-contextual 'controlled' laboratory environments designed to investigate the relationship between externally defined variables. Such experiments were criticised for being based on a model of the individual as a 'passive machine' as described in the following quote:

'The need for a comprehensive theoretical treatment of social psychology and for a reformed methodology we feel to be pressing, and to be evident from increasing dissatisfaction with the state of social psychology, even within the citadels of the profession. The underlying reason for this state we believe to be a continued adherence to a positivist methodology, long after the theoretical justification for it, in naive behaviourism, has been repudiated. At present there is scarcely any coherent body of theory. In such a vacuum it is possible to carry on empirical studies which make sense only if people are conceived of in the mechanical tradition as passive entities whose behaviour is the product of 'impressed forces', and whose contribution to social action is the latent product of earlier impressed experience. A methodology of experiment survives in which the typical investigation is recommended to be the manipulation of 'variables', and the typical result a correlation in the manner of Boyle's Law.' (Harre and Secord, 1972, p. 1).

Harré and Secord's critique of social psychology can still be applied to much of social psychological research carried out in the 1990s. Social psychology's continued reliance on positivism means that it has failed to provide a model of the person other than as a passive reactor to environmental forces which are conceptualised as impinging on the individual. It continues to theorise human behaviour in relation to a natural science model which views human subjects as no different to the phenomena studied in the natural sciences, characterising them as 'objects' rather than as thinking, acting, creative individuals (Charmaz, 1990). This is illustrated by a classic quote from the phenomenologist Schutz (1962):

'The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist - social reality - has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within the social world.' (Schutz, 1962, p. 59).

In aiming to establish objective laws social psychology has thus failed to look at the meanings which people have attributed to their experiences, through the interpretation of these experiences in relation to individual, relational and social experiences (Charmaz, 1990). In relation to social psychological research on body size, this can be seen in attempts to measure constructs such as 'body size dissatisfaction' by means of simplistic questionnaires and scales (see Chapter Two). This approach has failed to look at what 'dissatisfaction' means for individual women in terms of how they feel about their



bodies and their experiences of their bodies in their relationships with others (see Chapter Two). In addition it has failed to look at the way in which women's dissatisfaction with body size relates to social factors, so that the meanings of body size relate to women's interpretations of these social factors.

## **2.2 Current Approaches in Social Psychology**

Since the critique of positivist social psychology carried out by Harré and Secord (1972) there has been a gradual development of theoretical and methodological alternatives to positivism. However these debates have been slow and it is only since the mid eighties that qualitative research has come to be regarded as a valid method of research in its own right (Henwood and Nicolson, 1995), as opposed to being combined with quantitative methodologies.

Whilst all qualitative methodologies are based on the collection of written or spoken accounts of people's experiences, a number of different approaches are now being used in social psychology with very different epistemological orientations. Current approaches within psychology can be linked to micro-sociology, which draws on phenomenology (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Schutz, 1962), and which represents an alternative to the positivist slant of structural or macro-sociology. Micro-sociology focuses on the ways in which meanings are negotiated in small scale interactions. It can be characterised as having taken two broad directions which have developed into the two theoretical perspectives present in qualitative psychology today (Smith, 1993). One theoretical perspective is termed the 'interpretative perspective' which includes grounded theory approaches (e.g. Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990) and the use of symbolic interactionism as initially developed by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969). A number of feminist approaches can also be characterised in this way (e.g. Henwood, 1993; Nicolson, 1988, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983).

The second tradition to have developed from micro-sociology is that of ethnomethodology which can be traced separately through conversation analysis to the type of discourse analysis developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Discourse analysis can also be seen to part of the tradition of post-structuralism (Hollway, 1989; Weedon, 1987; Henriques et al., 1984) which has developed in philosophy, English literature, sociology, history and cultural studies. Discourse analysis now occupies a strong and coherent position in British social psychology whereas a coherent theoretical alternative in terms of an interpretative approach is not as well established (Smith, 1993). In the discussion which follows discourse analysis and post-structuralism are referred to as discursive approaches in reference to the fact that they develop a discursive view of the self (see section 2.2.1 below).

A third contemporary qualitative approach within psychology is that of experiential or cooperative inquiry (Smith, 1993, 1990; Reason, 1988; Reason and Rowan, 1981). As discussed in Chapter Three, this research enlists the participants as co-researchers in a collective action research project. Cooperative inquiry methodology has already been discussed in relation to the Pilot Study of the thesis (Chapter Three) where the process of respondent validation was used, with data analysis being returned to the participant (or co-researcher) so that an agreed interpretation can be arrived at between co-researchers (see Smith, 1990 for a further example of this type of work). However, as discussed in Chapter Three, there are a number of problems associated with this approach which resulted in its exclusion from the main study of this research. This chapter therefore focuses on the development of an approach incorporating the interpretative approaches of symbolic interactionism and social constructionist grounded theory combined with a feminist perspective to these approaches.

### 2.2.1 Discursive Approaches: Discourse Analysis and Post-structuralism

As stated above the broad focus of qualitative approaches in social psychology is on examining the meanings which particular events, situations and experiences have for individuals in an attempt to more fully understand the complexities of human behaviour. The difference between interpretative and discursive approaches in psychology lies in the distinction made between exploring the *content* of these meanings, as in interpretative approaches, or investigating the *method* by which such meanings are constructed and the *function* of such meanings in the context of people's accounts of their experiences, as in discourse analysis.

The tradition of ethnomethodology in micro-sociology is the precursor of discourse analysis. Ethnomethodology conceptualises individuals as being constantly engaged in a process of creating 'appearances' in their accounts of their experiences so as to ensure the accounts they give of their behaviour appear appropriate or sensible (Bryman, 1988; Hewitt, 1984). Thus the emphasis in ethnomethodology is not on what people do in terms of the particular experiences they might recount or on why they might engage in particular behaviours but focuses on the means by which people actually 'make sense' of what they do.

Discourse analysis develops the ethnomethodological perspective and also draws on post-structuralist approaches (Hollway, 1989) in proposing that the focus of social psychological research should be on discourse itself in terms of the functional nature of such discourse. This is in opposition to the idea that discourses are used by individual people on the basis of the meanings which discourses have for them in the context of their own lives. In presenting an alternative to cognitive psychology, there is no analysis of what lays 'beyond the text' in terms of the relation of such discourse to personal

experiences of events or the ‘inner workings’ of the individual in terms of attitudes or cognitive processes.

Whilst discourse analysis serves to highlight the role of social and historical discourses in people’s experiences, its model of the individual as being produced through, and having no existence beyond discourse, is both socially deterministic and dualist. In addition, discourse analysis provides a theorisation which reduces the individual to a passive entity which has much in common with positivist conceptualisations of the individual. In discourse analysis subjectivity is reduced to passive positioning within discourses which does not allow the individual to challenge or resist such discourses.

The focus on discourse and ‘texts’ rather than on the individual is in opposition to the research questions of this thesis which aims to explore the subjective meanings associated with body size and food and to emphasise the importance of looking at women’s own accounts of their experiences. The model of the passive individual who is ‘determined’ by discourse does not provide an adequate model of the individual who is capable of reflecting upon different discourses and who can then actively challenge or resist such discourses.

### 2.2.2 Interpretative Approaches: Symbolic Interactionism and Social Constructionist Grounded Theory

As an alternative to discursive approaches, this thesis argues for the value of an interpretative approach to the study of the subjective meanings of body size and food for women across the life span. It argues that whilst individual’s accounts are dependent on contingent forces operating in the context of the account they are nevertheless rooted in and hence bear some resemblance to ‘real’ experiences as described in accounts. Hence the focus of study is on the content of the meanings in accounts rather than the functions which such meanings might obtain in the context of that account. In order to do this the thesis develops a methodology and epistemology which combines a symbolic interactionist approach (Hewitt, 1984; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) to the theorisation of subjectivity with recent social constructionist formulations of grounded theory (e.g. Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990).

Symbolic interactionism provides a model of subjectivity which transcends the dualism of mainstream social psychology and discursive approaches. It conceptualises the person as engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the social world in which she lives so that she is both shaped by the social and by her actions in the world herself shapes that world (Hewitt, 1984). The emphasis in symbolic interactionism is on exploring the meanings with which individuals interpret their experiences, viewing these meanings as being formed through a process of interaction with the people who make up an individual’s

social world (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). The emphasis on interaction also provides a model of an active, reflective subject because of the way in which such interaction is carried out sub-vocally in the form of an inner conversation inside the individual's head (Smith, 1993). Thus whilst Mead (1934) conceptualised the self as being socially constructed, his conceptualisation of a reflective self avoids social determinism and the model of a passive subject incapable of personal resistance and social change.

This thesis also draws upon another interpretative approach known as grounded theory in order to develop a methodological framework for research. Grounded theory was initially developed by the sociologists Glaser and Strauss in their book 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (1967). Here they criticised the use of the hypothetico-deductive method in positivist social science which defines the scientific method as proceeding through the formulation of hypotheses based on prior theoretical hunches which are then tested, revised and tested again (see Chapter One). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that this resulted in sociology being restricted to the testing of the 'grand theories' so that participants' experiences were evaluated in relation to these theories. They argued that theory should be developed from out of the experiences of the participants themselves. Thus an alternative methodology of 'grounded theory' was proposed which allows a theory of the subjective meanings of people's experiences to be developed from or 'grounded in' the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; see also Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990; Bryman, 1988).

The grounded theory approach has been drawn upon and used as a methodology in a number of feminist research projects (e.g. Henwood, 1993). This is because the approach stresses the importance of basing research on individuals' experiences and hence is able avoid the traditional distortion of women's experiences in mainstream psychological research (see Chapter One for an introduction to this issue). However whilst grounded theory provides a precise and therefore useful method which can be employed in analysing women's accounts of their experiences, it can be criticised for the implicit assumptions contained within Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original methodological framework. The main criticism which will be addressed here is that in asserting the importance of grounding theories in people's experiences, grounded theory appears to advocate a form of 'naive induction' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992). Here then the researcher is characterised as a 'blank slate' or passive medium through which analytic themes simply 'emerge' from the data. No account is provided of the researcher's involvement in the research process.

Some of these criticisms have now been recognised by researchers within the field and attempts have been made to reformulate the approach into 'social constructionist grounded theory' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). This

formulation incorporates a recognition of the researcher's own contribution to the research process and hence advocates the building of reflexive analysis into the thematic analysis which emerges from participants' accounts.

In summary, this chapter outlines the case for the combination of the interpretative approaches of symbolic interactionism and the social constructionist version of grounded theory, viewing these approaches from a feminist perspective and using them to meet feminist research aims. Symbolic interactionism is used to provide a model of subjectivity conceptualising an active, reflective subject who is initially constructed through social discourse but who then uniquely fashions such discourses through a process of reflection. Symbolic interactionism thus provides us with a theory which emphasises the importance of looking at the meanings contained in participants' accounts whereas social constructionist grounded theory provides a method through which theories about the content of these meanings can be developed.

### **3. SUBJECTIVITY, AGENCY AND THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE 'SOCIAL' AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

Subjectivity is defined as '..the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, one's sense of oneself and ways of understanding one's relation to the world' (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). In this thesis it is understood as the individual's interpretation of experience and the incorporation of social experiences into one's sense of self. This understanding of subjectivity is debated in contemporary social psychology, particularly in relation to post-structuralist and discourse analysis. In these approaches subjectivity is the term preferred to those of 'self' or identity' which have traditionally been used in social psychology:

The 'subject' is the generic term in philosophy for what in lay terms would be 'the person', 'the individual' or 'the human being', and what in psychology is referred to as 'the individual'. The term 'theories of the subject' has tended to refer to approaches which are critical of psychology's assumptions about individuality, theoretical approaches which emphasise the way in which the social domain constitutes the individual, rather than the other way round. (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 2).

Subjectivity has been neglected in mainstream social psychology. Whilst the role of social psychology can be defined as understanding the social aspects of the individual (Hollway, 1989), it has actually avoided theorising the relationship between the two. This is because of social psychology's assumption of a dualism between the individual and society, so that society is characterised as 'social context' which in some way influences the individual from 'the outside' and individual experience is characterised as being contained within the individual, separate from the 'social'. Whilst a relationship is

assumed to exist between individual and society, the theorisation of the exact nature of this relationship is neatly side-stepped:

Attempts from within psychology to cope with the theoretical problems .. have tended to resolve themselves into the mere making of statements to the effect that a 'complex interaction' is at work, as if all the problems were solved thereby. (Riley, 1978, p. 79 in Hollway, 1989).

Social psychology takes the individual as its starting point and attempts to understand how the individual is influenced by the social context in which she lives. Social psychology was originally set up as a sub-discipline which investigated the influence of social context in opposition to the influence of biological or innate characteristics of the individual (Hollway, 1989). Its focus on the 'nature-nurture' debate, comparing the biological with the 'social', has resulted in the failure to adequately theorise the 'social'. As a result social psychology has fallen back on concepts about 'socialisation' or 'internalisation' which simply assume that the 'social' is subsumed into the individual's identity. In addition society is set up as an external entity which exists in isolation from the individuals acting within it.

A theorisation of the subjective meanings of body size and food must consider the way in which these meanings are formed from social discourses in a model which conceptualises women as the producers and users of discourse. This involves formulating a position which moves beyond traditional 'internalisation' approaches which view society as 'impinging' on the individual. In addition there must be a challenge to the discursive view of subjectivity which sees social discourses as constructing the individual, rendering the individual as passive in terms of the concept of 'subject positions' within discourses. In developing a theorisation of subjectivity which views the subject as being the user and producer of discourse we can conceptualise how women are constructed through social discourses but are then able to reflect upon the 'social' and be involved in a process of challenging and resisting social discourses.

### **3.1 Subjectivity and the Experience of Body Size: Internalisation and the Passive Subject**

In looking at the subjective meanings of body size for women there is a need to theorise subjectivity in terms of the relationship between the individual and the 'social'. As discussed in Chapter Two, the aim of this thesis is to explore these subjective meanings in relation to discourses surrounding physical attractiveness and body size which are conceptualised as being structured around gender and power. This involves a consideration of the increasing emphasis on the socially and historically constructed 'thin ideal' of body shape (Wiseman et al., 1992; Bordo, 1990; Garner et al., 1980) and of cultural discourses surrounding the concepts of fat prejudice and fat discrimination in Western societies (Rothblum, 1992; Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Schoenfelder and

Wieser, 1983). There must also be a consideration of the way in which these discourses are gendered discourses in relation to the importance placed on physical beauty for women as part of a wider cultural discourse about femininity and women's role in society (Bordo, 1993; Ussher, 1989; Brownmiller, 1984) and the way in which they relate to age discourses surrounding female beauty and sexuality (Itzin, 1986, 1984; Sontag, 1972; see Chapter Five).

As discussed in Chapter Two, previous research on women's relationship to body size has traditionally relied on theories of individual deficiency which view women's feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies as the product of some individualised distortion or misperception of body size. Such theories fail to recognise the role of the 'social' on women's experiences of their body size and fail to explore what body size and food mean for women in the context of their lives. Alternatively, in more recent research there has been a consideration of the role of social factors in terms of the influence of societal ideals of thinness as propagated by the media. Whilst such a model might seem to offer a move forward in acknowledging the role of social factors, such a model continues to work within the traditional psychological tradition which conceptualises the social in terms of the way in which it 'impinges' on the individual in the behaviourist model of stimulus and response. Such theories rely on a theory of internalisation of the 'social' which fails to take account of the way in which social factors come to have individual meaning for women and the way in which such factors are incorporated into women's subjective experiences of their bodies and the food that they eat.

Within mainstream psychology, the move towards a consideration of socio-cultural factors has relied on the identification of the concept of the thin ideal in Western cultures (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980). However in accordance with the dualist view of self and society, the conceptualisation of the relationship between the individual and society has been confined to a model of socio-cultural 'influences'. This implies a model of social causation so that women's feelings about their bodies (in terms of dissatisfaction, for example) are seen as being directly caused by social factors such as the societal emphasis on a thin ideal of beauty. Thus many psychologists (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Rozin and Fallon, 1988; Fallon and Rozin, 1985) cite the work of Garner et al. (1980) who carried out an analysis of the changing body size of the 'ideal' woman represented in Playboy magazine and the Miss America beauty contest over the 1960s and 1970s. Garner et al. (1980) hypothesised that:

Particularly during the last decade, there has appeared to be a shift from the voluptuous, curved figure to the angular, lean look of today. The impact of this changing idealized female shape is exemplified by the pervasiveness of dieting among women. (Garner et al, 1980, p. 483)

In this quote a connection is made between 'external' sociocultural factors and the high proportion of women currently dieting in Western societies. The assumption is that the message of the thin ideal is passively internalised by women so that there is a one-to-one correspondence between societal images and women's identity. Thus women see images of thinness in the media and internalise the message that this is the 'right way to look'. They then compare their own bodies to these images and mechanistically decide that their bodies are not thin enough. This leads to dissatisfaction with the body which results in the behavioural response of 'pervasive dieting'.

In this conceptualisation of the relationship between individual and society we can identify the model of the individual criticised in Harre and Secord's (1972) critique of positivist psychology. No consideration is given to the interpretations which women make of the images of femininity presented to them in their social world. There is no recognition in these assumptions that women may reflect upon the images they see presented to them in the media and that they may then either reject or accept the images (see also Tunaley, Nicolson and Walsh, 1994).

Such a view of internalisation of social factors can also be seen in feminist psychology in its analysis of oppressive social stereotypes of women. Such theories rely on socialisation theories of subjectivity which view women as being influenced by the inequalities in society by a process of internalisation of gender role stereotypes present both before and after the birth of every individual in society (Leonard, 1982). Whilst such theories are important in identifying the presence of social discourses about women and in emphasising the prevalence and power of such discourses, they continue to present a model of a passive individual who is simply the victim of oppressive social forces. There is therefore a failure to theorise how such oppression comes to have individualised meanings for different women.

An example of this reduction of female subjectivity to passive internalisation can be seen in the analyses of age-sex stereotypes developed by Cathy Itzin (1986, 1984) and Susan Sontag (1972). These stereotypes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five where there is a discussion of literature relating to the female life span and its relationship to body size and food. An analysis of the operation of these stereotypes in media and societal representations of older women is useful in this thesis in theorising the way in which images of older women are constructed in terms of asexuality, decline and loss (see Chapter Five). Such stereotypes can be theorised as influencing the changing meanings of body size and food for women as they develop across the life-span. However such analyses of age-sex stereotypes fail to take account of how individual women experience social images of age and gender and how they incorporate these images into their subjectivity or experiences of themselves.



Itzin (1986, 1984) falls back on the concept of internalisation to explain how stereotypes shape older women's lives and feelings about themselves. She assumes that there is a 'one-to-one correspondence between media images (or other articulations of sex-role stereotypes) and women's identities' (Hollway, 1989, p. 104). Such an approach fails to recognise that older women may reject negative stereotypes or that they may actively use such stereotypes in potentially positive ways. This will be illustrated in Study Three of the thesis (Chapter Eight) where the older women were found to utilise the stereotypes of the asexual and unattractive older women as a means of being more accepting about their bodies at this stage of their lives (see also Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson, 1994).

This problem with research on stereotypes is recognised by Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) who identify the need to:

'..highlight the considerable tension that can be generated between public images and the personal perceptions of elderly people. This tension is also to be found echoed in a more widespread tension existing in society between images and social realities. There is the danger that we will mistake images for reality and use images as direct evidence of the actual social relationships and activities which occur in everyday life. Yet images and reality clearly interrelate, and images, representations and classificatory schemes are clearly in operation at the everyday level. Rather than accept images as accurate descriptions, or ciphers for the attitudes and behaviour of elderly people, we need to look at the way in which images, both positive and negative, are used by men and women in their everyday lives' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1990, p. 250).

Thus in research such as Itzin's (1986, 1984) there is a tension between her aim to demonstrate the insidiousness of the negative stereotypes surrounding older women in Western society and the subsequent assumption that people are 'controlled' by these discourses because of their direct and inevitable internalisation. Whilst this thesis argues that the images surrounding gender and age are very powerful and do have an effect on women's feelings about body size and food, it also argues that women are active in their relationship to these images. Thus rather than simply internalising these images and changing one's sense of oneself and one's behaviour accordingly, it asks how social discourses such as those discussed by Itzin (1986, 1984) come to have individual meaning for women.

An analysis of Itzin's work highlights the contradictions in many feminist approaches which conceptualise subjectivity in terms of patriarchal society oppressing women through the internalisation of oppression. Whilst such a theory highlights the importance of considering the role of the 'social' on women's experiences, it correspondingly creates a tension with the commitment to challenging and changing power asymmetries in society (Griffin, 1995). The model of subjectivity implicit in internalisation theories implies a

passive subject who is inevitably crushed by patriarchy and who is incapable of resistance and hence of social action and change. This contradiction leads to the need for the development of an alternative approach to the theorisation of subjectivity which draws on theories of an active, reflective individual who is influenced by social discourses but who is able to reflect upon these discourses and hence to resist or challenge them. This point is discussed in more detail in section 5.

### **3.2 Discursive Theories of Subjectivity: Subject Positions and the Invisible Subject**

As stated above post-structuralist ideas are now becoming well established in contemporary social psychology through the perspective of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). However, several problems can be identified within the discursive theorisation of subjectivity so that there is a need to develop an alternative conceptualisation to that developed in either positivism or discursive approaches.

From a post-structuralist perspective subjectivity is theorised as being constituted through language and discourse. Rather than the individual being influenced through the internalisation of the social world, the individual is characterised as being constituted within the social world. There is a focus on the role of language within subjectivity, so that rather than representing a transparent medium through which people express pre-given experiences, language is conceptualised as the means by which people construct the meanings contained in their talk (Hollway, 1989). This can be explained in terms of people constructing a sense of themselves through discourse rather than using language as a way of making themselves understood (see Smith, 1993). Depending on the particular contingent forces operating in the context of a person's talk, the person constructs meanings through drawing on particular historical and social structures of meaning (which are termed discourses). Thus, in post-structuralism subjectivity is conceptualised in terms of the subject positions which a person takes up in relation to different discourses. Thus the subject is plural and contradictory rather than representing a unitary core self.

Within social psychology, post-structuralist ideas have become popular through the perspective of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analysis presents a non-cognitive and functional approach to the analysis of talk and written texts, in that it does not relate subjectivity to the inner motivations or intentions of the speaker. The emphasis on language as constitutive rather than reflective results in a focus on the functional and rhetorical basis of discourses within the given research context:

The researcher should bracket off the whole issue of the quality of accounts as accurate or inaccurate descriptions of mental states .. Our focus is exclusively on discourse itself: how it is constructed, its functions and the consequences which arrive from different discursive organisation. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 178).

In focusing on the functional nature of talk rather than speculating on the inner workings of the individual, discourse analysis presents a model of the individual whose accounts of experience merely represent positioning between different discourses. There is no account of the way in which the individual may draw on particular discourses on the basis of the meaning of what such discourses mean to her in the context of her life. Discourse analysis thus represents a theory of social determinism where the individual represents a position in relation to social discourses. Such a model fails to provide a model of a *psychological* subject at all because there is no consideration of how and why individuals produce and use social discourses beyond an analysis of specific contextual events which take no account of the way an individual's biographical experience might influence the meanings which particular discourses have for the individual.

It is the contention of this thesis that whilst women's accounts of their experiences of body size and food are shaped by social and historical discourses, these accounts do not simply represent a position in relation to these discourses. While women will draw on discourses in giving their accounts of their experiences, there is a reality to these experiences which transcends the conceptualisation of subjectivity as discursive constructions within accounts. Women's accounts of their feelings about their bodies have meaning in relation to the women's experiences as part of their on-going biography.

In theorising subjectivity in relation to positioning between discourses, discourse analysis can also be seen to reduce subjects to passive entities. If subjects merely reproduce discourses this presents a model of the subject who is unable to challenge or reject particular discourses. This feature of discourse analysis and post-structuralism has been problematised by researchers concerned with bringing about social or political change (see Smith, 1993). The conceptualisation of a passive rather than an active subject problematises social change because this can only take place if people are conceptualised as being able to resist oppressive discourses and produce alternatives discourses. In failing to provide a model of women as active users of discourse, post-structuralism and discourse analysis have reduced women to passive entities locked into social and historical discourses with no ability to challenge these discourses. As Riger (1992, p. 737) points out post-structuralism presents a model of women who '.. who have no voice other than an echo of prevailing discourses.'

The model of a passive subject is particularly ironic in relation to female subjectivity. The model of a passive subject who has no choice or free will fits in remarkably well with

traditional models of female identity, which view women as being the victims of their biology (Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Howell, 1981; Barnett and Baruch, 1978; see Chapter Five). In discursive approaches the shift has moved from one of biological determinism to one of social determinism but the outcome is the same: a model of women whose identities are 'out of their control' and whose identity is defined for her rather than being defined by herself. In addition, passivity is traditionally associated with femininity, for example in relation to female sexuality where women are taught that their role is to passively attract male desire rather than actively seek it out for themselves (Nicolson, 1993b). Both internalisation and discursive theories of a passive female subjectivity can thus be characterised as actually adding to patriarchal discourses which equate femininity with passivity.

In summary, discursive theories of subjectivity provide no account of the way in which the individual may draw on particular discourses on the basis of the meaning which such discourses have for in the context of the individual's life. Because subjectivity is produced through language, an individual's account of her experience is seen as bearing no resemblance to any 'real' events which the individual has experienced and hence the account she produces is not seen as being linked to the biographical experiences of the individual's life. Further the theorisation of subjectivity in terms of subject positions takes no account of the individual as active in her use of language and discourse. There is no reflection upon discourse and hence no challenging or resistance of discourses.

This thesis proposes that in seeking to explore the subjective meanings of body size for women across the life span, it is necessary to provide a model of subjectivity which relates individuals' accounts to their experiences of their own lives lived in the social world. It is therefore necessary to theorise a model of an active language user who is able to actively reflect on the discourses being used rather than simply reproducing them in response to contextually specific events. It is argued that women's accounts of the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food are grounded in a reality of experience and that these meanings, whilst being formed in relation to social discourses, are incorporated into an individual's subjectivity through a process of reflection upon these discourses. This model of subjectivity relies on a theory of interaction with social discourses both in terms of interaction with others and interaction with the self as described in symbolic interactionist theory. This theory is discussed in the following section.

#### 4. SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND THE THEORISATION OF MEANING

This thesis develops a symbolic interactionist approach to the analysis of the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women across the life span. As discussed in section 2 above, symbolic interactionism can be classified as one of the interpretative approaches to qualitative social science. Whilst being drawn upon in the micro-sociology of the 1960s, it forms part of a much older tradition in the social sciences going back to the work of George Herbert Mead in the 1930s (Mead, 1934) and even further back to the work of Cooley (1902). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings which individuals attach to their experiences of themselves and the world around them, in the assertion that only by understanding these meanings can human behaviour be understood. Symbolic interactionism provides an alternative to discursive approaches because it is concerned with exploring the meanings through which individuals interpret their experiences rather than the functions which such meanings might have when they are discussed in individuals' accounts of their experiences. In looking at the content of these meanings by which experiences are interpreted, symbolic interactionism links individuals' accounts of their experiences to a reality of experience which has taken place in the context of individuals' biographies.

The account of symbolic interactionism developed in this thesis is broadly based on the work of George Herbert Mead (1934) whose theories have been further developed by Herbert Blumer (1969). Blumer (1969) defines symbolic interactionism in relation to three basic premises:

- i) Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings which the things have for them
- ii) Meanings are derived from a process of social interaction
- iii) Meanings are 'handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process' (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

According to the symbolic interactionism developed by Mead and Blumer, social science should concentrate on the study of meanings, where such meanings are viewed as social creations formed through a process of interpretation occurring through interaction with self and others. Rather than responding mechanistically to environmental stimuli Mead (1934) conceptualised the individual as acting on the basis of the meaning the situation has for her. Situations have no meaning other than that which they are ascribed by people in a continuous process of forming, sustaining and transforming meanings.

'All objects, events, and situations acquire their meanings through processes of human interpretation. The meanings attached to objects, events and situations are not built into them. Rather, they are the products of our responses to them. In this regard, all of human experience is an ongoing exercise in sense-making.' (Karp, 1994, P. 6).

Hence symbolic interactionists view social life as an unfolding process in which the individual interprets her environment and acts on the basis of that interpretation.

The meanings which represent individuals' interpretations of their experiences of the social environment are proposed to come about through a process of interaction between an individual and others. Meanings are 'attached' to situations through the individual experiencing, through interaction, how other people interpret (or ascribe meaning) to that situation. This is explained in a quote from Blumer:

Symbolic interactionism .. sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other people act towards the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. (Blumer, 1969, p.3).

The subjective meanings which each individual attributes to situations, events or objects are not a result of the individual's own psyche in isolation from social context. Meanings are in no way fixed so that the individual acts on the basis of 'arousing and application of already established meanings' (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). Instead the process of interpretation results in meanings being continuously reflected upon and reconstructed in the light of the situation an individual is in and the actions she is involved in. Thus there is not the automatic application of meanings but meanings are constantly being revised on the basis of the interactions which the individual is involved in.

Having looked at the three basic premises of symbolic interactionism and having focused on the importance of assessing subjective meanings in looking at people's accounts of their experiences, it is necessary to look at the model of subjectivity developed in symbolic interactionism.

#### **4.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Subjectivity: Interaction and The Reflective Subject**

Symbolic interactionism provides a model of the self which is socially constructed but reflexive and agentic rather than passive. Mead (1934) saw the self as a social rather than a biologically 'innate' self, formed in a process of interaction with the social world followed by interaction with oneself. This theorisation of a social but reflexive self transcends the dualist accounts of subjectivity in theorising a reciprocal relationship

between self and society. Whilst symbolic interactionism sees the social as preceding the individual (because the self is not biologically innate) the process of social interaction which the individual is involved in and which forms the self in itself forms society:

Only individuals, singly or jointly with one another, *act*.. All else - society, culture, social norms, social structure, authority, power - is in the final analysis dependent on the actions of individuals. Yet individuals act only because they acquire the capacity to do so as members of a society, which *is* the source of their knowledge, language, skills, orientations, motives, and many of the other capacities or dispositions they have. Society is temporally prior to any individual; it owes its continuity as well as its existence to individual conduct and it is only visible in conduct; it will persist long after the individual is dead. (Hewitt, 1984, p. 5).

Thus in symbolic interactionism both society and individual are conceptualised as processes rather than static structures. Both are formed in a continuous process of individuals acting within social relationships via process of interaction. Such a model of self and society goes beyond the dualism of traditional psychology which conceptualises the individual as separate from society (as in traditional research on body size, see Chapter Two). In addition it goes beyond structuralist and post-structuralist theories of subjectivity which, in different ways, construct the individual as passive in relation to society. There is thus a rejection of structuralist approaches (such as Marxism), which view the individual as the powerless victims of oppressive social conditions, who are again incapable of individual change (Hollway, 1989):

The reality of personhood cannot be grasped either at the extreme pole of individualism - in which the seemingly autonomous individual is the ontological reality and prime mover - or at the pole of mechanical collectivism - in which the individual is merely a mechanical copy of the underlying social order. There is an essentially dialectical interpenetration of subject and object in which neither has full primacy. We must refocus our understanding so that we can see what Giddens (1979) terms the 'quality of structuring' that describes the person-society relationship. The person is the mediate product of society and also, in acting, reproduces or potentially transforms that society. People can transform themselves by transforming the structures by which they are formed. (Sampson, 1989, p. 6, in Nightingale, 1994).

Symbolic interactionism also presents an alternative to the way in which post-structuralist and some discourse analytic approaches construct individuals in terms of passive subject positions or as the 'echoes' of prevailing discourses. In failing to provide a model of women as active users of discourse on the basis of the meaning such discourses have for them, post-structuralism and discourse analysis have reduced women to passive entities locked into social and historical discourses with no ability to challenge these discourses.

It should be pointed out here that, as indicated in section 2.2 above, there are many different forms of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherall, 1994). In addition to the work carried out by Potter and Wetherall (1987), the term covers cognitive linguistics,

the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g. Gilbert and Mulkey, 1984), as well as semiology or post-structuralism (Foucault, 1971; Hollway, 1989; Henriques et al., 1984). Different forms of discourse analysis are united by their focus on language and on written or spoken texts and hence this thesis can also be described as adopting a form of discourse analysis (see section 7 below).

In proposing a model of a self capable of active reflection upon social discourses and hence of challenging and resisting such discourses, the symbolic interactionist approach developed in this thesis draws upon Mead's conceptualisation of interaction, which as well as occurring between the individual and other people, also occurs with the self. Mead (1934) conceptualised this in terms of an 'internal' conversation with the self where the self interacts with itself on the basis of the interaction it has previously engaged in with others. There is thus 'symbolic replaying of the social nexus' (Smith, 1993).

'After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self...who still has himself as a companion, and is able to think and to converse with himself as he had communicated with others.' (Mead, 1934, p. 140).

Mead argued that in order to carry out this internal conversation, the individual has to regard herself as an object. Only then can she reflect upon herself and her experiences and actions. This is achieved by the individual taking the attitude towards herself which she has experienced others to take towards her as experienced in interaction with them. Thus the individual places herself in the position of others and views herself or acts towards herself from that position. This reflection upon oneself is seen as taking place in relation to the individual's social experiences and interactions which provide the individual with knowledge about social norms and expectations.

This leads us to Mead's conceptualisation of the self as a dialectic between the 'I' and the 'Me', which can be described as two phases of the self as a process. Hewitt (1984) describes these phases in the following way:

'I' designates the 'subject' phase of the process, in which people respond as acting subjects to objects or to the particular or generalised others in their situations. 'Me' labels the 'object' phase of the process, in which people respond to themselves as objects in their situations. (Hewitt, 1984, p. 72).

Thus according to Hewitt's interpretation of Mead's work, the 'I' represents the immediate, spontaneous, and impulsive aspect of conduct. Here the individual responds to an act as a subject who is becoming aware of the environment and the objects within it towards which action will be directed. As the individual becomes aware of her response to a situation the 'Me' phase of the self is begun. The 'Me' phase represents the reflective phase of the self as discussed above, where the self is viewed as an object. To be more



specific, the 'Me' is a source of reflection upon actions based on perceptions of how these actions will be viewed by others (as deduced from the process of social interaction). Cooley (1902) described the 'me' as the 'looking glass self' because it is our view of ourselves as others see us.

This model of a reflective self can be seen as providing a model of an agentic self which discursive approaches fail to provide. Whilst identity is seen as being initially derived from the culture and discourse in which the individual lives, symbolic interactionism provides a model of the self who is able to reflect upon social discourses and who thus has a unique identity who is able to reject or resist such discourses and hence who can be held responsible for her own actions.

This model of the person has implications for research practices and hence will be returned to in section six. First though it is necessary to look at feminist contributions to epistemology and methodology. This involves continuing the analysis of symbolic interactionism in order to look at its implications for a theory of society and of the gender power relations within that society.

## **5. FEMINIST THEORY AND METHOD: EXPERIENCE, POWER AND AGENCY**

This section of the chapter aims to develop a feminist perspective to the debates in contemporary social psychology outlined in the preceding sections. This involves a discussion of theory and methodology developed in feminist social psychology and their relationship to qualitative social psychology. It argues that symbolic interactionism and social constructionist versions of grounded theory can be profitably combined with feminist epistemology in order to develop a theoretical framework which brings together an emphasis on exploring the meanings contained within women's accounts of their experiences with a commitment to exploring and challenging the power differential existing in society and within the research process.

Although early research in feminist psychology argued for the development of a specifically feminist method, it is now generally agreed that there is no particular method which can be defined as intrinsically feminist (Griffin, 1995; Doherty, 1994). Thus rather than prescribing a particular methodology as intrinsically feminist there is an emphasis on choosing a research methodology and epistemology which meet certain feminist research criteria. These criteria are explored below.

## **5.1 Grounding Research in Female Experience**

One of the most fundamental features of research carried out from a feminist-standpoint is the emphasis placed on the importance of basing psychology on women's accounts of their own experiences (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Roberts, 1981). Such experiences are seen as valid in their own right rather than being assessed in relation to accounts of male experiences (Griffin, 1986, 1985; Gilligan, 1982). This emphasis arises out of the critique of mainstream psychology's bias towards women in terms of the way in which psychology has traditionally ignored or distorted female experience (Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Griffin, 1986, 1985; Stanley and Wise, 1983). The emphasis on experience in feminist research can thus be linked to a similar emphasis in qualitative approaches in psychology more generally (see Wilkinson, 1986).

The emphasis in feminist research on 'taking women's experiences seriously' implies a 'realist' epistemology where women's accounts are seen to be grounded in experience. Such an epistemology means that the relativist stance of discourse analysis is problematic within feminist research. A symbolic interactionist perspective with its emphasis on exploring the meanings contained in individual's accounts can be seen to be of more relevance here as can social constructionist grounded theory with its emphasis on building theory from people's accounts of their experiences.

As discussed in section 4.2, this thesis develops a theorisation of women's experience from a critical realist position. It problematises the exploration of experience at the purely descriptive level as suggested in some feminist approaches (Stanley and Wise, 1983) and argues that women's accounts of their experiences need to be theorised as constructions brought about in a process of interaction between researcher and participant but which nevertheless have some root in the participants' own experiences and interpretations of the world (see also Chapter Three). This approach has much in common with the social constructionist reformulation of grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990) with its emphasis on reflexivity as an alternative to the 'naive induction' implied in the original formulation of the theory (see section 6 below).

## **5.2 A Focus on Reflexivity**

A second feature of feminist social psychology is its focus on functional and personal reflexivity. This emphasis arises out of the feminist critique of positivist psychology and its claims to produce objective and value free knowledge. The feminist critique of the invisibility and distortion of female experience in mainstream psychology has shown that its claims to be value free and 'gender neutral' are false. Bias has been shown to enter the research process at the level of topic selection (McHugh, Koeske and Frieze, 1986), where topics relating to women's experiences are not explored and hence remain

invisible; at the level of theory, with theories of women being presented within a purely biological and reproductive framework (Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Howell, 1981; Barnett and Baruch, 1978); at the level of research design and subject selection, such that supposedly universal theories are developed from all male samples (e.g. Griffin, 1986; Gilligan, 1982); and at the level of interpretation where one's analysis borrows from and legitimates popular mythology relating to women's lives and women's psychology (Nicolson, 1993b, 1992).

From this perspective it can be seen that research represents the validation of the concerns of the dominant groups in society (Griffin, 1995; Wilkinson, 1986) so that what counts as 'knowledge' is structured around unequal power relations in society based around gender, class, sexuality and age (Stanley and Wise, 1983). This awareness in feminist research can be linked to Foucault's (1973) concept of 'knowledge cycles' which links scientific knowledge claims, popular knowledge and social power. Thus in an analysis of female sexuality, Nicolson (1993b) draws on the work of Foucault to theorise the way in which scientists produce knowledge in the midst of their historically situated, everyday assumptions about reality, which are influenced by the media and the vested interest of the most dominant in that society (see also Nicolson, 1992).

This awareness of the social construction of knowledge and the way in which this influences the researcher leads to the emphasis in feminist research on both functional and personal reflexivity. Functional reflexivity involves the feminist researcher in critical reflection on the assumptions, biases and values present in the production of psychological knowledge. Personal reflexivity involves reflection upon the way in which one's own interests, goal and values influence the research process. This emphasis on reflexivity can again be linked to current approaches within social psychology (Smith, 1993), particularly interpretative approaches such as social constructionist grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990).

### **5.3 Power and Agency: Exploring and Challenging the Influence of Power Asymmetries on Women's Lives.**

Feminist research involves a commitment to challenging and changing power differentials (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986). This involves a commitment to research which investigates gender power relations and which attempts to identify the influence of such power asymmetries on women's experiences. In addition there is a commitment to the attempts to change the oppressive nature of women's experiences through this type of research. Hence in having feminist aims, this research aims to explore women's experiences of body size in relation to social discourses surrounding women which are theorised as being structured around gender and power.

The emphasis on changing power differentials in feminist research implies a realist ontology. Here power asymmetries are treated as 'givens', they represent an objective reality within which women live their everyday lives (Doherty, 1994; Jackson, 1992). The relativist ontology of discursive psychology conflicts with the basic feminist premise that certain inequalities exist in society (Jackson, 1992). Here women's accounts of inequality or oppression in their lives are treated as one discourse among many which are all accorded similar status in terms of their claims of representing the 'reality' of the social world. The use of a 'inequality discourse' would be viewed as a functional or rhetorical device based on the context of the account rather than representing an actual experience of inequality for that particular woman. Clearly this presents problems in a perspective which wishes to highlight and challenge oppressive social practices.

The model of subjectivity developed in discursive psychology is also problematic in relation to a perspective concerned with challenging inequality and oppression (Smith, 1993). As discussed in section 3.2 above, the conceptualisation of the subject as passively positioned between discourses fails to provide a theory of an agentic self capable of challenging and resisting oppressive discourses and hence bringing about social change. Similarly however much of feminist research has rendered the subject passive in its use of the concept of internalisation (see section 3.1). Thus it is clear that a different conceptualisation of the subject is needed in order to theorise an active subject who is both influenced by and capable of resisting the inequalities in society.

This thesis draws on a symbolic interactionist approach to provide a theory of a subject who actively reflects upon discourse and hence who is capable of challenging and resisting social discourses. It should be recognised however that in emphasising the role of self conscious reflection and agency, symbolic interactionism could present a model of the individual as capable of free choice, where this choice is equally available to all individuals. Clearly there is a need to problematise the idea that individuals are able to triumph over any oppression simply by reflection upon, and resistance of, social discourses. This is illustrated in the following quote from Griffin:

Individuals are both determined by, and potential determinants of social forces. We are not simply passive reflections of stereotyped images and ideas, or acquiescent victims of oppressive social conditions. Conversely, we are not all active 'social agents', able to make 'free choices' and rise above the most harrowing social conditions through sheer effort of willpower and 'individual resourcefulness' .. Qualitative cultural analysis tries to maintain that tension between the individual as an active social agent, the product of a given 'life history', who is capable of making positive choices and decisions, and the individual as shaped by specific social structures and ideologies. (Griffin, 1986, p. 186)

Thus whilst emphasising the active rather than passive nature of human subjectivity, symbolic interactionism could be accused of failing to take account of the fact that all

people are not equal in a complex society and that different people therefore have a greater or lesser ability to resist discourses. This is part of the way in which symbolic interactionism fails to provide a discussion of either gender power relations or other power relations in society. In part this is a result of the fact that symbolic interactionism was developed in the early part of the twentieth century when feminist ideas were not prevalent. On another level, however, the neglect of gender in the symbolic interactionist perspective relates to Mead's conceptualisation of a unified society with shared social and moral values. This can be seen in his concept of the 'generalised other' (Hewitt, 1984; Leonard, 1982; Mead, 1934).

Symbolic interactionism presents a micro-sociological theory which is concerned with the way in which meanings are negotiated within small scale interactions. In terms of a model of a wider society beyond local interactions between individuals, Mead developed the concept of the 'generalised other' in an attempt to theorise how the wider values of society were incorporated into subjectivity. The generalised other is defined as the position which individuals take up when they take into account perspectives which are shared by societies or groups as a whole (Hewitt, 1984). Mead (1934) proposed that it is through our interactions with others that we come to learn these shared values. By this process the self incorporates the moral standards of the society of which the individual is a member.

Mead's concept of the generalised other presents a society defined in terms of certain social norms formed through a process of public consensus. Such a conceptualisation presents a picture of a 'monolithic and unitary social order' (Leonard, 1982, p. 74) rather than a complex differentiated society made up of class, age and gender relations. Symbolic interactionism has thus been criticised for its failure to provide a view of the way in which larger social and structural forces operate at the level of society or how such forces influence the construction of subjective meanings (Giddens, 1979). Thus in focusing on the interaction between individuals and the way in which such interaction produces meanings, symbolic interactionism does not provide a model of how class, gender, sexuality, age or ethnicity influence the subjective meanings which individuals attribute to their experiences.

The concept of consensus implicit in Mead's theory of the generalised other is untenable within a feminist perspective which considers society to be made up of power relations characterised by gender or social class. Symbolic interactionism fails to take account of the fact that it is within the power of certain dominant others in our society to define the social meanings within the world and hence to influence the incorporation of these dominant meanings into subjectivity. Such a viewpoint can be seen to draw on the feminist critique of scientific knowledge as objective and value free (Griffin, 1995;

Nicolson, 1993b, 1992; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986). This draws on the idea of knowledge cycles (Foucault, 1973) where certain socially and historically situated structures of meaning (discourses) are dominant in a particular society because they reflect the interests of the powerful in that society. Such discourses influence the individual by a cycle of knowledge between scientists and practitioners, who represent the powerful in a society and who have the power to define what is knowledge about society and the people in it. These ideas are then propagated by the media which in turn influences the self cognitions of the individual.

This thesis argues that symbolic interactionism can be of use in research from a feminist stand-point if it attempts to incorporate these criticisms into its epistemology. This incorporation could take the form of reinterpreting Mead's concept of the 'generalised other' as representing the dominant social values present in any society based around the concept of power knowledge cycles. Thus rather than representing a single, unified society, Mead's writings could be used to represent the domination of particular social values, including those surrounding gender, which reflect the operation of power relations in society. In addition the use of a symbolic interactionist perspective provides a theory of how such power relations are incorporated into subjectivity through its conceptualisation of social interaction. Thus there is a theory of how gender power relations are incorporated into subjectivity through individuals' immediate relationships in which gender power relationships are embodied and experienced.

#### **5.4 Power in the Research Process: Developing a Feminist Method**

In addition to carrying out research which examines and challenges the power asymmetries affecting women's lives at the broad societal level, feminist research is committed to the reduction of inequality and power differentials in the research process itself (Griffin, 1995; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Harding, 1987). Feminist researchers (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1981) have presented a critique of the way in which participants are objectified in relation to the power of the researcher in her position of the all-knowing scientific 'expert' (see Chapter Three). The relationship between the researcher and the participant is identified as representing a power relationship which mimics those present in society, positioning the woman as powerless and the researcher as powerful. In presenting oneself as a 'researcher' for example, one is given the power to ask questions about the participant's experiences (which are often of a personal and / or upsetting nature) whilst being granted legitimate exclusion from being asked questions about oneself (Oakley, 1981). In addition because the participants' experiences have been given in the context of 'scientific research' they can then be taken away as 'data' to be used for analysis, discussion or publication. This involves the objectification of women who are viewed as 'data points' rather than living, feeling and thinking individuals.

The feminist critique of the interview process is also of relevance here. This critique identifies the way in which the positivist method espouses objectivity within interviews and asserts instead that interviews are fundamentally specific kinds of social interactions and are not simply data collection exercises between a data provider (the participant) and a data collector (the researcher) (Oakley, 1981). The feminist critique identifies the need to view the research process as a subjective process, involving a process of interpretation on the part of the researcher rather than as an objective exercise in gathering data. This critique can be seen as paralleling the debate in social constructionist grounded theory with its identification of the need for reflexivity in the research process, incorporating an analysis of the researcher's experiences, philosophy and general belief system into the analysis of data (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). Feminist researchers have similarly identified the need for reflexive analysis in research which arises out of their critique of the subjectivity of the interview process as well as their critique of the objective nature of scientific knowledge (Griffin, 1995).

In the main studies of the thesis attempts are made to produce power differentials in the research process by a number of means. Firstly, rather than carrying out the interviews from the standpoint of a passive and neutral observer, attempts were made to provide the participant with information about myself. This involved basic information about why I was carrying out the research and where I was based. This also allowed the participant to seek redress for any problem they encountered in participating in the research. Additionally I sometimes shared my own experiences with the participants, although the primary focus of the interviews was to provide the participants with the opportunity of exploring their own experiences. This process is explored in more detail in the data chapters.

Secondly, power differentials were minimised in the main studies of the thesis through an interview design which enabled the participants to explore what they considered as relevant to the research. As well as ensuring that the research explored subjective meanings in common with the aims of the symbolic interactionist and grounded theory approach, this also has the more specific aim of empowering women through enabling them to talk about their experiences in a way that they may not previously have been able to.

## **6. METHODOLOGY AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST GROUNDED THEORY**

This section discusses the methodology employed in the main studies of the thesis. The specific methodology of each of the main studies are explored in Chapters Six, Seven and

Eight. This section discussed the theoretical framework behind this methodology. This involves a discussion of the role of the original version of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a research tool, which provides a specific method for analysing participants' accounts. However there are a number of criticisms of the epistemological assumptions contained in grounded theory which have been acknowledged and developed in the recently developed social constructionist version of grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). These criticisms focus on the failure of grounded theory to consider the role of subjectivity in the research process, where subjectivity is conceptualised as entering the research process on three different levels. Research is firstly influenced by the researcher's subjectivity, which rejects the assumption that the researcher is passive in the research process so that theoretical categories simply 'emerge' from the data without any input from the researcher. It is argued that there is a need for reflexivity in the research process. Secondly, the research process is influenced by the participants' subjectivity which is constructed in relation to cultural discourses. There is therefore a need for deconstructive analysis to highlight the hidden meanings in participants' accounts, rather than take them at face value. Thirdly, the research process is influenced by the interplay of the subjectivities of researcher and participants because the interview is an interactive process.

### **6.1 Grounded Theory: A Method for Research based on Women's Accounts.**

This thesis draws on a grounded theory approach (Bryman, 1988; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a way of developing a theoretical analysis of the subjective meanings of body size and food for women across the life span from women's own accounts of their experiences. The original version of grounded theory provides a method of building theory which is based on individual's experiences, which potentially avoids the traditional distortion of women's experiences in mainstream psychological research (Henwood, 1993).

Grounded theory can be seen as a useful tool within qualitative social psychology because of its provision of a definite and precise set of steps for carrying out qualitative research. These steps begin with the proviso that the researcher carries out her research without any strong prior theory about the subject to be investigated:

Delineation of theoretical ideas is usually viewed as a phase that occurs during or at the end of field-work, rather than being a precursor to it. The prior specification of a theory tends to be disfavoured because of the possibility of introducing a premature closure on the issues to be investigated, as well as the possibility of the theoretical constructs departing excessively from the views of the participants' (Bryman, 1988, p. 81).



This means grounded theorists begin with general research questions rather than precisely defined pre-conceived hypotheses. Thus in this thesis the research questions were developed along the lines of ‘what are the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women across the life span and how do these subjective meanings relate to the social and historical discourses structured around gender and power?’ rather than being in terms of questions about specific meanings.

Having gathered discursive data which is not structured by prior theory, grounded theory defines data analysis as proceeding through allowing an ‘array of concepts and categories to emerge from systematic observation of a data corpus’ (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, p. 103). This involves the researcher working through the interview transcripts to generate a number of low level concepts which are then labelled. Here then there is a difference between grounded theory, where the data defines the categories into which it is allocated, and traditional content analysis (e.g. Tunaley, Slade and Duncan, 1993) where the researcher allocates data to predefined, mutually exclusive categories (see Chapter One).

Following the allocation of data to low level categories which contain one or more instances of data, the researcher seeks to develop a ‘conceptually rich understanding, and systematic integration of the low-level categories into a coherent theoretical account’ (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, p. 103). This involves a process of constant comparative analysis where the researcher looks for similarities and differences in the data in order to link categories together into a theoretical account (Charmaz, 1990).

This thesis draws on grounded theory as a method of analysing the interviews carried out in Studies One, Two and Three. As will be discussed in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, this involved the use of a computer-based methodology (Morse, 1992) which allowed themes to be built up through assigning passages from the individual transcripts into theme files. Each theme was then further refined through comparing all passages within each theme file. At the same time, however, this analysis was carried out with a recognition of the many criticisms which have been levelled at Glaser and Strauss’s original formulation of grounded theory. These criticisms centre around the implicit assumptions contained within Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) methodological framework. These criticism are explored below.

## **6.2 Analysis and The Role of the Researcher: Subjective versus Objective Research and the Need for Reflexivity**

The most fundamental criticism which has been directed at grounded theory concerns the emphasis placed on carrying out analysis with no prior theory about the subject of research. This implies that the researcher is passive in the research process so that

theoretical categories simply 'emerge' from the data without any input from the researcher. The implication of this is that research proceeds by a process of induction where the researcher is conceptualised as a blank slate or 'tabula rasa' (Bulmer, 1979, p. 667; see also Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992) who is nothing more than a passive medium through which theory emerges.

Such a conceptualisation of the research process has clear similarities to the positivist paradigm with its emphasis on the objectivity of the hypothetico-deductive method whereby the researcher carries out impartial, value-free observation and measurement in tightly controlled experiments (see section 2 above). Grounded theory can be seen to parallel the use of context-free experiments in psychology as discussed in Harré and Secord's (1972) critique. Thus grounded theory suggests that it is possible to research an external reality which is unaltered by the observer's presence.

As discussed in previous sections, such a view of research in either the context of grounded theory or positivism is problematic because knowledge production is inherently related to the social, historical and cultural contexts in which it is based and because the researcher herself conducts research in the midst of these contexts which shape her own subjectivity and hence the way she carries out research (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995; 1992; Smith, 1993; Charmaz, 1990; see also Chapter Three). Hence in developing theory from participants' accounts rather than the mere 'mirroring' or description of these accounts, the researcher is involved in an interpretative process based on her own subjectivity formed in relation to the world.

These criticisms have been developed by recent advocates of grounded theory who have reformulated Glaser and Strauss's (1967) approach into what is termed 'social constructionist grounded theory' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). In this approach the researcher is conceptualised as an active agent whose subjectivity shapes both the process and product of research. Thus Henwood and Pidgeon state that social constructionist grounded theory:

.. acknowledges the ways in which research activity *inevitably* shapes and constitutes the object of inquiry; the researcher and researched are characterised as interdependent in the social process of research. (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, p. 106).

There is thus a recognition of the researcher's contribution to the research process. This results in a commitment to building personal reflexivity into the analysis. Reflexivity involves a process of conscious reflection on the contribution of the researcher's philosophical stance, experiences, values and priorities to the research (Charmaz, 1990). This type of reflexivity needs to take place in relation to the design of the study, data collection (the research interview) and the analysis of data. A fine balance is therefore

obtained between recognising that the researcher has a *perspective* from which researcher seek to build their analyses without merely applying this perspective to the data.

This [social constructionist] stance implies a delicate balance between possessing a grounding in the discipline and pushing it further. .. When wedded to concepts in their disciplines researchers may neither see beyond them nor use them in new ways. For example [a concept may only be applied] as given in the literature instead of using it to ask new questions or to form new leads (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1165).

Henwood and Pidgeon (1992), drawing on the work of Bulmer (1979), refer to this as the 'flip-flop' between data and interpretation. Thus the emergence of a theoretical account is seen 'as a result of a constant interplay between data and conceptualisation, a 'flip-flop' between ideas and research experience.' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, p. 104).

### **6.3 Grounded Theory and Feminist Psychology: Deconstruction versus Taking Accounts at 'Face Value'**

In addition to building reflexivity into the analysis of accounts, social constructionist grounded theory also advocates the use of deconstruction in qualitative analysis, so that the hidden meanings contained within participants' accounts are analysed. This perspective has been explored in Chapter Three and is discussed here in relation to taking a feminist perspective in research.

As discussed in section 5 above, this thesis is carried out from a feminist standpoint and hence aims to explore female experience as well as attempting to reduce the power differentials present in the research process. These aims have been interpreted by some feminist researchers as implying that women's accounts should be taken at 'face value' and be accepted non-problematically as the 'true' account of their experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1983). This approach has been rejected by other feminist researchers, however, who adopt a more critical position to the analysis of women's accounts (Henwood, 1993; Dryden, 1989). These different positions have to some extent been explored in the Pilot Study of the thesis (Chapter Three) as part of the development of a critique of the 'respondent validation' approach, where interview analysis was taken back to the participants in order to ensure it was readily recognisable by them.

The uncritical acceptance of participants' accounts can be challenged in relation to the claims that such a method reduces the power differentials in research. It was argued in the Pilot Study that research continues to take place in the context of a power relationship between researcher and participant so that the idea that taking one's analysis back to one's participants reduces this power differential is questionable. The researcher continues to

have the 'interpretative privilege' and the participant continues to regard the researcher's view as that of an expert regardless of whether this agrees with her interpretation or not.

A second criticism which can be made of the acceptance of women's accounts at 'face value' relates to the idea that simple descriptions of women's accounts represents all there is to be obtained from this account. In relation to this, a dilemma for feminist researchers occurs in instances when their interpretations do not match the woman's interpretation of her experiences. As Condor (1986) notes, not all women view their experiences in relation to feminist ideas, which introduces the conflict between valuing women's accounts and hence sticking to the strict analysis of experience through participants' eyes (which may involve an interpretation of experience in non-feminist terms) and attempting to carry out an analysis of women's subordination. It may be that women view their experiences in personal rather than structural or feminist terms. Thus in her use of a grounded theory approach Currie (1988) found that women involved in making reproductive decisions (whether to have a baby or not) saw their decisions as being shaped by personal and relational factors rather than in terms of structural factors. Similarly Dryden's (1989) research on the subjective experiences of marriage, found inequalities within marriage to be explained in personal rather than social terms.

This thesis argues that rather than taking women's accounts of their experiences wholly at face value the analysis process must be understood as involving a process of deconstruction of women's accounts to highlight hidden meanings and discourses (see Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995; Henwood, 1993; Dryden, 1989). This does not involve a failure to take women's accounts seriously, but involves taking the analysis of their experiences to a deeper level, to deconstruct the language which women use to describe their experiences and to relate this to other structures of meaning. Nor does deconstruction mean that the researcher is 'pulling rank' on the participant in asserting that her representation of the participants experiences are more valid than the participants own representation (although it is acknowledged that such power differentials do exist within research).

#### **6.4 The Interview Process and Realist versus Relative Accounts**

In considering the role of subjectivity in the research process, social constructionist grounded theory also acknowledges the interactive nature of research. According to this view, the research interview can be conceptualised as a social encounter between two individuals, where the interplay between the individuals' subjectivities influences the research process. This means the interview will be influenced by the individual characteristics of both the researcher and the participant in terms of the social class of both parties as well as their gender, age, sexuality and ethnic background. In addition, in taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, this thesis conceptualises the interaction

between researcher and participant as resulting in a reconstruction of the meanings with which a participant interprets her experiences during the course of the interview.

In taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, this thesis conceptualises the research process as an encounter between two reflexive agents both of whom construct the meanings of experiences and events prior to and during the interview. Both the researcher and the participant enter the interview with existing identities formed by interaction with others and the self. This means that both the researcher's and the participant's pre-existing identity will shape the research project. In addition the account which the participant gives relates to the reconstruction of her identity (or subjectivity) in the interview process because of the process of interaction within which the individual is involved. Thus the use of symbolic interactionism with its model of the dynamically constructed self formed through a process of interaction implies that the meanings discussed in a research interview represent meanings which have been constructed as the result of previous interactions with self and others but which are also reflexively constructed over the course of the interview itself.

This can be more clearly explicated if one looks at the role of inconsistency in individuals' accounts. Discourse analysis views inconsistencies in accounts as proof of the relative and functional nature of accounts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In this thesis, inconsistencies are conceptualised as being partly related to these features, but they also represent the way in which identities are reconstructed through the interview process. Inconsistencies can thus relate to the reflection which an individual engages in in the course of the interview. This reflection is based both upon the context in which the individual finds herself but also upon the individual's personal and biographical experiences which have constructed her subjectivity prior to the interview. The participant is thus active in her construction of her account, she does not passively position herself in relation to discourses according to their functional value but actively reflects upon what she is saying and what she has said in the interview to construct her account of herself. Smith (1993) describes this process in the following way:

I am advocating a form of analysis which addresses the simultaneous presentation and production, representation and reconstruction of identities or persons during the research encounter. In practice this means interrogating transcripts of research interviews with a series of questions, for example: how might this have been affected by the ethnic differences between researcher and respondent? Can we see indicators of the respondents' attempts to account for themselves and how is this received by the interviewer? What other discourses are the respondents drawing on in telling their story? What work have they done before and during the interview in order to construct their own identity project from these discourses? The aim then is to recognise how persons and identities have an existence prior to the research project, an existence which the research encounter is intended to document, and that the research meeting itself then constitutes a contribution to the ongoing reconstruction of those identities.' (Smith, 1993, p. 8).

From Smith's analysis we gain a sense of the reflexivity involved in the interaction of the interview. The reflection which goes on in the interview occurs for both the researcher and the participant with both parties reflecting upon the accounts given in the interview. For the participant, this reflection involves a reflection upon her past experiences, upon what she has said in the context of the interview, and also on the socially defined markers about appropriate interaction in the interview situation between the specific type of participant (herself) and researcher. For the researcher, there is a reflection upon what the participant is saying, reflection upon her own experiences, reflection upon the aims of the project, and reflection upon appropriate interaction in the interview situation. Again this may vary throughout the interview as the interaction between researcher and researched changes the meanings of the research encounter.

The research process can therefore be conceptualised as involving at least four forms of subjectivity (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995). Firstly, participants' accounts involve their own tacit and declared understandings, which are formed prior to the interview through a process of interaction and reflection. Secondly, the research process is shaped by researchers' perspectives and interpretations and hence there is a need to incorporate reflexivity into the research. Thirdly, both the researcher and participants' subjectivities are constructed in relation to cultural meaning systems which inform and link participants' and researchers' understandings, and which are interrelated with relations of power. Fourthly, acts of warranting particular interpretations as valid within social and institutional networks. All these factors imply that whilst valuing participants accounts of experience and conceptualising them as having some root in reality, to take them at face value would be to deny the complexity and multi-levelled structure of the subjective meanings contained in participants accounts.

This analysis of subjectivity in the research process results in a critical realist perspective. It is realist because it asserts that individuals' accounts will bear some resemblance to real events that have happened. However it is critically realist because it recognises that the meanings contained in participants accounts are constructed and reconstructed within the interview and that analysis involves a interpretative and subjective process on the behalf of the researcher. Thus there is a move beyond a strictly realist ontology to a theory which emphasises the representational (or realist) nature of accounts but which simultaneously views accounts as representing the constructive nature of subjectivity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and methodological framework in which the main studies of the thesis are located. This involves a combination of symbolic interactionism, social constructionist grounded theory and feminist epistemology and methodology. The following points have been made:

- This thesis explores women's relationship to body size and food in terms of the subjective meanings of body size and food for women across the life span. It adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective, where the meanings contained in individuals' accounts of their experiences are conceptualised as being derived from social interaction as well as interaction with the self. This represents an alternative to mainstream psychology which is located within the positivist paradigm and hence fails to explore the understandings which individuals have of their experiences, or of the meanings with which they interpret these experiences.
- This thesis conceptualises the subjective meanings of body size and food as being constructed in relation to social discourses which are incorporated into subjectivity through interaction and reflection upon discourses. A symbolic interactionist perspective is adopted which provides an alternative to social psychological (and some feminist) theories of subjectivity which conceptualise individuals as passively internalising sociocultural factors. There is also a rejection of the social determinism of post-structuralism and discourse analysis, which conceptualise individuals as positioning themselves between different social discourses in a given conversational context, but where the use of particular discourses does not relate to the meanings which they have for the individual. A symbolic interactionist perspective provides a theorisation of an active and reflective subject, who is influenced by social discourses but is able to reflect upon and challenge these discourses. Individuals are thus conceptualised as using discourses on the basis of the meanings they have for them in the context of their lives and previous experiences.

Although this thesis is critical of discourse analytic approaches (e.g. such as the type of discourse analysis carried out by Potter and Wetherall (1987)), it can be described as adopting a form of 'discourse analysis'. Here the aim is to explore discourses from within a symbolic interactionist framework, with an emphasis on the active and reflective use of discourse. The term 'discourse' is defined in terms of an extra-locally organised framework of meanings which prescribe individuals' conduct and identities. The normative standards within these frameworks are constructed in relation to social institutions and relationships (see Henwood, 1993). The subjective meanings of body size and food are thus explored in relation to the discourses

surrounding body size, female identity and ageing (see Chapters Two and Five) in terms of exploring how such discourses come to have individual meaning for women.

- The thesis adopts a position of critical realism, which takes account of the meanings which individuals attach to their experiences and conceptualises these meanings as rooted in a reality of experience. Thus there is a primary emphasis on the content of these meanings rather than the functions which they have in the context of individuals' accounts. This realist ontology forms part of the thesis's commitment to a feminist perspective which emphasises the importance of exploring women's experiences and aims to challenge the 'reality' of power asymmetries existing for women in society. At the same time however there is a recognition that this does not necessarily involve taking participants' accounts at face value. Qualitative analysis needs to involve a process of deconstruction where the hidden meanings contained within participants' accounts are analysed.
- Whilst relating individuals' accounts to a reality of experience, the research process is also conceptualised as subjective, social and interactive. This involves a focus on the role of the researcher's subjectivity in research, where the researcher's philosophical stance, experiences and values are theorised as influencing the research process. This results in a commitment to building personal reflexivity into the analysis. The interview is identified as an interactive process, which takes place between two reflexive agents. Whilst the interview is influenced by existing identities of the researcher and the participant, the accounts which participants give of their experiences are also reconstructed over the course of the interview interaction.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE MAIN STUDIES OF THE THESIS:**

#### **AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO BODY SIZE AND FOOD ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN**

##### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews previous literature on women's relationship to body size and food across the life span. It provides an introduction to the three main studies of the thesis (Studies One, Two and Three) which explore the meanings surrounding body size and food for women across the life span (see Chapters Six, Seven and Eight). These studies involve three different age groups of women including sixteen to eighteen year olds (Study One); thirty to forty five year olds (Study Two); and women over sixty years old (Study Three).

The first part of the chapter outlines the age focus of mainstream psychological research on women's dissatisfaction with their bodies. The majority of this research has focused upon the experiences of women in adolescence or early adulthood, although more recent studies have explored middle and late adulthood. Young women are theorised as being dissatisfied with their bodies because of the importance of sexual relationships in their lives and the negative effects which pubertal changes have on body size. The focus on adolescence and early adulthood implies that older women are unconcerned about sexual relationships and sexual attractiveness and they do not experience social or relational pressure about these issues. In addition it constructs the meanings of body size and food solely in terms of sexuality and fails to acknowledge the complexity of these issues in relation to women's roles as wives and mothers.

The second part of the chapter explores the cultural discourses surrounding sexual attractiveness and sexuality for women at different stages of the life span. Social discourses define female sexual attractiveness in terms of a young and thin ideal, which conceptualises women beyond early adulthood as decreasing in physical beauty. In addition, women's lives are conceptualised in terms of a chronology of events, so that sexuality is again defined as a young women's issue where it is involved in 'catching a man'. By contrast women who become mothers are categorised as pure and asexual as part of the discourse defining the 'good mother' as caring for others and therefore putting

the needs of others before those of herself. Postmenopausal women are portrayed in terms of a loss of sexuality as part of the cultural discourses conceptualising older women's lives in terms of general loss and decline.

The third part of the chapter analyses the role of cohort factors in the meanings of body size and food across the life span. This firstly involves a consideration of changes in socially and historically constructed body ideals, involving the increasingly thin ideal of the last three decades. Secondly it involves a consideration of changes in cultural discourses surrounding the female role, in relation to the influence of feminism in the twentieth century.

The fourth part of the chapter explores the meaning of body size and food in a wider context than women's concerns with sexuality and sexual attractiveness. It is argued that an analysis of the meanings of body size and food for women across the life span needs to take account of the role which food plays in women's roles as wives and mothers. Women are involved in providing food for others whilst denying themselves food in order to lose weight. Here then the meanings of body size and food are conceptualised as being constructed in relation to different ideologies of femininity as women attempt to be both 'good lovers' and 'good mothers'.

The final part of the chapter discusses the research questions of the three main studies of the thesis. Based on the literature reviewed in this chapter, these studies shift the conceptualisation of the meanings of body size and food from an emphasis on adolescent sexuality to an exploration of the complex relationship between social constructions of femininity and social discourses surrounding ageing, sexuality and women's role within the family.

## **2. BODY SIZE RESEARCH AND THE EMPHASIS ON YOUNG WOMEN**

A review of mainstream psychological research on women's dissatisfaction with their body size was presented in Chapter Two of the thesis. The age focus of this research is discussed here in order to provide an overview of previous research on women's relationship to body size and food across the life span.

Body size dissatisfaction research has traditionally focused on adolescence and early adulthood. The vast majority of studies have been carried out on either high school (Tolman and Debold, 1994; Koff and Rierdan, 1991; Attie and Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Cohn et al., 1987; Dwyer, Feldman and Mayer, 1967; Nylander, 1971) or university students (Harmatz, 1987; Mable, Balance and Galgan, 1986; Mintz and Betz, 1986;

Fallon and Rozin, 1985; Lerner and Karabenick, 1974; Lerner, Karabenick and Stuart, 1973). In more recent years, the limited age focus of body size research has been recognised within the field (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984) and a small number of studies have been carried out on body size dissatisfaction across the life span. However these studies have still tended to concentrate on middle adulthood (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Rozin and Fallon, 1988; Rackley, Warren and Bird, 1988), with relatively few studies exploring late adulthood and old age (Mindham, 1994; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Janelli, 1986; Hetherington and Burnett, in press).

The neglect of women at middle and late adulthood in body size dissatisfaction research reflects a wider neglect of the experiences of these age groups of women in psychological research. In recognition of the traditional emphasis on childhood and adolescence in both developmental psychology and psychoanalytic theory, there is now extensive research on psychological development across the life span (Baltes, 1980; Gergen, 1980; Hetherington and Baltes, 1980; Neugarten, 1977). However this research has typically ignored the variety and complexity of women's experiences (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Nicolson, 1993c; Arber and Ginn, 1991) through a focus on the experiences of men (Gould, 1978; Levinson et al., 1978; Vaillant, 1977). As in other areas of psychology (Griffin, 1985; Wilkinson, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), data from all male samples has been used to produce universal and gender-blind models of life span development (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Unger and Crawford, 1992; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Gergen, 1990; Barnett and Baruch, 1978).

The focus on young women in body size research relates to the conceptualisation of adolescence as a time of increased concerns about sexuality and sexual attractiveness (Lerner and Karabenick, 1974; Lerner and Karabenick and Stuart, 1973; Clifford, 1971; see Freedman, 1984). Adolescent women are theorised as being particularly vulnerable to feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies because of the importance attached to establishing sexual relationships for this age group (Ussher, 1989; Freedman, 1984). importance attached to women's physical attractiveness in establishing sexual relationships (Ussher, 1989; see Chapter Two) means that there is a great emphasis on the size of the body. However, the emerging sexuality of adolescent girls and the increased emphasis on physical appearance coincides with changes in girls' bodies which result in a movement away from the current thin ideal of female beauty (see Chapter Two) and an increase in dissatisfaction with the body.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the thin ideal defines female beauty in terms of the body of a prepubescent girl whose body has not yet developed through the changes of puberty (Brownmiller, 1984; Chernin, 1983; Dickenson, 1983; Sontag, 1972). As girls move

into adolescence their bodies increase both in height and in the relative amount of body fat. The rapid gain in body fat which is deposited around the breasts, hips and buttocks is known as the female 'pubertal fat spurt' (Unger and Crawford, 1992). These increases in fat are thought to be necessary for sexual maturation because they are linked to the onset of menstruation (Frisch, 1983). Such a fat spurt is not seen in pubertal boys, who grow in height and in muscle. Thus whilst prepubescent girls and boys have similar proportions of body fat, adult women have twice as much body fat as adult men (Warren, 1983).

The widespread concern which adolescent girls feel about their bodies and their eating habits (Tolman and Debold, 1994; Koff and Rierdan, 1991; Attie and Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Cohn et al., 1987; Dwyer, Feldman and Mayer, 1967; Nylander, 1971) is theorised as relating to the divergence between girls' bodies and the contemporary ideal of thinness (Wooley and Wooley, 1980). This means that adolescent girls experience the changes in their bodies as negative and problematic, where the development of the characteristics of a sexually mature woman are regarded as 'too fat' and therefore as unattractive. The negative experience of pubertal changes for girls can be contrasted to boy's experiences, where changes in the shape and size of the body are experienced as positive and self-affirming (Surrey, 1991). The increased muscle associated with the male adolescent growth spurt is valued for its enhancement of the strength and effectiveness of the body (Freedman, 1984; Lerner and Karabenick, 1974; Lerner and Karabenick and Stuart, 1973). This highlights the different values attached to women's and men's bodies, where the male body is valued for its 'action in the world' and the female body is valued for its decorative value and for its ability to attract the attention and approval of others (Freedman, 1984).

This thesis acknowledges the feelings of dissatisfaction which surround body size for adolescent women and explores these feelings through a focus on women in late adolescence (sixteen to eighteen year olds) in Study One (Chapter Six). In addition however, this thesis asserts that a focus on the experiences of young women constructs concern with body size and food solely as a 'young women's issue' (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990). The focus on young women has resulted in a failure to explore the importance of body size and food at other stages of the life span and is based on the assumption that the pressure which young women experience in relation to their bodies does not affect women of other ages. It is assumed that the dissatisfaction which women feel with their body size is limited to adolescence and early adulthood so that women who are older than this do not feel dissatisfied with their bodies.

Recent research has shown that these assumptions about body size dissatisfaction are not justified. The small number of studies looking at body size beyond early adulthood have

found that women continue to be concerned about their body size in mid- and later life (Mindham, 1994; Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Rozin and Fallon, 1988) and that women continue to be less satisfied with their bodies than men (Altabe and Thompson, 1993; Tiggemann, 1992; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Rozin and Fallon, 1988). In addition, body size and eating concerns have been found to be prevalent in preadolescent children, with children as young as nine feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and dieting to lose weight (Hill, Oliver and Rogers, 1992). These findings suggest that the ageist assumptions in body size research are not justified and that further investigation of the meanings of body size across the life span needs to be carried out.

A further implication of the emphasis on adolescent women in body size dissatisfaction research is that body size is constructed solely in terms of sexual attractiveness and sexual relationships. This arises from the conceptualisation of adolescence as a time when sexual relationships are particularly important. An analysis of the meanings of body size for women across the life span needs to acknowledge that these meanings may not be solely related to these issues. This thesis asserts that as well as an analysis of the meanings of body size and food in relation to women's sexuality and sexual relationships, there needs to be an analysis of women's roles as wives and mothers which can result in conflict around body size for women. This conflict centres around the different meanings of food in women's roles as 'lovers' and 'mothers' and the way in which this results in problems with women's attempts to lose weight through dieting. These issues are explored in section 3 and 4 of this chapter in an attempt to conceptualise the meanings of body size and food for women across the life span.

### **3. BODY SIZE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS AND SEXUALITY ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN**

This section of the chapter argues that the conceptualisation of body size as an issue which only concerns young women (see section 2 above) can be related to the cultural discourses surrounding women's sexual attractiveness and sexuality across the life span. The emphasis on young women can thus be related to the fact that cultural female beauty ideals define attractiveness in terms of a thin and young ideal, so that women's sexual attractiveness can be defined as declining after early adulthood. In addition the construction of women's lives in terms of a chronology of heterosexual roles followed by reproductive and caring roles constructs the importance of women's sexuality as declining across the life span. This relates to the association between motherhood and asexuality, where 'good mothers' are involved in the care of their families rather than meeting the care of their own bodies or their sexual needs. In addition older women, who

are defined here as women aged sixty or over (Stuart-Hamilton, 1994), are constructed in terms of a 'loss of sexuality'. This relates to the link between sexuality and reproductive functioning so that post-menopausal women are culturally constructed as declining in sexuality. This can be seen to form part of the way in which psychology portrays older women's lives in terms of general loss and decline.

### **3.1 Sexual Attractiveness and Ageing: The Youthful Beauty Ideal**

This advent of ageing is experienced as a crisis by many women: a crisis which is not experienced in the same way by men. Within the discourses surrounding women, looking young is seen to be one of our main preoccupations: our images of 'ideal women', against whom all women are judged and against which we as women judge ourselves, are primarily of young, slim, able-bodied, heterosexual, attractive women...Older women are mostly absent from these images: if present, they are largely represented as an incapable, unattractive group. (Ussher, 1989, p.116).

In Chapter Two of the thesis, cultural discourses surrounding body size were identified as including a 'thin ideal' of female beauty which defines female attractiveness in terms of a thin body, devoid of excess flesh or flabbiness. In addition to this, female beauty ideals define female attractiveness in terms of a 'young' body. As women mature their bodies can be seen to diverge from both these ideals so that women who are beyond early adulthood are defined as sexually unattractive and sexually undesirable.

The thin ideal of female beauty defines female attractiveness in terms of a thin body (Wiseman, et al., 1992; Bordo, 1990; Chernin, 1986, 1983; Garner et al., 1980; see Chapter Two) which represents that of a prepubescent girl (Brownmiller, 1984; Chernin, 1983; Dickenson, 1983; Sontag, 1972). After puberty and throughout adult life however, the majority of women have bodies which fail to conform to this thin standard. Research shows that women have a tendency to gain weight as they age, so that they can gain an average of ten pounds per decade (Andres, 1989). In addition, the biological milestones in women's lives, such as puberty, pregnancy (for some women) and the menopause tend to induce fat storage (see Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984 for a review of this literature), so that weight gain is an inevitable part of growing older. As social discourses define female beauty without reference to these biological changes in women's bodies, women's bodies are less and less likely to be defined as sexually attractive as they age.

In addition to the thin ideal of beauty, a 'youthful ideal' of female beauty exists, defining attractiveness in terms of the soft, hairless, odourless, smooth and unwrinkled body of a young girl (Brownmiller, 1984; Sontag, 1972). This means that women as young as their mid-twenties may be concerned about their appearance and the effects of growing older (Sontag, 1972). The effect of this emphasis on youthful or girlish attractiveness is

that many women are involved in a life long struggle to keep age 'at bay' by minimising the effects of physical ageing. Attempts to remain 'young and beautiful' involve dyeing grey hair, the use of anti-wrinkle creams (Gerike, 1990) and the use of cosmetic surgery to more radically remodel the body into its former youthful appearance.

The fact that women in the media are involved in such 'age-defying' activities means that images of 'what older woman should look like' have changed. This can be seen in the following quote from Susan Bordo in a discussion of media norms of older women:

She [Cher] also looks much younger at forty-six than she did at forty, as do most actresses of her generation, for whom face-lifts are virtually routine. These actresses, whose images surround us on television, and in videos and films, are changing cultural expectations of what women 'should' look like at forty-five and fifty. This is touted in the popular culture as a liberating development for older women; in the nineties, it is declared, fifty is still sexy. But in fact Cher, Jane Fonda, and others have not made the aging female body sexually more acceptable. They have established a new norm - achievable only through continual cosmetic surgery - in which the surface of the body ceases to age physically as the body grows chronologically older. (Bordo, 1993, p. 25).

The result of the combined thin and young ideals of beauty is that women beyond young adulthood are judged, and judge themselves, in relation to ideals which bear little resemblance to their bodies and which therefore defines them as sexually unattractive and undesirable. In comparison, male ageing does not inevitably mean a decline in sexual attractiveness. For men the wrinkles, grey hair and heavier build which are signs of 'growing older', may be regarded as 'distinguished' and 'respectable' (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Sontag, 1972). Men therefore continue to be regarded as sexually attractive for a much longer period of their lives than women. These gender differences relate to differences in the way in which male and female sexual attractiveness are defined. Whilst female sexual attractiveness is evaluated primarily in terms of physical appearance, male sexuality may be judged in other terms so that power, money or occupation may make a man sexually desirable (Sontag, 1972). The fact that older men may have considerably more power, money or influence than younger men means that male body ideals are not solely confined to young ideals.

The fact that women are evaluated in relation to a young ideal means that ageing can be experienced as a 'humiliating process of sexual disqualification' (Sontag, 1972). Thus whilst it is socially permissible for a man of forty to have sexual relationships with women younger than himself, it is rare for women to have relationships with younger men (Bell, 1989). This sexual disqualification occurs despite the fact that many women may feel more confident about their sexuality as they mature:

'What, fat, forty-three, and I dare to think I'm still a person? No, I am an invisible lump. I belong to a category labelled *a priori* without interest to anyone... To be told when you have half your years still to wade through and when you don't feel inside much different than you did at twenty (you are still you! - you know that!), to be told then that you are cut off from expressing yourself sexually and often even in friendship, drives many women crazy - often literally so... I think stripped down I look more attractive on some abstract scale than my ex-husband, but I am sexually and socially obsolete, and he is not. When I was young, my anxiety about myself and what was to become of me colored all my relationships with men, and I was about as sexual as a clotheshanger. I have a capacity now for taking people as they are, which I lacked at twenty; I reach orgasm in half the time and I know how to please. Yet I do not even dare show a man that I find him attractive. If I do, he may react as if I had insulted him; with shock, with disgust... Listen to me! Think what it must be like to have most of your life ahead and be told you are obsolete! Think what it is like to feel attraction, desire, affection towards others, to want to tell them about yourself, to feel that assumption on which self-respect is based, that you are worth something, and that if you like someone, surely he will be pleased to know that. To be, in other words, still a living woman, and to be told every day that you are not a woman but a tired object that should disappear. That you are not a person but a joke. Well, I am a bitter joke. I am bitter and frustrated and wasted, but don't you pretend for a minute as you look at me, forty-three, fat, and looking exactly my age, that I am not as alive as you are, and that I do not suffer from the category into which you are forcing me'. (Moss, 1970, pp. 170-175).

In summary, cultural discourses surrounding female sexual attractiveness define women's attractiveness in relation to a thin and a young ideal. Thus whilst adolescent women's bodies may be judged in relation to the thin ideal, older women's bodies are additionally judged in relation to a young ideal which defines their bodies as sexually unattractive and hence as undesirable. One of the research aims of the main studies of the thesis is to explore the way in which the young standard of beauty affects women as they grow older in terms of the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food.

### **3.2 Motherhood, Caring and Sexuality: The Asexuality of Fertility**

In this section the construction of female sexuality across the life span is explored in relation to the discourses which surround women's roles as wives and mothers. There is a discussion of the conceptualisation of women's lives in terms of an 'inevitable' chronology involving women in sexual roles in adolescence and early adulthood which is then followed by the asexuality of reproductive and caring roles.

As discussed in section 2 above, life span research has traditionally neglected women's experiences. Research which has theorised women's development across the life span has produced a distorted view of this development through focusing on the reproductive events of women's lives, such as menstruation, pregnancy and the menopause (e.g. Erikson, 1968, 1950). Such research draws on biological theories of female identity and development, relating women's behaviour and identity to their reproductive organs or



their hormones (Unger and Crawford, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Howell, 1981; Barnett and Baruch, 1978). According to these theories, women's lives are restricted to sexual, reproductive or domestic roles and fulfillment can only be achieved through participation in these roles (Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Itzin, 1986, 1984).

The emphasis on reproductive models in mainstream psychological theory can be linked to cultural discourses surrounding women's lives (Gergen, 1990; Itzin, 1986, 1984). These discourses restrict women to the narrow roles of sexuality, reproduction and domesticity and hence define the female life span in terms of a number of sexual and reproductive events which are assumed to be experienced in a strict chronological order. According to this chronology, sexual attractiveness and sexual relationships are conceptualised as issues which concern women in puberty and early adulthood because this is the period in women's lives when they are involved in the all-important process of 'catching' a man (see section 2 above). Once a woman has 'caught' a man it is assumed that her sexual attractiveness is no longer important to her sense of self or in her relationship with her partner. At this point in their lives women are assumed to be more concerned with child bearing, child rearing and domesticity, where fulfillment is achieved solely through these activities (Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Itzin, 1986):

Media images of women, reflecting society's construction of the narrow female role, depict childbearers and childrearsers. If we look at the 'media woman', her main concern from adolescence onwards is to 'catch' a man. She makes herself as attractive as possible so as to achieve this aim. When she achieves it and becomes a wife and mother, she is shown, to be solely interested in keeping her family to the best of her ability. .. Once she has caught her man, the 'media woman' occupies herself with finding the best washing powder, or fabric softener, so as to please her family, apparently, obtaining a great deal of satisfaction from such tasks. Her house is spotless, her children smiling, and she looks as if she were having the time of her life (Ussher, 1989, p. 117).

Here then we see that women beyond early adulthood are constructed as being more concerned with the care of their families than with their sexual attractiveness or sexuality. This links to cultural discourse of 'the good mother', who is defined in terms of the self sacrificing care and nurturance of others (see also Chapter Two for a discussion of these issues). Women learn that being a 'good mother' involves meeting the needs of their husbands and children before meeting their own needs. The gratification of their own needs is achieved vicariously through meeting the needs of others (Orbach, 1993). Part of caring for others involves the protection and nurturance of their bodies, either through providing the family with healthy and nourishing food or through looking after their physical and emotional health more generally. In relation to this discourse concern with one's own sexuality and sexual appearance may be conceptualised as selfishness because it involves caring about one's own body rather than those of other people (Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1993; 1988).

Such a discourse ties into the conceptualisation of women's concerns with their bodies and physical appearance as signs of their inherent vanity (Bordo, 1993; Berger, 1972; see Chapter Two). Thus whilst vanity and preoccupation with physical appearance may be tolerated in adolescent women, women who are wives and mothers may be expected to forgo their interest in these issues in the interests of their homes and families. At the same time women are encouraged not to 'let themselves go' as this may result in sexual problems and the ultimate loss of one's husband. Thus women are encouraged to care for their appearance in order to 'please' her man, but they must not go beyond this to a personal interest in their appearance as this would signify self interest and hence a lack of femininity.

The discourses which define sexuality as a young women's issue are compounded by cultural taboos surrounding sexuality and motherhood. Mothers are culturally portrayed in terms of images of the Madonna, who is pure, serene and asexual. The paradox here is that Western society traditionally defines sexuality as being linked to reproduction, so that sex outside the framework of producing children has traditionally been forbidden and pre-menarche and post-menopausal women are defined as asexual (Ussher, 1989). This will be discussed in relation to cultural constructions of older women in section 3.3 below. At the same time sexuality is also denied for women who are involved in reproduction such as pregnant women or mothers:

Women's sexuality is categorized in our society as being intrinsically related to reproduction. The premenarchal or postmenopausal female is viewed as asexual, which serves to cloak female sexuality divorced from reproduction in a mantle of secrecy and shame. Yet at the same time as defining women as sexual if she has the capacity to reproduce, the sexual element in menstruation, pregnancy, and the menopause is denied or ignored, creating further consternation and confusion (Ussher, 1989, p. 13).

In summary, women's lives are defined in relation to a limited number of roles which they are assumed to pass through in chronological order. Sexuality is considered to be an issue concerning young women as part of their concern with establishing sexual relationships. Once past early adulthood women's lives are constructed in relation to reproductive and domestic roles rather than the role of the sexual woman. This relates to discourses defining mothers as being involved in meeting the needs of other people rather than those of the self, which defines an interest in sexuality and sexual attractiveness as selfishness, and to cultural taboos against sexuality in pregnancy or motherhood.

### 3.3 The Sexuality of Older Women: Asexuality versus the ‘Lustful Crone’

The vast majority of women who do accept the centrality of their biological roles within their life stories must also recognize their functional obsolescence when their bodies no longer can serve as baby machines and their roles as material caregivers have ended. When their biological clocks have rung their final alarms and the associated activities are terminated, they no longer tick as full human beings. With no other social utility, they have reached the end of their natural functioning potential, and thus, they may be viewed as costs to the social system. They may look to their past performances for a sense of accomplishment, but the awareness that their bodies fail to meet the standards of youthful fecundity creates a source of shame. The embarrassment and concern to correct or hide wrinkles, ‘cellulite deposits’, sagging breasts, ageing spots, veiny legs and other bodily changes associated with age are indicative of the shame and reflect women’s obedience to the biologically dominated life scripts. (Gergen, 1990, p. 479).

This section of the chapter explores the cultural discourses surrounding older women’s sexuality. Here older women are defined as women aged sixty or over (Stuart-Hamilton, 1994). This age group of women are generally regarded as asexual as part of the association of sexuality with reproduction (Gannon, 1994; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Itzin, 1986, 1984). The conceptualisation of older women in terms of a ‘loss of sexuality’ can again be related to broader discourses defining older women in terms of loss and uselessness, because they are no longer involved in either sexual or reproductive roles. Women’s lives are therefore portrayed as being ‘basically downhill, or regressive, from forty on’ (Gergen, 1990, p.477). Alternatively, the conceptualisation of older women as asexual has been related to the fear surrounding the idea of sexual activity amongst older women which results in them being defined as physically repulsive and sexually obscene (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Sontag, 1972).

As discussed in section 3.2 above, women’s sexuality is generally defined in terms of reproduction (Ussher, 1989). Older women are thus conceptualised as asexual because having past the menopause they no longer have the ability to reproduce and bear children. They are ‘desexualised’ because their reproductive organs no longer function. This means that post- menopausal women are regarded as no longer being interested in sexual activity.

The portrayal of later life in terms of a ‘loss of sexuality’ can be seen to form part of the way in which older women’s lives are conceptualised in terms of loss and decline (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Gergen, 1990; Barnett and Baruch, 1978). Once past mid-life women are no longer involved in the roles of reproduction or child rearing and hence are conceptualised as socially useless, with their lives being categorised by loss and decline:

'Women have two functions: sexual and domestic. Each involves children: the first childbearing and the second child rearing. Each involves availability and services to men: sexual and domestic. Both functions for women begin for women from the 'age of marriage'. Both functions finish for women in their mid-forties: in retirement from reproduction and retirement from child rearing. Neither of these rites of passage is marked by celebration. They are characterised by gloom and misery (the stereotype of the menopause) and categorized by loss (the 'empty nest' syndrome of sociology). From the age of about 40 when men are in the prime of life, women embark on the second half of their life with little status and almost no value. This valuelessness is not inherent, but created; not biologically determined, but socially constructed' (Itzin, 1986, p. 130).

Barnett and Baruch (1978) note that cultural representations of women are so strong that even when research indicates that women's lives are not inevitably made worse by the menopause and the departure of their children, research into these areas continues to be carried out and the biological beliefs about older women's lives persist.

The cultural discourse defining older women as asexual has also been related to the fear surrounding the idea of sexual activity amongst older women (Arber and Ginn, 1991). This fear relates to ancient fears of the lustfulness of older women (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Sontag, 1972) where older women are regarded as sexually obscene 'crones' who possess a disgusting and insatiable lust. Early civilisations such as the matrilineal, agricultural societies of South Eastern and East Central Europe (6500 BC to 1500 BC) involved positive attitudes towards older women. These societies worshipped goddesses (there were no gods) for their role in fertility, nurturance and life sustaining energy (Miles, 1989). Goddesses represented the three phases of being - birth, life and death. Here the latter phase was not regarded as wholly negative because of its role in the cycle of growth and regeneration (Robbins Dexter, 1990). By contrast, patriarchal Indo-European cultures (post 1000 BC) involved more negative attitudes towards older women. These societies worshipped goddesses because of the benefits they provided to men through the energy involved in their sexuality (the virgin goddess) or their nurturing/fertility role (the mature goddess, see Graves, 1960). In these societies however the old goddess or 'crone' was denigrated and feared because of her role as the dissipater of male energy (Robbins Dexter, 1990).

The origins of hostile attitudes towards older women have also been traced through the witch hunts of medieval Europe and colonial America, where thousands of people (of whom 90% are estimated to be women) were tortured and executed. Witches were seen as dangerous because of their 'insatiable lust' which led them into liaisons with the Devil and hence threatened the fabric of society. Being a woman was synonymous with being a witch because of women's supposedly rampant sexuality arising from the fact that women were conceptualised as 'closer to nature' than men (Ussher, 1991). The popular stereotypes of the witch involved the image of the 'lonely old hag' crouched over her

cauldron (Ussher, 1991; Cohn, 1975; Midlefort, 1972), so that age was again associated with lustfulness in women. The prevalence of witch-hunts in the historical period has been linked to fears of women who were not financially dependent on men and hence again to male fears of loss of power.

Older women are thus conceptualised as asexual and sexually obscene in Western societies. This relates to the association between sexuality and reproduction as well as to ancient fears regarding sexual activity amongst older women. In relation to women's feelings about their body size, these cultural attitudes towards ageing and sexuality result in a failure to consider that women over 60 may be aware of or concerned about their bodies. This failure can be seen in both popular culture and everyday attitudes as well as in academic research.

#### **4. THE ROLE OF COHORT FACTORS IN WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO BODY SIZE AND FOOD**

In taking a life span perspective, this thesis aims to explore the meanings of body size and food in relation to social discourses (see Chapter Two) which are theorised as relating to both age and cohort factors. This chapter has focused on the influence of age discourses on women's feelings about body size and food across the life span, in terms of discourses surrounding women's sexuality and sexual attractiveness across the life span. In addition to this, any consideration of how the meanings of body size and food change across the life span must also explore how the social discourses influencing these meanings are dependent on cohort factors in terms of the different social context in which women from different birth cohorts have lived their lives. This must involve a consideration of historical changes in the discourses surrounding body size, in terms of an increasingly thin ideal of female beauty, as well as in discourses surrounding the female role, in relation to the influence of the feminist movement.

Chapter Two identified the influence of the thin ideal of female beauty on women's feelings about their bodies. This ideal was identified as socially and historically constructed, so that Western female body ideals have changed over different historical periods (Bennett and Gurin, 1982). In addition the ideal was demonstrated to have become increasingly thinner over the last three decades (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1980). It is possible that the meanings of body size and food for women of different ages will relate to these changes in body ideals, so that women will construct the meanings of body size in relation to different body ideals depending on the birth cohort to which they belong.

The small number of studies which have been carried out with older women have found that there is a tendency for them to define body ideals in terms of a larger size than their younger counterparts (Mindham, 1994; Lamb et al., 1993). It has been suggested that this finding could relate to cohort differences in terms of changing body ideals. Thus it may be that older women compare themselves to different body ideals than younger women because these ideals represent those which were current in earlier parts of their lives. On another level however, these age differences could relate to age factors so that changes in the ideal to which women compare themselves may relate to the effects of growing older. It may be that the meanings of body size for older women are constructed in relation to expectations of weight gain in middle and late adulthood so that women regard larger bodies as more attractive as they grow older. This thesis aims to explore the debate between the influence of cohort and age factors on older women's feelings about their body size.

The Pilot Study (Chapter Three) identified the way in which the subjective meanings of body size and food were related to the women's use of a feminist discourse, which involved the women in rejecting the thin ideal of beauty as well as the way in which women are valued in terms of their sexual attractiveness. Here the women could be seen to be influenced by the second wave of feminism which began in the 1960s and which had therefore been experienced throughout the whole of these women's lives. In looking at different age groups of women there must be a consideration of how social discourses surrounding the female role have changed and the way in which this influences how women feel about themselves and their relationships with others. Thus there must be a consideration of how women feel about changes in definitions of the female role, which have involved a challenging of the way in which women are valued in terms of their sexuality and of their restriction to the roles of sexuality following by the wife and mother role.

## **5. WOMEN, BODY SIZE AND FEEDING THE FAMILY**

As discussed in section 2 above, the emphasis on young women in studies of body size dissatisfaction can be related to the conceptualisation of adolescence as a stage in the female life span where sexual attractiveness and hence the size of women's bodies are very important. This thesis asserts that an exploration of the meanings of body size and food across the life span must take factors other than sexual relationships and attractiveness into account. There must also be a focus on the other roles which women are involved in as they develop across the life span, with a particular focus on the wife and mother role and the ideology of femininity which surrounds it.

Women's roles as wives and mothers are important in the study of body size and food because food is an important part of this role. In addition to being surrounded by denial and restraint in relation to body size concerns, food is part of the way in which women care for others as part of being a 'perfect wife and mother' (Orbach, 1988). Women are involved in providing food for others whilst attempting to deny themselves food in order to lose weight. This creates conflict for women as they attempt to meet the food needs of their families whilst continuing to deny their own needs for food out of a concern for their body size. Here the different ideologies of femininity are in opposition to each other as women attempt to be both 'lovers' and 'mothers'.

Within psychology, there has been little consideration of the role of women's experiences of feeding others in their feelings about their body size or eating. A small number of sociological studies have now begun to explore the role of food within the family and the role of women as the providers of food (DeVault, 1991, 1987; Charles and Kerr, 1988, 1987; Kerr and Charles, 1986; Murcott, 1983, 1982). These studies build upon earlier anthropological food research, focusing on the social organisation of food within the family and the symbolic values and cultural beliefs which underlie this organisation. Food beliefs and the organisation of eating are seen to be both a product and a reflection of societal norms and values, particularly norms relating to gender and gender roles.

Research on food within the family has found that the feeding of others is extremely important at an ideological level, as part of the ideology of the wife and mother role (Murcott, 1982). Here being a 'perfect wife and mother' involves providing healthy, well cooked meals which are enjoyed by one's family. Such feeding symbolises the love, nurturance and care of others on both a physical and emotional level (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Orbach, 1988; DeVault, 1987).

Women's role as the provider of food for others has been found to be linked to the cultural discourse which asserts that women must put the needs of their families before those of themselves (see section 3.2, above). Women have been found to take the needs and preferences of other family members into account when planning meals, with their own tastes being regarded as irrelevant or of less importance (Charles and Kerr, 1987; Murcott, 1982). This privileging of preferences is particularly carried out in relation to women's husbands, who are felt to 'deserve' a 'proper meal' after a 'hard day at work' (Kerr and Charles, 1986). Husbands were felt to deserve a 'cooked dinner' which was defined as meat, potatoes, vegetables and gravy (Murcott 1982).

Similar accounts were found in Charles and Kerr's (1988, 1987) study of women bringing up young children in the North of England. Here foods defined as being of high status, such as steak, were given to men whereas the women and their children were

given lower status foods, such as sausage (Charles and Kerr, 1987; Kerr and Charles, 1986). This relates to an earlier study of food distribution in rural south western France by Delphy (1979) who found that women reserved choice pieces of meat for their husbands, whereas there was a total absence of meat in the diets of children and the old (particularly the infirm). Charles and Kerr (1988, 1987) found that women often either denied that they themselves had any food preferences at all or actually missed meals when their husbands were not present. This is interpreted as being related to the belief that because food is paid for out of money earned by the husband women do not feel entitled to as much food as their husbands (Kerr and Charles, 1986).

The way in which the women put the needs and preferences of their families before their own has been found to have an impact on women's feelings about body size. Hence women who want to lose weight must struggle between their need to reduce their own food intake which may conflict with the hunger and desire for food within their families. Hence Charles and Kerr (1988) report:

Most of the women therefore denied themselves certain sorts of foods in the interests of maintaining their sexual attractiveness and retaining their partners. At the same time, however, they had to feed their partners and children 'properly' ensuring that the children grew and developed healthily and that the men were refuelled so that they returned to work well fed and contented. The self-denial involved in dieting and weight watching was therefore taking place in a social context in which healthy, nutritious food had to be prepared and provided for others. Differing ideologies of femininity come into conflict. As one woman said 'It is difficult to be a mother and a lover at the same time': the demands on women are contradictory and irreconcilable. (Charles and Kerr, 1988, p. 150).

Here then we see the confusion which can surround body size and food for women with families. The subjective meanings surrounding body size for women who are wives and mothers are constructed in relation to two conflicting ideologies of femininity. Firstly, there is the ideology of the 'perfect lover', which constructs women's role as being as sexually attractive as possible (in accordance with the thin and young ideal) in order to 'please' her husband and ensure his continued sexual interest in her. According to this ideology, women must restrain their appetite for food in order to achieve a sexually attractive body. Secondly, there is the ideology of the 'perfect mother' which defines women's role as the carer and nurturer of others. Here women are involved in providing food for others, where food is surrounded by warmth and comfort in order to nurture husbands and children. In attempting to achieve both these roles women become confused about the meanings of body size and food in their lives and ambivalent about how they can achieve the ideal of the 'perfect woman'.

In considering the meanings of body size across the life span and the way in which these meanings influence women's feelings about the food that they eat, there must be a



consideration of the fact that women are involved in the feeding of others. This must involve an exploration of women's relationships with their husbands and children and the role which food and body size plays within these relationships.

## **6. MOVING TOWARDS A LIFE SPAN APPROACH TO WOMEN, FOOD AND BODY SIZE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE MAIN STUDIES**

The main studies of the thesis involve three individual studies which aim to look at the subjective meanings of body size for three age groups of women and to explore the relationship between body size and the meanings of food and eating. Study One explores these issues for a group of women aged between 16 and 18 years (Chapter Six), Study Two discusses women aged between thirty and forty five years (Chapter Seven) and Study Three examines body size and eating issues for women in the over 60 age group (Chapter Eight). Based on the literature described in this chapter and in Chapter Two, each study explores research questions specific to the age group of the study. These research questions are discussed at the start of each of the studies. In addition there are general research questions which the thesis aims to explore in a cross generational analysis of the subjective meanings surrounding body size and eating. These research questions are discussed below.

### **6.1 The Subjective Meanings of Body Size and Eating**

As discussed in Chapter Four, the main studies of the thesis aim to explore the subjective meanings of body size and food for women. This involves a focus on exploring the women's experiences from their own perspectives in order to examine the meanings of body size in the context of the women's lives. These meanings are explored in relation to the social discourses surrounding women, body size and food (see Chapter Two) and to the influence of age and cohort factors as described in this chapter.

### **6.2 Body Size and Ageing**

In taking a life span perspective, the main studies of the thesis explore the role of age and ageing in women's relationships to body size and food. A consideration of age effects involves an exploration of the effects of physical ageing on women's feelings about their bodies. This involves an examination of the effects of actual body changes on women's feelings about their bodies, such as the weight which may be gained with age and the other changes of the body which come about as the body matures.

### **6.3 Body Size and Sexuality across the Life Span**

The three main studies of the thesis explore how the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food are related to women's feelings about their sexual attractiveness and

the importance of this attractiveness in their sexual relationships. This involves examining how the meanings of body size are constructed in relation to ageing discourses, which define female attractiveness in terms of a young and thin ideal and which define female sexuality as declining in relation to women's roles as wives and mothers and to changes in women's reproductive functioning. There is an exploration of women's feelings about their sexuality and sexual attractiveness in relation to these discourses. In addition changes in women's sexual relationships are explored for the different age groups, in terms of their effects on the meanings of body size and food.

#### **6.4 Cohort Factors**

The final research question of the studies focuses on the role of cohort factors on women's relationship to body size. These cohort factors involve a consideration of the role of historical changes in the social construction of femininity and body size on the subjective meanings of body size for women. This involves a consideration of changing ideals of female beauty, as discussed in Chapter Two, and a consideration of the influence of the second wave of feminism (beginning in the 1960s) on the way in which women of different ages define femininity and how this influences their feelings about their bodies.

#### **6.5 Body Size, Food and the Family**

In looking at the meaning of body size and the effects of these meanings on women's relationship to food across the life span, the main studies of the thesis explore the role of food in women's relationships with their families. Here there is an exploration of the effects of women's experiences of being a wife and mother on her feelings about body size and food.

### **7. CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored the literature surrounding women's relationship to body size and food across the life span in order to introduce the main studies of the thesis and to define the research questions of the studies. The following points have been discussed:

- Research on body size dissatisfaction has focused on the experiences of women in adolescence and early adulthood, so that there has been little exploration of the experiences of women at middle and late adulthood. This emphasis relates to the conceptualisation of sexual relationships and sexual attractiveness as issues concerning young women. The implication of this is that older women are not concerned about sexual relationships and sexual attractiveness and that they do not experience the same pressures around these issues as younger women.

- Discourses surrounding women's sexual attractiveness define women beyond early adulthood as declining in attractiveness. This relates to the thin and young body ideal which defines attractiveness in terms of the body of a thin, soft, hairless and unwrinkled prepubescent girl. In addition, female sexuality is defined as declining across the life span in terms of discourses surrounding the role of the 'good wife and mother' which define an interest in sexuality as a selfish preoccupation with the self rather than the family and which define mothers in terms of purity and asexuality. Older women are also defined as asexual in relation to associations between sexuality and reproduction which define the menopause as the end of a woman's sexual life.
- An analysis of the meanings of body size and food across the life span needs to explore the role of cohort factors. Thus there needs to be an exploration of changes in body ideals across women's lives as well as of changing definitions of the female role as part of the influence of feminism on Western societies.
- In taking a life span perspective, there is a need to conceptualise women's relationship to body size and food in a wider context than sexuality and sexual attractiveness. This involves a consideration of women's role as the provider of food for others as part of being a 'good wife and mother'. In this context food is about nurturance and love, where the provision of food is related to the meeting of the physical and emotional needs of husbands and children. At the same time however, women themselves struggle with food in order to conform to ideals of female beauty. The meanings of body size and food for women across the life span are thus related to two different ideologies of femininity in terms of women's roles as 'lovers' and 'mothers'.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **STUDY ONE:**

#### **LATE ADOLESCENCE: RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS AND AUTONOMY**

##### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores the meanings surrounding body size and food for women in the sixteen to eighteen age group. The chapter looks at the way in which these meanings are constructed in relation to social, cultural and historical discourses, and the way in which body size influences how a woman feels about herself and how she is treated by others. The life span orientation of the thesis means that the meanings surrounding body size and food are explored in relation to both age and cohort factors. The examination of age factors involves an exploration of the psychological issues which concern women in late adolescence and of the way in which these issues are influenced by the social discourses surrounding women at this stage of the life span. The examination of cohort factors involves an exploration of the influence of the specific social, cultural and historical time period in which the women were born, experienced childhood, and developed through puberty and adolescence.

The potential issues of age and cohort for this age group of women are explored below to provide a background to the study. This is followed by an outline of the research questions of the study. The rest of the chapter is organised around a discussion of the design and research procedure, the thematic analysis of the interviews, and a discussion of the analysis, drawing out the main analytic themes in order for cross sectional comparisons to be made in Chapter Nine.

## **2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY**

As discussed in Chapter Two, studies of body size dissatisfaction are based on simplistic rating scales measuring the extent of dissatisfaction with body size. Such studies fail to look at the meaning of body size for young women in the context of women's lives as told from their own perspectives. The overall research aim of this study is therefore to explore the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women in the sixteen to eighteen age group and to investigate these meanings in relation to how a woman feels about herself and how she is treated by others. These subjective meanings are investigated in terms of the way in which they are constructed in relation to social, cultural and historical discourses, and the way in which the meanings relate to ageing and cohort effects. Many of the research questions of this study are therefore shared with Studies Two and Three in order for cross sectional and cross generational comparisons to be made. The specific research questions of this study are discussed below.

### **2.1 Sexuality and Sexual Attractiveness in Late Adolescence**

As discussed in Chapter Five, the majority of psychological research on women's relationship to body size and food has focused on the experiences of women in adolescence and early adulthood (see Chapter Two for a review of this literature). This research emphasis relates to the conceptualisation of adolescence as a time of increased concern with sexuality and sexual relationships (Freedman, 1984) which is theorised as resulting in increased concerns with physical appearance. In relation to this emphasis, this study also aims to explore the role of sexuality in the meanings of body size for adolescent women. In looking at adolescent women's experiences of heterosexual relationships and their feelings about their sexual attractiveness, the study aims to compare younger women's experiences of these issues with those of the women in their thirties and forties (Study Two, Chapter Seven) and in the over sixty age group (Study Three, Chapter Eight). Here there is an exploration of body size and sexuality issues amongst women who are beginning to explore their sexuality and experiencing their first relationships with men. In the other studies the focus is on women who have longer term experiences of relationships as well as experiences of the breakdown of relationships.

Traditional body size research has conceptualised women's feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies in terms of the divergence between the women's perceptions of an 'ideal' body size and of their 'actual' size (Chapter Two). This divergence is seen as being particularly salient to women in adolescence due to their experiences of the

'pubertal fat spurt', which moves the women's bodies further and further away from the thin ideal of beauty (Chapter Five). As discussed in Chapter Two, such a conceptualisation presents women's feelings about their bodies in terms of the passive internalisation of cultural discourses surrounding body size in a 'stimulus-response' model of social causation (see also Chapter Four). This study aims to conceptualise women's feelings about their bodies in terms of the subjective meanings of body size, which are theorised as being constructed in terms of interaction with others and internal reflection upon these discourses. Thus this study aims to explore the way in which young women construct their experiences in relation to social discourses as well as the way they reflect upon these discourses.

## **2.2 Cohort Factors: Feminism and Changing Beauty Ideals**

A further issue to be considered in this study involves the influence of cohort factors on the meanings surrounding body size and food. The findings of the pilot study (Chapter Three) demonstrated that the meanings of body size for a small group of women in their early twenties were constructed in relation to two opposing discourses. Thus the women felt unhappy with the size of their bodies and wanted to lose weight in order to feel more confident about their sexual attractiveness and relationships with men. At the same time, they rejected the pressures which they identified women to be under in relation to their size and asserted that they should be valued for other parts of their identities. These findings indicate the way in which women in their early twenties are influenced by feminist discourses which reject the valuing of women as 'sex objects'. In relation to these findings, this study aims to explore the influence of feminist ideology on women in the sixteen to eighteen age group to investigate the effects of this discourse on the subjective meanings of body size for this group of women.

The women in the age group of this study had experienced childhood and adolescence in the 1980s when, despite the fact that many oppressive and discriminatory practices towards women continued to exist (Faludi, 1992), feminism came to be declared by many as an out-moded and out-dated concept in the era of the 'backlash' and 'post-feminism'. This study aims to explore the effects of experiencing the changing face of feminism at this particular point in the life span on women's feelings about their bodies and their physical appearance.

A further cohort factor to be explored in this study relates to social and historical changes in ideals of female beauty. Women of different cohorts will have experienced different social discourses surrounding body size which is likely to influence the meanings of different body sizes for women from different birth cohorts. Since the emergence of the 'Twiggy' ideal in the 1960's (Bennett and Gurin, 1982), female

beauty ideals have been shown to be increasingly thinner in body size (Wiseman et al., 1992; Garner et al., 1983). Women aged between sixteen and eighteen were born and grew up in a period in which thin ideals had been the 'norm' for a number of years and were becoming increasingly thin. There is therefore a need to explore the way in which this socio-cultural environment has influenced the meanings surrounding body size for this age group of women.

### **3. DESIGN, RECRUITMENT AND PROCEDURE.**

#### **3. 1 Sample Criteria**

##### 3.1.1 Age Range

As discussed above, this study aims to explore the subjective meanings of body size and food in relation to young women's emerging experiences of their sexuality and of sexual relationships. An initial aim of the study was therefore to look at the experiences of women who had some experiences of relationships with men but for whom relationships were a relatively new experience. As will be discussed in section 3.2, a number of problems were identified in recruiting young women who met these requirements. After a consideration of these difficulties it was decided to recruit young women in the sixteen to eighteen age group.

##### 3.1.2 Clinical Status

As discussed in Chapter Two, research on women, food and body size has traditionally focused on the experiences of individuals from the clinical population. Thus there is extensive literature relating to 'eating disorders' compared to a sparser literature on the meanings of food and body size for women in the general population. An overall aim of the thesis was to explore the subjective meanings of body size and food for women who were not diagnosed as eating disordered. Thus a second sample criteria of the study was that the women should not be clinically defined as having an eating disorder.

#### **3.2 Recruitment Process**

After defining the above sample criteria, a number of problems were identified in recruiting young women who met these requirements. Firstly, I felt that to recruit women through requiring them to answer whether they were in a relationship or not was inappropriate. Young women are often under a great deal of pressure, both from themselves and from other people, to be in a relationship with a man. This is seen as an extremely important part of 'becoming a woman' as well as proof of a woman's femininity and sexual attractiveness. I therefore felt that I did not want to add to this

pressure or to make those women who were not in a relationship (and hence who would be rejected from the study) feel they were somehow 'abnormal' or 'substandard' to other women. I therefore decided to explore the meanings of body size and food in relation to a specific age group of women regardless of whether they were in a relationship or not.

Secondly, I felt that it would be extremely difficult to define clearly exactly what I meant by a 'relationship' and that these definitions might diverge from the young women's understandings of what a 'relationship' entailed. In response to these difficulties an assumption was made about the age at which young women begin to have relationships. It was decided that by the age of sixteen most young women would have had at least one heterosexual relationship.

The upper age limit of the sample was decided on the basis of the requirement that relationships were a relatively new experience for the women. It was therefore decided to set the upper age limit at the age of eighteen.

After further refining the sample criteria it was decided that recruitment would be carried out at a state school with a sixth form. Access to a school which met these criteria was obtained with the help of a contact who worked as a sixth form psychology teacher at a comprehensive school on the outskirts of Sheffield. The school was mixed sex and had approximately 1500 - 1600 pupils and 105 staff.

My contact with the school from initial contact to the interviewing phase can be split into a number of stages.

As a first step to gaining access to the school I telephoned the member of staff, giving her brief details about the research and outlining the characteristics of the young women I wanted to interview. At her request I agreed to give a presentation at the school. The presentation was based around a review of the psychological literature of food and body size and was intended to be given to the teacher's 'A'-level psychology group as a way of introducing the students to current areas of psychological research not represented on the syllabus. It was also attended by a few members of the teaching staff as well. Giving the presentation provided the opportunity of introducing my research to the school as a whole as well as to a number of potential participants.

Following the presentation the headmaster of the school was approached and full permission for the study to go ahead was obtained. It was decided that recruitment would be carried out by the member of staff rather than myself because of her everyday



contact with the sixth formers. Recruitment began around two months after the presentation (the Christmas break came in between).

Recruitment was carried out in four basic ways.

(i) Possible participants were informed about the study in psychology 'A'-level classes. It was explained that the study was aiming to look at women's eating habits and attitudes towards dieting and body size, that I wanted to interview the young women separately and that the interviews would take about an hour. Volunteers were asked to arrange an interview time with the member of staff.

(ii) Pupils in my staff contact's tutor group were informed about the study in the same way. This group was made up of sixth formers who were studying a variety of subjects.

(iii) To reach a wider section of the sixth form, posters describing the study were displayed in the sixth form common room. These posters again gave brief details about the aims of the study and described the age requirements involved and how long the interviews would take (see Appendix One). All those interested were asked to contact the member of staff for further details.

For these three groups the member of staff took details of the young women's free periods (when they would not be in lessons) and hence would be free to be interviewed. These times were then matched to the times when I was available and the young women were then informed of when they should come to be interviewed.

(iv) A fourth method of recruitment involved recruitment by 'word of mouth' and took place after interviewing at the school had begun. As I carried out the interviews, knowledge of my presence at the school became more widespread, with women who had already been interviewed telling their friends what was involved in the interviews. 'Knowing what to expect' then encouraged more women to volunteer. These women either directly approached me in the interviewing room or contacted the member of staff who made an appointment for them. This 'word of mouth' recruitment strategy was later adopted by me in the later stages of interviewing so that I asked participants if they had friends who might like to take part.

### **3.3 Participant Characteristics**

A total of fifteen women were interviewed for the study. All the women were in the sixteen to eighteen age group and none had been diagnosed as having an eating disorder. All but one of the women (n=14) were studying for their 'A'-levels, with the

majority (n=9) being in the lower sixth or first year of their 'A'-levels. The remaining woman was studying for GCSE re-sits. Five of the women interviewed had attended my presentation in the previous term.

The majority of the women had been born in the Sheffield area and had lived in the same area all of their lives. All but one of the women lived with one or both of their parents. The majority of the women's parents were married (n=11). Of the four women whose parents were divorced, three lived with their mothers and one lived with her grandparents. The majority (n=13) of the women had siblings, with the majority (n=11) having just one brother or sister.

Ten of the women currently had boyfriends and had been in these relationships for an average of 14 months. Of the five women who did not have boyfriends at the time of the interview, two had been in relationships until very recently which they talked about in the interview.

The majority of the women interviewed were of working class origin with their fathers being skilled and semi skilled workers such as miners, lorry drivers or dustbin men and their mothers shop assistants and factory workers (n=11). The decline of the coal industry in the area meant that many of the women's fathers had been made redundant and hence they were now unemployed or had retrained for new jobs. There was also a small proportion of women with middle class origins whose parents were employed as teachers, engineers and sales managers (n=4). All of the women in the sample were white.

Eleven of the young women intended to go on to study at university. Of the remaining four women, one had decided to train as a nurse and the other three were undecided about future career plans. Of those going to university, the majority were considering universities close to home with several considering the possibility of continuing to live at home with their parents.

The interviews ranged from between thirty five and eighty minutes in length, with the average interview lasting for forty five minutes.

### **3.4 Design**

As discussed in Chapter Four, the methodology of the main studies of the thesis was designed to allow women to explore their feelings about body size and eating in their own words and to reflect upon these feelings within the interview. In this sense then the interview design needed to be relatively unstructured in order to avoid the imposition of

prior theory on the woman's exploration and reflection as well as to allowing the analysis to 'emerge' from the data. As has been discussed in Chapter Four however, achieving a totally unstructured interview is problematic because of the way in which the researcher's subjectivity (in terms of her research interests, ethics and values) influences the research process. In addition to this unstructured interviews were problematic because of the need for comparison across participants as well as cross-sectionally across the different age groups of Studies One, Two and Three.

As a result of these issues it was decided that the interviews would be designed around a flexible interview guide. The aim of the guide was to provide a sense of 'guided flexibility' which enabled the participant to explore those experiences she thought relevant, but which facilitated some sense of order to allow comparison across interviewees. The guide listed possible areas of discussion grouped under headings related to particular areas of interest (see Appendix Two). These areas did not represent questions as in a traditional questionnaire or structured interview, but were intended as a guide to discussion for both myself and the participant. The guide was not intended to be inclusive, nor was it to be followed in any particular order.

The interview guide was developed and changed across the course of the interviewing phase of the study. This development occurred in relation both to the questions asked in the interview as well as to the actual practical format of the interview. Whilst conducting the interviews, new analytic themes emerged which might not have been previously considered. The themes were then followed up in future interviews. The guide was also changed depending on my assessment of how 'well' particular questions worked with the women. Thus, when a particular form of questioning was not found to work effectively in eliciting comprehensive responses from the young women alterations were made either in the form of the question or the order in which they might be asked in the interview. As discussed in Chapter Four, this dynamic process is in opposition to traditional interviewing techniques which assert that each interview should be carried out in exactly the same way. The perspective taken in this study regarded the interview (as well as the research process as a whole) as a process with research questions and methods developing over time as the research itself progressed.

### **3.5 Procedure**

#### **3.5.1 Interview Process**

The interviews took place in a small room on the main corridor of the school. This room was set aside for the use of parents when they came to the school with problems or queries about their children and was used either as a waiting room or an interview room.

It was furnished with comfortable chairs and had blinds on the windows so that no-one could see into the room from outside. The room provided a quiet environment removed from the rest of the school where the young women were able to talk about their feelings without interruption. One problem with the room was that it was located on the main corridor of the school and hence became very noisy at break times when pupils went outside to the playground or changed rooms between classes. As this made both interviewing and tape transcription difficult, there was occasionally a short pause in the interview whilst waiting for the noise to pass. Fortunately these interruptions did not occur too often and so did not cause too much disruption.

When the young woman arrived for her interview, the session was begun with a brief introduction to the design and research questions of the study. Thus the participant was told that I was researching women's relationship to body size and eating across the life span and that I was interested in how women felt about their bodies, how this affected their eating habits and the involvement of the women's friends, family and boyfriends in these issues. I also gave the participant my name, details of my status as a postgraduate research student and information about where I was studying. These details were given to ensure the participant had a clear idea of who I was, which came out of my concern to minimise the power differentials in the interview relationship (see Chapter Four). As the women provided a number of intimate details about themselves it seemed appropriate that they should be given some details about myself. Presenting these details also represented an attempt to present myself as another woman, rather than a 'faceless' expert involved in the assessment and judgement of the women. Details about my degree and career details often resulted in the women asking for more details about me at the end of the interview. They also often asked how the data would be used and the actual purpose of the study.

Following the introduction, the participant was then given information about the format of the interview. It was explained that the interview would last for about an hour but that this depended on how much time the woman had and how much she had to say. This was followed by asking the participant's consent to audio tape the interview, with the participant being assured that the interviews would be confidential and anonymous, with all identifiers being removed from the transcript of the interview. This was followed by giving the women a copy of the interview guide of the study which they were asked to read before the interview began. This was to allow the participant to feel more at ease with the interview process so that she was aware of possible areas of discussion. At this point the participants were also informed that the guide was in no way inclusive and that the aim of the interview was to explore whatever experiences she thought were relevant to the discussion. The women were also informed that the

interview would not necessarily stick to the order presented in the guide but that questions would be asked in whatever order unfolded in the 'flow' of the interview. After the participant had read through the guide the tape recorder was switched on and the interview was begun.

The interview was managed in three stages. These included a 'warming-up' stage, the main body of the interview and a 'winding-down' or ending stage.

### Warming-up Stage

The aim of the 'warming-up' stage was to put the participant at ease and establish some connection with each woman. This involved asking for details about how old the woman was, what she was studying at the school, whether she was in the lower or upper sixth, and what she planned to do after she left school. These were felt to be the type of questions young people would generally be asked about themselves and hence were expected to provide the young woman with a sense of familiarity. It also introduced the woman to the experience of talking about herself but in a non-threatening way. Thus rather than being asked about her personal feelings and experiences right at the start of the interview, connection was established with more impersonal or factual questions.

### Main Interview Stage

The main part of the interview involved the discussion of the areas on the interview guide. In the first few interviews this began with straightforward questions about the young woman's personal eating habits, such as 'Do you enjoy food?' or 'What are your favourite foods?'. In later interviews however I decided to begin with questions about family eating habits. This was felt to establish 'rapport' more effectively with the young women. By asking more impersonal questions early in the interview it became easier for the young woman to talk about her personal experiences and feelings later on in the interview.

Together with the questions which came from the areas outlined on the guide, there were also a number of prompts used in the interviews. These prompts were used when the young woman was finding it difficult to answer a question because she was unsure what she was being asked, or because she was finding it difficult to express her feelings. These prompts involved general questions such as 'How does that make you feel?'. They also involved paraphrasing or repeating back what the young woman had said in order to elicit further comments from the woman. More specific prompts involved the participant being asked 'Can you remember the last time that happened to you?'. This made it easier for the young women to talk about their experiences as they often seemed unsure whether to elaborate general remarks with examples from their own experience.

'Winding-down' or Ending Stage

The final part of the interview involved the 'winding-down' or 'ending' stage. This involved asking the woman whether she had any further comments she would like to make about her experiences or feelings. The women were also asked whether there were any questions which they had thought would be asked but which had not been raised in the interview. This was designed firstly to elicit information about possible questions which I might not have thought of, but also to provide the participant with another opportunity to make any final comment which they might not have felt appropriate to raise at another point in the interview.

The winding down phase also involved ensuring that the participant did not leave the interview feeling upset or vulnerable. For example, if a woman had talked about feelings of anger or distress, she was given a chance to further explore these feelings at the end of the interview. This was felt to be necessary even when these feelings related to experiences which did not directly relate to the research questions of the study. I felt it was important to ensure that the woman felt she had been listened to and that her experiences had been taken into account.

For other women it was felt that reassurance was needed. For example, one young woman was extremely nervous all through the interview and found it extremely difficult to talk about her feelings. This seemed to cause distress for the woman as the interview was quite difficult with many pauses and monosyllabic replies which I tried to coax into longer ones. The end of the interview was thus spent reassuring the woman about her 'performance' in the interview, to ensure that she did not feel that she had 'failed' in some way. All interviews were ended by thanking the woman and telling her that I had enjoyed talking to her and that she had raised some interesting issues which would be useful to the study. When she felt that she was ready, the young woman left and the tape recorder was switched off.

Following the interviews I took 'field notes' for each woman. This involved noting down my impressions of the interview in terms of how well I thought the interview had gone or any difficulties which I had experienced in carrying out the interview. This was followed by notes about the themes raised in the interviews, how this related to the literature and to themes arising from other interviews. Some of these details, together with brief biographical details about each woman, are given in Appendix Three.

### 3.5.2 Experiences of the Interview Process

The interviews with the young women were often quite difficult to carry out because of the fact that many of the women were not very talkative or expressive. There was thus a great deal of reticence where the young women answered questions solely with monosyllables or one sentence answers. This formed part of the way in which the young women appeared to find it hard to go beyond a brief statement of their experiences or their feelings so that they were unable to explore these experiences in any great depth or to reflect upon reasons for why they felt a certain way. Thus the young women did not have the appropriate language to talk about their feelings.

In part, the women's reticence was a result of the women's nervousness and uncertainty about what would be involved in the interview process. At this stage in their lives they had had little experience of one-to-one interviews. This nervousness usually wore off as the interviews progressed. The interview guide was also designed to counter some of the women's feelings of nervousness, particularly as I gave the women the guide to read before the interview started to give them some idea of what would be involved. In addition to this however, the women's reticence also related to the fact that the women saw their feelings about body size and eating as 'common knowledge', so that they perceived everybody (including myself as the interviewer) to know 'what they meant' when they briefly described an experience. Thus, for example, the women often assumed that everybody thought that thinness was more attractive than fatness or that everybody was concerned about their body size in order to obtain a boyfriend (see section 4.1.1). Here then the young women did not elaborate on these experiences because they perceived them as self exploratory and non-problematic.

The difficulties experienced in carrying out the interviews in this study also related to my own skills as an interviewer and the way in which I dealt with the young women's responses. In the first interviews carried out in the study I found it difficult to deal with the points in the interview where the women gave short, monosyllabic replies. This relates to a 'fear of silence' in the interview situation, so that rather than waiting and allowing the women to possibly elaborate on their answers I often went straight on to another question. As the interviews progressed, however, my interviewing technique improved and I developed a number of different ways of drawing the participants out. One of the main strategies (see above) involved encouraging the young women to discuss concrete instances of their feelings or experiences. Thus asking the women for details about 'when they last felt like this' encouraged them to reflect on what they had said.

In general I found the interviews with the young women easier to carry out than those which I had previously carried out with the older women for Study Three (see Chapter Eight). As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, I found the interviews with the older women difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, I felt uncomfortable asking the older women about body size issues, particularly in relation to issues surrounding sexuality and sexual attractiveness. It was much easier to ask the younger women about these issues and the women answered them easily. Here, then, my sense of the 'appropriateness' of certain issues for different age groups of women can be seen to be related to my own subjectivity, which can be seen to be informed by the cultural discourses surrounding women's sexuality across the life span (see Chapter Five). Sexuality and sexual attractiveness were seen as more appropriate in relation to younger women, as seen in the emphasis in body size research on women in adolescence and early adulthood.

Secondly, I found the interviews with the older women difficult because I felt I was regarded by the women as a granddaughter rather than as a psychologist who was carrying out postgraduate research. In comparison to this, in the interviews with the young women I felt more confident in my role as a psychologist as well as in asking the women intimate and detailed questions about their lives. This again related to the ages of my participants in comparison to myself, so that it was easier to feel 'in control' of the interview process when I was interviewing women who were younger than myself.

### 3.5.3 Analysis

#### Transcription

Analysis began immediately after the interviewing stage with the taking down of field notes as described above. There was then a break of several months whilst other parts of the research were carried out and during which all the tapes were transcribed. One third of the tapes were transcribed by myself with the remaining tapes transcribed by three secretaries. In these cases all identifiers were removed to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Each woman was given a pseudonym and was also referred to in the text with an identifier of the form 'Y1'. The letter 'Y' (for 'young') distinguished between the different age groups of women interviewed in the main study and the number following this related to the chronology of the interview. I also checked all these transcripts against the original recording of the interviews, filling in any gaps and correcting any mistakes. This was the first stage of familiarising myself with the transcripts.



### Analysis

Analysis was attempted using a grounded theory type method, as described in Chapter Four. In this section the practical applications of this method will be discussed. Analysis of the transcripts was based around the Macintosh computer, using the 'Microsoft Word' package, and was originally based on a method described by Morse (1992). The first stage of the analysis involved familiarising myself fully with the transcripts. This was achieved by several readings of each transcript, underlining interesting passages and adding comments in the margins. This was followed by the gradual identification of a number of analytic themes in the data which corresponded to particular passages from the text. These themes emerged from the data rather than being identified in response to specific questions or lines of inquiry. However as discussed in Chapter Four, the influence of the researcher on the identification of themes cannot be ignored.

The identification of themes with corresponding passages of text led to the creation of separate computer files named after each emerging theme. The relevant parts of the transcripts were then copied from the transcripts and pasted into the corresponding theme files. Each passage was then labelled with an identifier of the form 'Y1, P33'. This label consisted of an identifier for each woman which took the form of the letter 'Y' (for 'young') which distinguished between the different age groups of women interviewed in Studies One, Two and Three, followed by a number relating to the number of the interview. All interviews were numbered chronologically. The second part of the identifier consisted of a number representing the page in the transcript from which the passage came.

After all the transcripts had been read and re-read and themes identified, a more detailed analysis of the themes was carried out. This involved looking at all the instances within the theme and carrying out a process of comparison, looking for similarities and differences. Gradually this is built up into a theorisation about the theme. This was an incredibly time consuming process.

Whilst this method of analysis made splitting the transcripts into themes relatively straightforward, I found that at the end of this process the quotes seemed divorced from the individual woman. The initial coding seemed de-humanising in reducing the women's experiences to lines of text identified only by letter and numbers. In addition I now had little idea about how the themes fitted together for that woman or of the possible contradictions contained in her account. At this point it was therefore necessary to go back to the individual transcripts in order to once more 'get to know' the subjects. This involved making notes within the theme files of the way in which passages in this

file linked to passages in other files and how these fitted together for the individual woman.

Once an individual picture of the links and contradictions between themes had been put together these pictures were combined to create a fuller picture of the contradictions and links for the sample as a whole. This involved the construction of diagrams for each theme, which linked the different concepts together and outlined the contradictions in the theme.

The analysis process was not fully completed until the analysis was formally written up. Writing the analysis was a time-consuming process, involving a number of different drafts as the themes were further clarified and reconceptualised. The actual process of writing these drafts created further questions and queries about the themes which had not previously been apparent. Difficulties in expressing the characteristics of the theme often resulted in a need to go back to the original theme files in order to check quotes and the links between them. It was therefore not until I attempted to write up the analysis in chapter format that the analysis finally became fully explicated.

#### **4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS**

The thematic analysis of the interviews is divided into four main sections, where each section discusses a theme or a group of related themes. The first section of the analysis explores the meaning of body size in relation to sexual attractiveness and sexual relationships. This involves a discussion of the way in which the women regarded their bodies as unattractive because they were 'too fat', with the women wanting to lose weight in order to be 'more attractive'. The desire to be attractive related to the importance the women placed on sexual relationships, where sexual attractiveness was regarded as the most important factor in 'catching' and 'keeping' a man.

The second section of the analysis explores the relationship between body size and the women's sense of self. Whilst the women were aware of the importance of their body size in relation to others and wanted to lose weight in order to be 'desired' by others, they asserted that they wanted to lose weight 'for themselves' rather than for the other people in their lives. The women stated that losing weight would make them feel 'better about themselves' so that sense of self was closely related to the women's feelings about their physical appearance. The women's assertions about the autonomous nature of their feelings about body size related to a more general rejection of the influence of external factors on the women's feelings about their bodies. Here the women asserted

that they were independent individuals rather than passive conformists to social or interpersonal pressures.

The third section of the analysis explores the way in which a small number of the women challenged and questioned the importance which they felt was placed on body size by other people. Here the women asserted that they should be valued for 'what I am, not for what I look like', so that other parts of the self were valued other than physical appearance. In contrast to this the women's accounts contained a number of contradictions, in that the women continued to value the opinions of others about their size and they still wanted to avoid weight gain. The women's rejection of the importance of body size relates to the women's feelings about the female role, which is discussed in terms of the women's relationships with their mothers.

The final section of the analysis explores the meanings of food and eating for the young women. This firstly involves an investigation of the women's attempts to control their weight through their eating habits where eating was restricted to the minimum amount of food needed to satisfy physical hunger. At the same time, however, the women's eating habits were determined by the emotional meanings of food, so that the women 'broke their rules' about food when they were depressed, bored or unhappy. This resulted in food being surrounded by feelings of 'forbiddenness' and guilt. Despite the fact that the women were involved in the control of their food intake they did not perceive this as 'dieting'. Dieting was regarded as too extreme and as an inefficient method of losing weight which the women wished to distance themselves from.

#### **4.1 Body Size, Sexual Attractiveness, and Sexual Relationships**

This section explores the meanings of body size for the young women in terms of the relationship between body size, physical attractiveness and the women's desire to be in a relationship with a man. Being attractive was defined in terms of thinness and sexual attractiveness was regarded as the most important factor in 'catching' and 'keeping' a man. As a result of this, the women felt that 'being in a relationship' confirmed their sexual attractiveness, making them feel more secure and confident about the way that they looked. In addition to wanting to be thin in order to 'catch a man', the women also felt that being thin was important in 'keeping a man'. This related to the women's experiences of being valued by their boyfriends in terms of their body size and general attractiveness. This meant that the women were displayed and 'shown off' by their boyfriends as a source of pride, status and achievement.

#### 4.1.1 Body Size and Boyfriends: The Importance of Sexual Attractiveness

In this section the importance of the young women's body size and sexual attractiveness is explored in terms of the women's relationships with their boyfriends. The women were highly aware that their appearance was very important in both 'getting' and 'keeping' a man. Thus women who felt unconfident about their size before being in a relationship often felt much more confident in the relationship as being in a relationship confirmed that the woman was attractive. At the same time however the emphasis placed on women's appearance and sexual desirability in a relationship meant that the women felt it was very important to maintain their attractiveness. The women feared that if they put on weight they would lose their boyfriends because this was the way in which the women felt they were valued in their relationships.

In the following excerpt from Caroline we see the way in which physical attractiveness (and therefore body size) was regarded as important if a young woman was trying to find a boyfriend. Here Caroline explains that if this is the case one tries to look as attractive as possible in order to attract a man:

- JILL                    Do you think it would have been different if you hadn't got a boyfriend like a, you know, quite a long term boyfriend?
- CAROLINE            Yeah I think it probably would because erm you try to look your best all like wherever you go so that you've got a chance of getting a boyfriend don't you really if you want one (Caroline, Y8, P14).

This quote illustrates the way in which the young women's relationships were defined in terms of their physical attractiveness. Thus the women felt that if they wanted to have the opportunity of having a relationship with a man they would have to look as attractive as possible in order to 'attract one'.

Also seen in the above quote is the way in which the women talked about body size and sexual attractiveness in terms of shared or common knowledge. Thus it was automatically assumed that thinness was equated with sexual attractiveness, that women tried to look as attractive as possible and that this was the best way to initiate relationships with men. This can be seen in the way Caroline ends her statement with 'don't you really?', where she assumes that I am able to clearly understand what she means. The fact that many of the meanings surrounding body size were regarded as 'common knowledge' resulted in difficulties in carrying out the interviews with the young women. These difficulties came from the fact that the women often did not

articulate the reasons behind their desire to be thin or sexually attractive because they regarded these issues as common knowledge. This in turn also made it difficult to question the young women about these meanings, both because of the fact that the women found it difficult to articulate them and because I myself found it difficult to ask questions about common knowledge.

In the following quote we see the way in which Heather had actually experienced the importance placed on her body size by men. Here she explains that losing weight made her more popular with men, so that she has now been able to form a long term relationships which she has not previously experienced:

JILL                    So do you think if you didn't have boyfriend  
do you think it would make a big difference?

HEATHER                ( ) Yeah cos erm I've not really had I mean  
I've had like boyfriends but not just like

JILL                    Like short

HEATHER                Yeah say you go to the pictures and stuff like  
that

JILL                    Yeah yeah not like long serious thing

HEATHER                No and erm it were funny cos after I lost  
weight people like lads started asking me out  
and stuff (Heather, Y11, P16).

In this quote we see how Heather has direct experience of being valued by men in terms of her body size and physical appearance. Thus she has found that becoming thinner has made her more popular with boys, which is clearly something which provides Heather with a great deal of pride and satisfaction.

In the following passage from Joanne there is again a recognition of the fact that the majority of men with whom the young women mix are concerned about the physical attractiveness of women rather than other parts of their identities. For Joanne, however, a previous experience of a relationship has made her aware that this may not be the case for all the men she may encounter:

JILL                    If you were going out with someone do you  
think you'd worry more or less or

JOANNE                Well like through previous experience like  
when you start going out with somebody you're  
sort of a bit paranoid about what you eat or  
how you act in front of them, but you see I  
used to go out with this lad and like I was  
with him for like ten months and like he  
accepted me for what I were and I accepted him

- for what he were (Right) he never used to say anything about anything
- JILL So it was quite relaxed and you didn't feel self-conscious or anything
- JOANNE No I felt right comfortable about it all
- JILL Right do you think that helped do you think maybe that's helped you now I mean I don't know how long ago that was but it - I don't know (Mmm) I'm just surmising
- JOANNE It makes you feel more easier around boys 'cos you know like they're not all like after seeing the right person and that
- JILL Right do you think a lot of blokes are?
- JOANNE Erm I think in a way they still are a bit because like if you like go out you can tell that like men would like look at thinner people before they'd look at fatter people (Joanne, Y9, P14).

In the first part of the quote Joanne explains the feelings of self consciousness which are experienced by women when they are in a relationship. There is a sense of being scrutinised by one's boyfriend in terms of the way one looks. In addition to this there is also an emphasis on the woman's eating habits because of their contribution to body size. Thus women might attempt to eat less when they are with their boyfriends in order not to appear greedy which would put even greater emphasis on their body size. The quote also highlights the way in which the women rejected the way in which their boyfriends valued them in terms of their bodies (see section 4.1.2 below). Thus here Joanne sees herself as fortunate because her ex-boyfriend did not value her in this way but 'accepted her for what she was.' Later on in the quote, however, Joanne identifies the fact that her ex-boyfriend was actually an exception to most men with whom she has come into contact with. Here Joanne recognises that men actually prefer thinner women to fat women.

For many of the women, being in a relationship confirmed their sense of being sexually attractive. Whilst they might have felt 'fat' or 'unattractive' prior to the relationship, being in a relationship cancelled out these feelings so that the women felt that because they were in a relationship they must therefore be attractive. Conversely, if the women were not going out with a man they felt that they were not attractive and that they had to 'improve' their attractiveness in order to be in a relationship. It can thus be seen that the women relied on male definitions of attractiveness to determine how they felt about their bodies, and that their boyfriends' opinions about their bodies were the ultimate judgement on their attractiveness.

The following quote from Louise illustrates the way in which the women's attractiveness was defined in terms of whether she was in a relationship or not. Louise was in a relationship at the time of the interview but here reflects upon how she would feel about her attractiveness if she was not:

JILL                    Do you think if you hadn't got a boyfriend it might have (inaudible) do you think you might be more concerned about your appearance or?

LOUISE                Erm probably yeah I'd think summat's wrong with me (laughs) (Louise, Y4, P13).

Here then it can be seen that being in a relationship confirmed the women's sense of attractiveness. Being in a relationship represented the fact that Louise was found desirable and sexually attractive by a man and hence was absolute evidence that she was attractive. Thus again attractiveness is male-defined.

In the next quote we see the opposite situation to that experienced by Louise. Fran was not in a relationship at the time of the interview and she felt that this resulted in her feeling more concerned about her body size:

JILL                    Have you got a boyfriend, are you going out with anyone?

FRAN                    No

JILL                    Do you think you'd be more bothered about your weight if you were going out with someone or do you think it'd make you less bothered about it?

FRAN                    I think I'd be less bothered about it because I'd feel more secure (Fran, Y6, P8).

In this quote Fran uses the word 'secure' to describe her feelings about body size. She believes that she would feel much more secure or certain about her attractiveness if she was in a relationship. The fact that she is currently single means that she questions her attractiveness, because if she were attractive she would be in a relationship. Here, then, physical appearance is seen as the primary factor in relationships, as the most important part of a woman's identity from both the woman's and the man's point of view.

#### 4.1.2 Body Size, Boyfriends and 'Being Displayed'

In the above section the women discussed the way in which they felt their body size was important in attracting a man where men were more likely to be interested in women who were thin. In this section there is a discussion of the way in which the

women's body size continued to be of primary importance once she was in a relationship. Here the women were aware that their body size provided men with a sense of pride and satisfaction, as well as an indication of their 'status'. The women felt that their bodies were displayed by their boyfriends to other men, providing them with a sense of achievement at the fact that they had been able to attract an attractive woman. For the women, there was a sense of ambivalence and conflict about this treatment, so that the women felt both proud at the fact that they were regarded as sexually attractive as well as angry at the way in which they were valued solely in terms of their appearance.

In the following quote from Lisa there is again a discussion of the women's awareness of men's preferences for thinner women. However Lisa asserts that her boyfriend is different to other men because he is older and she believes it is younger men who are the most concerned with their girlfriends' appearance:

JILL                    Do you think generally blokes are quite worried about size then?

LISA                    Yeah I think so I think most boys are because - especially boys that are the same age as me then they are a lot more erm conscientious about themselves and their size and like what they wear and everything and they want a good bird sort, I should say, you know, they want a good girlfriend on their shoulder on their arm to like show off to everybody you see. Someone that's thin and that's gorgeous and glamorous and everything, you know, they want somebody like that. But I mean like because like my boyfriend's a lot older than I am then he seems to be not as bothered you see he just seems to take me for what I am and if anybody says anything to him then he just brushes it off, you know what I mean, it doesn't bother him sort of thing.

JILL                    If anyone says what to him?

LISA                    If anyone says to him 'Oh you've got a right fat girlfriend' it wouldn't bother him you see but nobody has ever said that people are always that nice so it's alright, so that's okay.

JILL                    Right.

LISA                    But I think there are a lot of - especially this age group they are a lot more you know they want sexy slim girls you know so I think that's how they are really (Lisa, Y15, P13).



At the start of the quote Lisa discusses the way in which women's physical appearance is generally important to men because of the status which they are awarded from having a 'thin, gorgeous and glamorous girlfriend'. Here again thinness is automatically associated with attractiveness and women are primarily valued in terms of their attractiveness. Later in the quote Lisa asserts that her boyfriend does not display her in this way and explains that this is because he is older than many of the men she comes into contact with. Thus she asserts that her boyfriend 'just seems to take me for what I am' which could be taken as implying that he is not overly concerned about Lisa's appearance and that other parts of her identity are important to him. However later in the passage it seems that this is not what Lisa means. Instead she means that her boyfriend is not concerned by the fact that he may be judged for having a fat, and therefore unattractive, girlfriend.

Also seen in the above quote is the pride which Lisa herself obtains from her body and the fact that she is complimented on her body by other people. The fact that she has not received negative judgements about her body provides Lisa with a sense of the approval of others and the sense that she has a more attractive body than many other women. This sense of pride is also seen in a second excerpt from Lisa where she describes the pride which her boyfriend takes in the fact that she is attractive and the sense of pleasure which this consequently gives her:

JILL                    Do you think your boyfriend is quite proud of how you look then?

LISA                    I think so yeah because when we go out sometimes 'cos I've quite a big chest he likes to make me wear tight things to show it off so people can see 'Oh she's got a big chest' and their girlfriends haven't and then they can think that 'Oh he must be quite lucky to have a girlfriend with a big chest' you know what I mean

JILL                    So does he sort of comment on what you're wearing then things like that?

LISA                    Well when we go out cos we usually go out every Saturday night and when he sees me he always says 'Oh God you look right nice, you look gorgeous' or something like that you see so 'cos I make a real effort on a Saturday when we got out you see but during the week it doesn't really bother me so I don't really make an effort but he always seems to say I look nice or whatever if you know if I've just like other day I was wearing like slopping about in house and I had got some really old clothes on and he said I looked gorgeous and I thought 'God what's going on here' so you know it's just different things he's not bothered about what I look like really so.

JILL                   Is it quite important to you though that he says that you look nice?

LISA                   Yeah cos I said to him the other day 'When you stop complimenting me I'll get worried' cos he might be complimenting somebody else or you know he might have gone off me or summat but he like always compliments me so I feel quite good about myself when he's done that

In the first part of the quote we see that Lisa's boyfriend displays her body in much the same way as the men of Lisa's own age as described in the first quote. Thus he asks her to wear revealing clothes so that people can see that he has managed to 'catch' an attractive woman. Here again there is the idea that having an attractive girlfriend provides the women's boyfriends with status amongst their peers. Lisa also seems to take pride in this fact because his comments on her attractiveness confirm her attractiveness and confirm that her boyfriend is still interested in her. She appears to be proud of the fact that her boyfriend shows her off in this way and gains a sense of identity from the fact that she is perceived by others as an attractive woman.

The contradiction in Lisa's account lies in the fact that she asserts that her boyfriend is not concerned about her appearance at the same time as describing the way in which he displays her to his friends. On one level it seems that Lisa is aware that she should not be treated in this way by her boyfriend. On another level, however, she takes much satisfaction and pride in the fact that she can be displayed in such a way and still be a 'credit' to her boyfriend. One way in which she reconciles this contradiction is the fact that although her boyfriend compliments her when she has 'made an effort' with her appearance, he also compliments her when they are not in public and she is not looking her best. Therefore she asserts that he does not really care what she looks like. However this does not acknowledge the fact that Lisa's boyfriend is consistently commenting on her appearance so that it is very important to him and to their relationship.

At the same time as obtaining a sense of pride from her boyfriend's approval of her body, Lisa also experiences feelings of insecurity and self consciousness from the emphasis placed on her body by her boyfriend. This is shown in the following quote where she describes the way in which she will again be on display when she goes on holiday:

LISA                   All this week I felt right conscientious about my weight you see and I thought to myself 'I'm really fat' and I really want to lose some weight I mean how the hell am I going to lose some weight like I want to go away I'm going

away with my boyfriend in the summer and we're going somewhere like Greece or something and he's expecting me to go topless I mean he can think again like but you know and I says to my Mum like 'I can't go topless and can't walk about a beach' like because I've got a fat bum and fat legs and fat belly and I can't let people see me like that and she says 'Well you see all sorts on a beach' and I say 'I know but I want to be like super slim and you know really nice figure sort of thing' and that makes me feel really bad cos I think well it's only a few months away and I've got to lose all this weight and makes me want to eat more you see so it doesn't seem to help much when I'm thinking about (inaudible) that's why I've had a lot today really.

JILL                    So yeah that's something that people talk about quite a lot like summer and bikinis and

LISA                    Yeah.

JILL                    Why do you think it bothers you then more than it would like in the winter?

LISA                    I don't know cos I mean you show your body off don't you on a beach and if you're walking from where you're sat to water or to pool or whatever then people are going to look at you automatically and they are going to think 'Oh God she's fat' do you know what I mean and 'Oh she's got a lovely figure' or summat like you see (Lisa, Y15, P19).

In this passage we see the emphasis which going on holiday places on Lisa's body. The fact that she will be particularly on display on holiday means that she feels very self conscious about the way her body will look and the judgement which she feels her body will receive from other people. Also seen in this quote is the way in which body size is presented in terms of either being 'fat' and being criticised by others or of being 'super slim' or having a 'lovely figure' which results in the admiration and approval of others. Here then Lisa does not see having an 'average' figure to be an option for her, one is either thin or not thin. This relates to a sense of competitiveness in that Lisa doesn't want to look 'average' like everybody else but wants to look 'super slim' and be the most attractive woman there is.

In the following quote from Kim we again see the way in which the women's bodies were displayed by their boyfriends for status. For Kim there is again uncertainty about her feelings so that she is both proud of his compliments whilst feeling angry at being treated in this way:

- JILL Do you think he likes skinny women?
- KIM He probably likes em because they're slim and athletic I don't suppose he'd like someone who was like 18 stone he's not that sort of person I don't think, I think he's definitely got expectations
- JILL Of what? What do you mean?
- KIM Of what I look like like if we go out he'll say 'You can't wear that top you can wear that one 'cos its nice' I say 'I'll wear what I want to wear I can wear what I like'
- JILL So he's trying to - its quite important to him how you look, like he tries to
- KIM Make me look better
- JILL Why do you think he does that do you think its because it makes him look good to have somebody who looks like that?
- KIM That's what I think yeah because erm he doesn't care about what I wear when I just go to see him I can just bung anything on whatever I feel comfortable in but if we go out he'll say that top's nice or those jeans are nice put those on (laughs)
- JILL And how does that make you feel when he says those sort of things?
- JILL I don't know sometimes it makes me feel really good because like he likes the way I look and he wants his friends to know he likes the way I look sometimes I think he's just showing me off to his friends and he shouldn't be (Kim, Y2, P13).

At the beginning of the quote we see the pressure Kim feels she is under to be attractive when she is with her boyfriend. This is seen in the way she states that her boyfriend has 'expectations' of what she wears and the way that she looks. Here she expresses her anger at the way her boyfriend attempts to influence what she wears. This is experienced as an intrusion and as a threat to her autonomy as seen in the line 'I'll wear what I want'. Later in the quote Kim again expresses this anger whilst at the same time acknowledging that his comments on her appearance make her feel good. Here then a distinction is drawn between a man finding his girlfriend attractive and complimenting her about it and his attempts to influence his girlfriend for the sake of his own status with his friends.

### 4.1.3 Summary

In summary, body size was an important issue for the young women because of their desire to be sexually attractive and to be in a sexual relationship. Having a thin and therefore attractive body was vital in ensuring that a woman managed to 'catch a man' so that being in a relationship confirmed a woman's feelings of confidence in her body size. The sense of visibility surrounding the young women's bodies was compounded by the fact that the women's bodies were important to their boyfriends. Thus the women's bodies were displayed by their boyfriends as a source of pride for the men which in turn made the women feel approved of and desired. On another level the visibility of the women's bodies resulted in feelings of self consciousness for the women when they felt that their bodies did not receive the approval of others.

In looking at the women's feelings about the way they were treated by their boyfriends in relation to their body size, the analysis illustrates the conflict which the women experienced about their bodies and their sexual attractiveness. On one level, body size was important to the women because it represented their attempts to define themselves as sexual at a time in their lives when sexual relationships were a new phenomenon. Here the women were keen to be desired by men in relation to their bodies because this defined them as sexual. On another level however, the women were concerned to define themselves as autonomous and independent individuals who were not constrained or controlled by other people. This meant that the women experienced the way their boyfriends attempted to display their bodies and hence pressurise them about their attractiveness as a form of control and threat to their independence. This conflict between establishing the self as both sexual and independent was a major theme of the study and is discussed in more detail in the following section.

### **4.2 Body Size and the Self: Autonomy and Losing Weight to Feel Better about the Self**

This section of the analysis explores the relationship between the women's sense of self and their feelings about their body size. This analysis is split into two main parts. Firstly, there is a discussion of the way in which the young women defined their sense of self in terms of their bodies, so that the self was equated with the body. The close relationship between the women's feelings about their body size and their feelings about themselves had two main consequences. On one level the women felt that losing weight would make them 'feel better about themselves' because of the association between thinness, sexual attractiveness and feelings of self confidence. On another level, the women associated feelings of being dissatisfied with one's self with feeling dissatisfied with the body, so that feeling 'down' resulted in the women feeling that their bodies were unattractive and undesirable.

The second section of the analysis examines the way in which this close relationship between the body and the self resulted in body size being surrounded by a discourse of autonomy and independence. The young women denied that their feelings about their body size related to the influence of interpersonal relationships and wider social and media representations of women. Instead they asserted that their feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies were unique to them as a result of their own preferences for a thinner body and the fact that being thin would make the individual woman feel better about her self. These assertions of autonomy took place despite the fact that the women saw thinness as more sexually attractive and hence as being more likely to attract a man (as discussed in section 4.1.1 above).

#### 4.2.1 The Relationship between Body Size and Sense of Self: Confidence and 'Feeling better about the Self'

For many of the young women, the desire to lose weight was related to a desire for confidence and self-assurance. This desire to be more confident relates to the feelings of self consciousness which the young women felt about their bodies. Self consciousness was equivalent to a lack of confidence in how one looked and hence a lack of confidence in the self. The women asserted that they did not like their bodies and that losing weight would make them like their bodies more and hence feel more confident about themselves. Here then 'liking one's body' was equivalent to 'liking oneself'.

This association between body size and the self is illustrated in the following quote from Maggie:

JILL	Right okay so erm what would change then if you suddenly became thin in those areas?
MAGGIE	I would be a lot more self-confident and I'd like myself more (Maggie, Y13, P7).

In this quote losing weight is seen as desirable because it will result in greater feelings of confidence. Thinness is associated with increased self confidence because of the way in which it is equated with sexual attractiveness. However, in addition to feeling better about her body if it was thinner, Maggie also associated thinness with feeling better about herself.

The association between thinness and self confidence is also illustrated in the following quote from Heather. In this quote there is an account of the actual experience of losing weight and the way in which this subsequently made Heather feel about herself. Here

losing weight actually did make Heather feel better about herself and was a positive experience despite the fact that the weight was lost after a serious illness:

HEATHER            I were ill I had glandular fever I think it were November and I lost about a stone then and I think since then my appetite's just gone really so

JILL                Were you quite worried that you'd put that weight back on?

HEATHER            ( ) Erm I don't know but I felt happier about myself since I lost that weight

JILL                ( ) Mmm ( ) what do you mean?

HEATHER            I just felt better about myself and people have noticed that I've lost weight and that and that makes that made me feel good (Heather, Y11, P6)

In this excerpt losing weight is again described in terms of feeling better about the self rather than simply feeling better about one's body. Thus here Heather feels she is somehow a better person, so that she can feel more confident and self assured about herself because of the fact that she is a stone lighter than she was previously. Again then the women's sense of themselves can be seen to be strongly linked to their feelings about their bodies.

This quote also illustrates that losing weight made the women feel that they were more attractive and hence more acceptable, both to themselves and to other people. This is illustrated in the sense of approval which Heather felt from others after losing weight as seen in the line 'people have noticed that I've lost weight and that makes that made me feel good'. Here Heather has been praised by others for losing weight as well as being admired for the fact that she has a thinner and hence more attractive body. This approval and admiration from others makes Heather feel that she is a worthwhile person and hence makes her feel good about herself. This approval is important to Heather because of the way she has felt about her body size in the past. Here she has felt a sense of 'difference' in relation to her size, where she has felt that she has not 'fitted in' with everybody else because of her size. Being approved of therefore allows Heather to feel that she does now fit in and that she is no longer any different to anybody else:

HEATHER            When I'm with my friends you know like people that are thinner than me it makes me feel a bit ( ) funny a bit out of place but I don't bother that much 'cos nobody says anything but

JILL                Right so what do you mean by you feel can you sort of explain that a bit more to me

- HEATHER           Erm well I don't know really its just I'm right self conscious about my self and how I look and that
- JILL                Right do you tend to talk about it quite a lot with your friends then?
- HEATHER           Yeah quite a bit and they try to tell me like that I'm no different to anybody else really just try to make me feel a bit better but (Heather, Y11, P4).

At the beginning of the quote Heather describes her sense of being different to her friends because she feels she is fatter than they are. This results in her feeling 'out of place'. However she also adds that this is not because she has received comments from others about her size but relates to her own feelings about her difference to other people. In the next quote she describes that this results in the feeling that she is being looked at by other people. The visibility which surrounded her body has resulted in a feeling of continuous self consciousness and of being looked at by others.

- JILL                So do you think if you were thinner how do you think it would change things if you were thinner?
- HEATHER           I don't know
- JILL                (Laughs) Its not something that you really think about is it ? Its kind of
- HEATHER           Mmm erm I don't really think it would change anything only that I'd feel better in my self cos I like think about it right lot I get right conscious about you know like if I have to go swimming or something I feel right right conscious about it
- JILL                What are the thoughts that sort of run through your mind?
- HEATHER           I just feel right as though everybody's looking at me ( ) and they don't but its just something that I think (Heather, Y11, P6).

This quote illustrates the association of feelings about body size with feelings about the self. Heather feels that if she lost weight she would feel better about herself. This relates to the feelings that changing one's body size involves changing one's self so that becoming thinner is equivalent to 'becoming a better person'. This quote also illustrates the emphasis on the individual present in the interviews with this age group. Thus at the end of the quote Heather denies that her feelings of visibility and self consciousness



have any correspondence to reality. Thus she asserts that she feels as if 'everybody is looking at her', but then she adds that they 'aren't really'

For Heather the feelings of being looked at do not come from specific people but from a wider sphere of unknown people all of whom she perceives as looking at and judging her body. Here we see the sense of exposure which Heather feels and which is particularly acute when she is in her swimming costume and hence her body is more visible.

This sense of feeling more confident about oneself is also illustrated in the following passage from Lisa. Here Lisa explains that losing weight would make her feel more comfortable with her body because it would be more attractive and hence would be approved of by other people. Again the feeling of having an attractive body makes Lisa feel she would feel more comfortable with her self:

JILL	Do you think you would feel differently about yourself then? [if you lost weight]
LISA	I would feel a lot better with myself I would feel more confident with myself more comfortable I don't know I think I would just feel more 'Look at me' you know sort of thing I feel like I look better and everything you see (Lisa, Y15, P24).

In the first part of the passage Lisa explains that she will feel better about herself if she is thin. This is associated with feeling both more comfortable and more confident about oneself. These feelings of comfortableness are then related to the display which Lisa feels surrounds her body. At other parts of the interview Lisa describes how she feels that she is unable to expose her body as it is now because it is too fat and because she 'can't let people see her like that'. Thus she is uncomfortable with the visibility of her body. In this quote, however, Lisa explains that if she lost weight she would feel more comfortable with this visibility and would be more likely to display her body as seen in the phrase 'I'd just feel more 'look at me!' Thus here thinness is associated with increased confidence and comfortableness with the self and this confidence relates to Lisa's feelings about her attractiveness to others. Because she would feel more attractive if she were thinner she would just feel a lot better about herself.

The association between the women's body size and their feelings about themselves was also illustrated in the way in which the women's feelings of dissatisfaction with the self resulted in feelings of fatness and unattractiveness. Thus if the women felt unhappy

with themselves they felt unhappy about their bodies. This is illustrated in the following passage from Carrie:

- JILL                    You said that it varies then how you feel like sometimes you feel fat sometimes you don't - is there any particular pattern to that, are there any particular situations or when you're in a particular mood that
- CARRIE                I think I look at myself when I'm fed up or whatever or I mean sometimes I feel a right mess and I look at myself in the mirror and I think 'Have I put weight on or not?' and I haven't but I seem to look fatter because I'm fed up [Right] You know I just it just depends what sort of mood you're in, it is with me anyway
- JILL                    So feeling bad about yourself just seems to
- CARRIE                Yeah if you're fed up and you look at yourself and you look a mess - if you feel a mess you look a mess, well, you think you do anyway, do you know what I mean? (Carrie, Y12, P9)

In this quote, feeling 'fed up' can be seen to be closely linked to feelings about one's appearance. Thus Carrie feels fed up about herself and this results in her feeling fed up about her body as well. Because she feels fed up Carrie automatically feels that she is not attractive and that she looks a 'mess'. Here then psychological 'mess' is interpreted in terms of physical 'mess'.

The relationship between feeling dissatisfied with the self and feeling dissatisfied with one's body is further illustrated in the following excerpt from Jenny. Here Jenny explains that if she feels depressed she begins to 'put herself down'. This involves telling herself that she is really fat and hence unattractive:

- JENNY                    Erm ( ) If I'm feeling depressed for whatever reason I start to put myself down and that's when I do it but I'm I'm not sure if there's any particular situations
- JILL                    So when this happens and you put yourself down what sort of thoughts do you have?
- JENNY                    I just start thinking 'God I'm really fat' and 'I feel big' you know and 'Do something about myself'
- JILL                    Right and is that when something's happened to make you feel down?
- JENNY                    Yeah.

JILL Right

JENNY I don't know maybe problems with my boyfriend  
or whatever (Jenny, Y14, P9)

In this quote we see how feeling depressed about one part of one's life results in self criticism or 'putting one's self down'. Here 'putting the self down' involves 'putting one's body down' in terms of feeling bad about one's body and being critical of one's body. Thus for Jenny dissatisfaction in her life results in dissatisfaction with her self which is embodied in dissatisfaction with the body and physical appearance. Thus she feels she should 'do something about herself', which in this context involves doing something about her size. Jenny feels that if only she could alter the way she looks other parts of her life would also be altered.

It is interesting that the problems which make Jenny feel down and critical of the self relate to Jenny's relationship with her boyfriend and hence to her feelings about her sexuality and sexual attractiveness. Again relationships are cast in terms of physical appearance and sexual attractiveness so that if problems are experienced in the relationship they are automatically interpreted in terms of 'not being attractive enough' or 'not being thin enough'. Thus Jenny's problems with her boyfriend are interpreted in terms of the inadequacy of her body rather than other problems relating to other parts of Jenny, or to problems with her boyfriend himself.

#### 4. 2. 2 Body Size and Autonomy: Denial of External Pressure

This section discusses the young women's rejection of the idea that their feelings about their bodies and their eating habits were influenced by their experiences of external pressure about their size. Whilst the young women's bodies were extremely important in their relationships with others (see section 4.1 and 4.3.3), the young women asserted that their feelings about their bodies and their desire to be thinner were uninfluenced by other people in their lives. In addition to this, the women also denied the influence of the media or wider social pressures, with the women asserting that essentially they wanted to lose weight for themselves and not for 'anybody else'. Thus the women asserted their autonomy and independence.

Many of the questions I asked the young women related to the influence of interpersonal relationships and wider social and media representations on the women's feelings about their body size. The young women did not feel that they were influenced by these factors and asserted that their feelings of dissatisfaction with their bodies were solely related to their own feelings about the importance of being thin rather than

because outside influences pressurised the women into these feelings. This is shown clearly in the following quote from Maggie:

- JILL                    Do you think as you've got older you've become more aware of food or has it always been like that?
- MAGGIE                Erm probably since as I've got like as I've got older.
- JILL                    So what sort of age did you become?
- MAGGIE                Probably when I was about thirteen.
- JILL                    Right, what do you think are perhaps the reasons behind that?
- MAGGIE                Probably as I was like getting into adolescence and I started feeling self-conscious about my body that was probably why
- JILL                    Yeah why is it I mean was it to do with blokes do you think?
- MAGGIE                No myself just how I feel, so I wouldn't do anything for anybody else
- JILL                    So what I meant was is that you're coming into adolescence yeah why is it then that it becomes an issue?
- MAGGIE                I don't know, just is. (Maggie, Y13, P7).

Here Maggie talks about her concern with her body size as beginning at adolescence, which was an explanation given by many of the women. Here however the increasing self consciousness which adolescence brought for Maggie is seen in solely personal terms. Adolescence was thus simply a time of Maggie's life when she herself became more concerned about the way that she looked. This was not because of the increasing visibility of her body to other people, with increased comments about her body size, nor was it the fact that Maggie became more interested in boys and hence with the attractiveness of her body to them.

Towards the end of the quote Maggie asserts that her concerns about her body are definitely not related to 'blokes' but are a result of how she herself feels about her body size. This relates to the discourse discussed in section 4.2.1 above, where the women discussed the relationship between body size and sense of self. Maggie wants to lose weight because it will make her feel better about herself not because she feels she will look better to other people. In addition to this Maggie asserts that she is not concerned about her body for the sake of other people because this would imply that she is not independent or autonomous. Thus she asserts that it is her concern and her feelings

which are important. This can be seen clearly in the line 'So I wouldn't do anything for anybody else' which involves the assertion that she is not passively losing weight because she wants to 'please' other people, but because this is something which she herself has decided is important.

The importance of these assertions of autonomy are seen right at the end of the passage where Maggie shows her reluctance to offer any more explanations for why she wants to lose weight. Thus she answers that body size 'just is' important to her now that she is in adolescence. Here there is a sense of irritation with the questions she is being asked. This irritation may relate to the fact that Maggie does not really know the reasons why she feels self conscious about her body at this stage of her life, it is not something which she has particularly thought about, it is just something which she is now concerned with. On another level this irritation may relate to a sense of anger that her explanations about her feelings are not being accepted and that she is being pushed with more questions. Here there may be anger that her assertions about her independence and autonomy are not being accepted and that she is being presented as passively concerned about the opinions and pressures of others.

In a further quote from Maggie there is a discussion about the role of social context and media pressure on her feelings about her body size. Here Maggie does recognise that she may be pressured by such factors but again she asserts that she wants to be thin because this represents her own personal preferences about body size:

- JILL                    So erm what would change then if you suddenly became thin in those areas?
- MAGGIE                I would be a lot more self-confident and I'd like myself more
- JILL                    Right okay, so how would you like yourself more do you think?
- MAGGIE                I don't know may be it's just I think there's a lot of pressure from things like models and magazines to be thin and you should be thin and all that (Right) but I think it's just my own preferences as well that I'd like to be like that (Maggie, Y13, P8)

This excerpt again shows the relationship between body size and sense of self. Thus, as in section 4. 2.1 above, Maggie asserts that she wants to be thin because this will make her feel better about herself and she will then 'like herself more'. This relationship between body size and Maggie's feelings about herself means that body size is primarily interpreted in terms of personal preferences and idiosyncrasies. Thus thinness

is presented as something which the woman herself feels is a 'better' body size to be, because this will make her alone feel better about the way she looks. Thinness is not superior to fatness because this is the way body size is presented in the media. Whilst Maggie recognises that the media do present thin women as the most attractive and that she herself is influenced by these representations, she asserts that her own preferences are also important here. Thus she is not simply passively influenced by these images so that she subsequently wants to lose weight, but she herself chooses to be thin because this is what she herself wants. Thus there is a rejection of the idea that she is controlled by media images and an assertion that there is personal choice, autonomy and independence.

In the following quote from Heather there is again an assertion that losing weight is about pleasing the self rather than pleasing other people. Thus whilst again Heather acknowledges that there are outside influences relating to body size, these pressures are of secondary importance to the needs of the self and the desires of the self to be thin. Thus Heather does not want to lose weight because she is passively influenced by external forces but because she herself has chosen to be concerned about her weight:

- HEATHER            Yeah (laughs) probably erm I'd probably try and lose it if I could I just think I feel better in myself its not like anybody else pushing me to do it but they are in a way because I feel that I have to be thin, you know what I mean but I feel better in myself if I do it more confident to do things
- JILL                Right so you mean although people don't say you should be thinner you think that they're still thinking that
- HEATHER            Yeah yeah
- JILL                And is that like your friends or who do you think who have the most influence on that?
- HEATHER            I think its people I don't know really cos I know my friends they like like they eat chocolate and everything all the time and they'll say 'Oh you never eat' and all things like that and 'Get some food down you' and stuff like that (laughs) and ( ) but they might try to make me eat as well cos I think I think they know how I feel about food and myself and that and they try to make me like feel better but its just a thing about myself I do feel better in myself I'm more confident if ( ) if I'm like if I lose weight or something so (Heather, Y11, P12).

At the start of the quote Heather again relates losing weight to feeling better about the self in terms of feeling more confident. Here however she does recognise the pressure which surrounds women in terms of their body size, in that she feels that she has to be thin. Thus here thinness is recognised as the size which is most valued by other people. At the same time, however, Heather quickly asserts that she is not being 'pushed' into losing weight and that she is attempting to diet because she herself has decided to do so. Here then there a distinction is made between wider social pressure in terms of a general feeling that 'she should lose weight' and more personal relational pressure from the people in Heather's life. Whilst Heather recognises the influence of social pressure she rejects the idea that she is pressured by those whom she is close to.

The distinction between social pressure and relational pressure is returned to at the end of the quote where Heather states that she feels more influenced by people that she 'doesn't know' than by her friends. Here her friends are presented as not pressurising Heather about her weight so that this pressure comes from a wider mass of people, which could be interpreted as media influences or a more general societal pressure. In discussing her friends' attitudes towards her weight it is interesting that Heather recounts the way in which they encourage her to eat more than she should. This may involve Heather in the assertion that whilst she may be bigger than average, this is not because she over-eats. Here there is a rejection of the idea that fatness is caused by greediness and over-indulgence. Heather asserts that she has lost weight and that she is proud of the fact that she has achieved this through successfully controlling her eating habits.

Alternatively, Heather's account of the way in which her friends encourage her to eat more may relate to Heather's assertions about the lack of pressure from her friends and the way in which they attempt to make her feel better about herself rather than telling her she needs to lose weight. Thus Heather's friends know how she feels about eating and body size and they try to 'make her feel better about herself'. This forms part of the way in which the women generally asserted that other people were not concerned about other people's body size and that it made no difference to how a particular woman was treated (see below). Again Heather asserts that she is not pressured by other people but that her feelings about her size are again related to her own feelings about herself and her own needs to become more attractive and hence more confident about herself. Thus whilst Heather accepts that she may be influenced by others, the final decision ends with her. This enables her to present herself as actively in charge of her own fate rather than a passive victim of social forces.

In the following quote from Helen we see the contradictions present in the young women's use of the autonomous self discourse, where these contradictions relate to whether the women wanted to lose weight to 'please themselves' or 'please others'. As discussed in section 4.1 the young women wanted to be thin because they wanted to be sexually attractive, which they saw as important in order to establish relationships with men. Here, losing weight can be seen to be about 'pleasing' other people in that the young women are losing weight in order to meet the beauty standards set both by society and by the men with whom the women associate. In the quote from Helen below we see again the way in which losing weight is constructed in this way. However at the same time Helen strongly asserts that she does not want to lose weight because she is concerned about her boyfriend's opinion of her size. Again she asserts that she wants to lose weight for herself and not because of pressure from other people:

- JILL                    Did he ever like say anything about you know did ever say you're fat or you're thin or did he make any sort of comment like that?
- HELEN                    No he erm if I were in a mood I'd think 'God I look fat today' or summat he'd go 'You're not fat, you look alright'
- JILL                    Okay erm so ( ) so right okay did you worry about your body size in relation to him did you think he wouldn't like you any more if you were fat or whatever?
- HELEN                    No I don't I don't think like that
- JILL                    Why did you used to say that to him did you want him to say something back
- HELEN                    I think it were slightly wanting him to respond to it in some ways (Helen, Y1, P13).

In this quote Helen acknowledges that her boyfriend's opinion of her size is important to her. She therefore admits that she does sometimes express dissatisfaction with her body in the hope that her boyfriend will reassure her that he doesn't think she is fat and that her body is 'alright'. At the same time however Helen denies that she wants to lose weight because she thinks that her boyfriend would find her more attractive or desirable. As seen in the first quote from Maggie above there is a sense of anger in the line 'No I don't, I don't think like that' which shows the way in which the women strongly rejected the idea that they were losing weight 'for anybody else'. Thus whilst Helen values her boyfriend's opinion about her body and relies on his approval when she is feeling unhappy about her body size, she does not want to lose weight for him with the sole purpose of pleasing him. Again Helen asserts that she wants to lose weight



for herself because she herself wants to be thin rather than because she feels pressured by other people to change the size of her body.

In addition to denying that they themselves were influenced by the opinions of other people, the women also denied that other people were concerned about body size or that external pressure surrounding size existed. This can be seen in the following quote from Nicky who denies that there is any prejudice based on people's attitudes towards fatness and asserts that people are not treated differently because of their body size:

NICKY                    I think I'd still be treated by my mum and my friends just the same way because like some of my friends I have got a friend she is fat like its nowt bad against her and like she really doesn't mind and I mean no-one treats her any different cos she is so it doesn't really matter

JILL                     But would you want to be?

NICKY                    No

JILL                     Why?

NICKY                    I'd just feel right bad in myself (laughs)

JILL                     Right so you're saying people wouldn't change towards you but you still wouldn't want to be fatter

NICKY                    Aha

JILL                     and you'd feel really bad with yourself can you give me a bit more what do you mean?

NICKY                    (laughs) I'd feel bad in I wouldn't really mind about other people because I can't see that they would make that big a issue of it but to me if I got fatter then as as is now I won't wear shorts - short shorts - and I just feel really bad because things that I want to do I can't do because I feel so uncomfortable (Nicky, Y10, P14).

In this quote Nicky asserts that her own desire to lose weight does not relate to the fact that she will be treated differently by other people but that it is because of her own feelings about her self and about her own body size. Thus at the start of the quote she asserts that, in the same way as she would not be treated differently if she lost weight, other people are also not treated in a particular way because of their size. Here she refers to a friend who is fat but who experiences no pressure from other people about her size. Again the problem is conceptualised as a problem of the individual.

This denial of prejudice towards fat people is in stark contrast to the accounts of some of the women in the sample. The women in the sample who were bigger than average described the sense of difference which they felt about their size as well as the teasing which they experienced because of the fact that they were fat (see section 4.3). This contradiction is likely to lie in the fact that Nicky herself was one of the thinnest women in the sample whilst at the same time being extremely concerned about her size. Thus the fact that she herself has never been teased about her size or told that she was 'fat' results in her denial that people treat others differently because of their size.

In this quote Nicky also discusses body size in terms of freedom versus restriction. Thinness is perceived in terms of being able to wear whatever one wants whereas fatness restricts these choices. Thus Nicky wants to lose weight because she feels that she cannot wear the clothes which are currently fashionable. She cannot wear these clothes because they would reveal the fatness of her legs which would make her feel self conscious and 'uncomfortable'. Thus Nicky feels that there are certain things she cannot do because of her size and hence fatness is seen as an imposition on one's personal freedom.

The denial of prejudice towards fat people is also seen in the following excerpt from Carrie.

- CARRIE            If I put weight on I'd be really unhappy I'd feel terrible erm yeah it'd just make me feel awful I'd I'd be paranoid about the way I looked and what people were thinking and
- JILL                Right do you think it would affect like your relationships with other people?
- CARRIE            I don't think it would affect what other people thought of me erm but it'd affect the way I was myself I wouldn't be happy and erm I think I'd be a different person it'd depend on how fat I was if I got really fat then you know obviously I'd feel it'd be terrible I'd be in a right state and everything not eating at all and doing everything to get the weight down but I can't really say cos I've not (Carrie, Y12, P10).

Here, then, there is a rejection of the idea that others are concerned about body size with the problem again being rooted in the individual. In the first part of the quote Carrie admits that she would be worried about 'what other people were thinking' if she put weight on yet in her next turn she asserts that 'it wouldn't affect what other people thought of me'. Carrie feels that others may have an opinion about the way that she looks but that whatever they thought about this they would still see her as the same

person. At the same time, however, Carrie feels that she would be a different person *to herself*. Thus again Carrie denies that other people are concerned about body size and that the only reason she does not want to put weight on is because she herself would feel unhappy about her size.

In the final quote in this section we see how the women's denial of negative attitudes towards fatness in other people was also extended to a denial of negative attitudes in the self. Here Carrie asserts that she herself does not treat people differently because of their size and her own desire to 'avoid' fatness is again based on purely personal reasons:

CARRIE	Yeah I'd just be unhappy [if I was fat] because I'd feel that I didn't look nice
JILL	Right
CARRIE	That's just how I feel I don't think fat people look horrible
JILL	Yeah
CARRIE	but do you know what do you understand what I mean?
JILL	Yeah I do understand what you mean definitely
CARRIE	I just feel that I just feel that I'll be unhappy I'll be really unhappy (Carrie, Y12, P16)

In this excerpt Carrie asserts that her own fear of putting weight on is not in any way related to generalised attitudes towards fat people. Thus she does not feel that 'fat people look horrible'. Instead Carrie does not want to gain weight because she herself would not be happy if she was fat. Here happiness is again related to feelings of attractiveness in the discourse relating self concept to the physical body. Thus Carrie would be unhappy 'in herself' if she did not look attractive. Carrie therefore uses the 'autonomous self' discourse to express that she herself would be unhappy if she were fat but for other people fatness may not necessarily be problematic.

#### 4.2.3 Summary

In summary, the majority of the women in the sample related body size to their sense of self as well as to their own sense of autonomy and independence from others. Thus the women's feelings about themselves were related to how they felt about their bodies, so that losing weight and therefore being attractive made the women feel better about themselves and feeling 'bad' about the self resulted in feeling 'bad' about one's body and physical appearance generally. This link between self concept and the physical self

is likely to relate to the way in which the women were valued by others in terms of their appearance and the way in which they were approved of if they were physically attractive.

Despite this, the women themselves asserted that they were not influenced by their relationships with others nor by wider social forces pressurising women to be thin. Instead they asserted that because losing weight was about 'feeling better about the self', their desire to be thin was solely located within the individual and the individual's feelings about the self. Here then the women were concerned to point out that they were not influenced by others so that they wanted to lose weight in passive response to external pressure. Instead they were autonomous individuals who were in control of their own feelings about themselves and who wanted to lose weight in order to 'please themselves' rather than 'please other people'.

These assertions of autonomy can be related to the fact that the women were at a time of their lives when they were attempting to assert their own independence and to define their own identities. Thus in the period of late adolescence, acknowledging the influence of outside pressures on the self was interpreted as stating that one was not one's 'own person' but the passive and dependent 'dupe' of external factors. This point will be returned to in the discussion section of the chapter (section 5 below).

### **4.3 Rejection of the Thin Ideal and Resistance of External Pressure**

This section of the analysis explores the theme of resistance and rejection of the importance of body size to female identity and to women's worth and value. This theme was found in the accounts of a small number of women in the sample (n=4) who asserted that they should not be pressured about the size and who demanded that other parts of their identities should be valued. In contrast to other women in the sample who denied that they had experienced outside pressure about their size (see section 4.2.2 above), these women recognised and rejected the pressure surrounding body size. In addition to this, the women rejected the way in which they felt they were valued for their physical appearance rather than for other parts of their identities. Thus the women asserted that they should be valued for 'what I am not for what I look like'.

The second part of the analysis deals with the way in which the women's accounts contained a number of contradictions. On one level these contradictions related to the way in which the women continued to want to avoid weight gain so that fatness continued to be identified as inferior to thinness. Here the superiority of thinness was reconceptualised in non-beauty terms, so that thinness was valued for its association with health and fitness and fatness was rejected for its assumed dangers to health. This

illustrates the power of the thin ideal and the difficulty in forming an alternative discourses in relation to body size and attractiveness.

The third part of the analysis explores the way in which the women's rejection of the importance of body size relates to their feelings about the female role, which is discussed in relation to the women's relationships with their mothers. The women's mothers often pressurised their daughters into losing weight because they saw thinness and therefore attractiveness, as an important part of the way in which their daughters would 'make their way in the world'. The women who rejected the importance of attractiveness in their lives thus experienced a sense of conflict with their mothers, which focused around a divergence between the two women's feelings about femininity and the course which the young women's lives would take in comparison to the older women's.

#### 4.3.1 Rejection of the importance of body size: 'I am what I am, if nobody else likes it, stuff 'em'

This section explores the women's rejection of the importance of body size in their lives and as a contributor to their sense of self. This involved the women in questioning the idea that thinness was necessarily 'better' than fatness and asserting that they were now more accepting of their bodies and their appearance. This acceptance meant that the women rejected the pressures which other people placed on them about their size, so that the women asserted that 'I am what I am' and 'If nobody else likes it then stuff 'em'.

The theme of rejection is first illustrated with a number of quotes from Jan, who rejected the importance which she felt her parents, particularly her mother, placed on her size. Jan's parents regarded her as too fat and pressurised her to lose weight through dieting. Jan felt extremely resentful and angry at the continuous pressure she received from her mother and much of the interview was spent talking about this issue and the other problems she was experiencing with her family. In the first quote from Jan, she describes her mother's belief in the power of the thin ideal and the way in which she sees it as being able to transform Jan's life:

JAN                   And she's always going on about me going to Weight Watchers all the time 'You should go to Weight Watchers'

JILL                   And is that like this wonderful thing that she

JAN                   I think she thinks its some kind of miracle that's waiting to happen if I go there I'm going to come out you know like

- JILL                   Transformed
- JAN.                   7 stone Kylie Minogue type thing (Right) but I don't see it myself
- JILL                   Why do you think its so important to her that you're thin?
- JAN                   I don't know I think its just the way that she sees women that she thinks that I just think that she thinks that my life is going to be somehow better if I'm thin (Right) If I'm thin you know things are going to happen transformation (Jan, Y3, P21).

Here then we see the emphasis which Jan's mother places on her daughter's body size and appearance. The fact that Jan is fat (Jan was fatter than most of the other women in the sample and defined herself as such) causes a number of problems for Jan's mother who encourages Jan to lose weight. Here thinness is associated with a transformation in Jan's life, so that if she loses weight her life will automatically be improved. Jan however questions this association and asserts that this will not necessarily be the case. In the following quote we see how the fact that Jan's mother sees thinness as superior to fatness results in her pressurising her daughter to lose weight. However Jan's experiences of this pressure have led her to question the emphasis placed on the fact that she is fat and to reject the idea that being fat is necessarily such a bad thing:

- JAN                   She [mother] seems to think like its a really bad thing like you must feel really really awful you must be really depressed with yourself because you know you're slightly bigger than anybody else and (Right) and so it doesn't it doesn't worry me at all its only my mum and dad that are sort of worried about it that brings it to the front of my mind and I'm sort of thinking 'Well perhaps I should look like my friends more' but normally it just doesn't worry me at all
- JILL                   Does it make you feel angry when they say things like that?
- JAN                   Yeah it makes me feel like 'Well where where does it say that you're not allowed to be fat? Where does it say that being fat's wrong? As long as you're happy then it shouldn't matter what shape you are it doesn't matter it doesn't seem to matter to anybody else its just my mum and dad really (Jan, Y3, P5).

In the first part of the quote Jan refers back to the self discourse used by many of the other women in the sample, which linked dissatisfaction with body size to dissatisfaction with the self. Here, Jan identifies the fact that her mother uses this

discourse because she feels that Jan must be unhappy with herself because of the fact that she is fatter than average. However, Jan rejects this discourse and asserts that her body size is not particularly important to her, it does not influence the way she feels about herself or make her feel unhappy or depressed.

Later in the quote Jan questions the importance of body size more generally. Thus she asks why it matters that an individual is fat and challenges the general assumption that it is 'wrong' to be fat. Again she asserts that she has accepted her body 'for what it is' and that because she is happy with her size she should not be pressured to lose weight.

In a further excerpt from Jan this rejection of the idea that fat is necessarily 'bad' is extended to a challenging of the way in which individuals are judged in terms of their body size. Here she also reveals the pain which her parents cause her in expressing their disapproval of her size:

JAN                    My mum tends to blame herself 'cos she says that er when I was younger she took me to the doctors or whatever and they said that if I didn't cut out milk and chips and things like that then I'd have problems when I got older and my mum said that she never thought about it and she should have cut them out when I was younger and then I wouldn't be like I am now and all this

JILL                    She blames herself

JAN                    Yeah but what I don't see is what's she blaming herself for its not I'm not any less of a person just because I'm just slightly bigger I mean there's even more of me to love that's how I look at it (laughs) but I don't know they just seem to see it as a bad thing (Jan, P6)

At the start of the excerpt Jan illustrates the way she is a 'disappointment' to her mother because she is fatter than she 'should' be. This discourse of disappointment will be returned to in section 4.3.3 where the relationships between mothers and daughters and the way in which this influenced the young women's feelings about their bodies are explored. This disappointment is also referred to at the end of the quote where Jan asserts that 'I'm not any less of a person just because I'm just slightly bigger I mean there's even more of me to love that's how I look at it (laughs) but I don't know they just seem to see it as a bad thing'. Here there is a sense that Jan feels that she is not loved by her parents because of the fact that she is fat and her parents see her fat as a problem. Thus Jan feels that rather than being valued for 'who she is' in terms of other parts of her identity, she is valued solely in terms of her body size. Jan rejects this when

she asks why her mother blames herself for the fact that Jan is fat. She asserts again that there is nothing 'wrong' with fatness and that her mother should not regard Jan as something which 'went wrong' because of her failure to feed her daughter 'properly'.

Jan's rejection of the 'fat is bad' discourse and of the pressure she receives in relation to her body size can be related to Jan's attempts to assert a sense of independence from her parents. Thus her rejections about the importance of body size can be related to her need to develop a sense of an autonomous self who is not influenced by the opinions of other people. On another level, these assertions represent Jan's use of a feminist discourse, so that Jan's experiences are constructed in relation to social discourses surrounding women and body size.

The rejection of the idea that 'fat is bad' and that body size is extremely important to a woman's value is also seen in the interview with Jenny. Jenny rejects the idea that her body is wrong and that she must change it, and asserts that women should be more accepting of their size. Here there is an identification of the way in which women are pressured to be thin by wider social forces, which are identified here as being propagated by the media. In the first quote I ask Jenny whether her friends are concerned about her weight and whether they talk about weight issues together:

- JENNY                   Mmm well most of them are more sort of obsessed about it than I am so it's usually them 'Oh God I'm fat what am I going to do?' and I'm like saying 'Oh you're not, just like live with yourself' you know but I don't really tell friends stuff like that myself cos they need to get over it themselves you know and I'm alright about it
- JILL                     Right why do you think they worry about it so much?
- JENNY                   I think it's like images they've got to keep up with you know what you see on telly or whatever (Right) sort of like advertising and stuff they think they should look like that and if they don't look terribly like that then they're not worth anything it's really silly (Jenny, Y14, P10).

At the start of this quote we see that Jenny is more accepting of her size than her friends who are concerned about their weight and feel that they are too fat. Jenny identifies the way in which her friends value themselves in terms of their body size and appearance so that if they do not conform to the images of women which they see around them they feel that 'they're not worth anything'. This links to the way in which the other women in the sample related their body size to their sense of self (section 4.2.1). Jenny's



acceptance of her own body comes from her awareness of the pressures on women to be thin which she asserts is the reason why so many of her friends think they are too fat. Here, then, there is a move away from the discourse discussed in section 4.2.2 so that there is a recognition of the fact that there are external pressures influencing women rather than a denial of the influences in an assertion of autonomy. Here, however, Jenny rejects these pressures so that she too asserts that she is not influenced by external forces. Again there is a need to present oneself as an individual who is not manipulated by social pressures.

As well as identifying the influence of wider social discourses, Jenny also identified pressure from men as influencing how women feel about their bodies. In the following quote she criticises the way in which women's bodies are extremely visible to men who make comments about women's size:

- JENNY                    Sometimes I get a lot of comments from lads about the size of my chest, you know what I mean
- JILL                      Do you?
- JENNY                    I find it really annoying cos it makes you more conscious of it and I can - I know I've been made to feel self-conscious and I know it's men who've done it to me and it makes me feel really mad.
- JILL                      So what do you say then when they say things like that how do you react?
- JENNY                    I just ignore it I just think shut up you know but I make a comment say something about their anatomy but you know its just something they have to do isn't it? They just have to prove that they're in control or whatever (laughs)
- JILL                      Right so what do think mean though like control of what?
- JENNY                    Of women they feel they feel they've have to be in control of women in situations you know [ ] So if they make comments on the design of everybody's chest or whatever then they just exercising their whatever their control. (Right). That's not the real the way it is really but they think it is I don't know (laughs) (Jenny, Y14, P21)

In this quote Jenny expresses her anger that men make comments about the size of her chest. This anger comes from the fact that Jenny does not feel in control of the way she feels about her body and feels self-conscious about it because of the comments she has received from men.

In the final quote from Jenny there is an assertion about her need for individuality, so that rather than being concerned about her body size as a result of external pressure she tries to accept her body. Here acceptance of her body is defined in terms of being an individual rather than attempting to change one's body size in order to conform to the ideal size which everybody else wants to be:

- JILL                    So erm do you think that you compare how you look to how other people look and how your friends look?
- JENNY                   I used to I used to a lot but then I just thought I want to be an individual (laughs)
- JILL                    So when was it that that happened, when you decided?
- JENNY                   A couple of years ago I just thought 'Oh I don't want to compete anymore' (Right) 'I just want to be myself' so I just started dressing like I wanted to dress but as soon as I stopped trying to fit in I started fitting in so it was really good.
- JILL                    How do you mean fitting in with - who were you fitting in with?
- JENNY                   I don't know really, I mean, I've never had like any problems fitting in with friends or anything
- JILL                    No, I, no I didn't mean that (laughs)
- JENNY                   I don't know I just started to feel more comfortable in myself (Right) once I started to be myself (Jenny, Y14, P11).

Here then being concerned about one's body size is conceptualised in terms of competing with other women in order to look the most like the thin ideal of female attractiveness. Jenny rejects this competitiveness which she sees as trying to 'fit in' with everybody else rather than being an individual with an individual body size. The decision not to attempt to fit in anymore was an empowering one for Jenny because she found that accepting her body for what it was rather than attempting to change it provided her with a sense of confidence and comfortableness with the self. Again this is in stark contrast to the way in which the other women in the sample associated losing weight with the potential benefit of 'feeling better about the self' (see section 4.2.1). Here Jenny has found that feeling good about herself has come from accepting her body rather than attempting to change it, so that she finds her self more acceptable now that she no longer attempts to change her body and her self through losing weight.

Jenny's rejection of the thin ideal of body size can again be related to the young women's needs to assert their own autonomy and independence from others. Unlike the other women in the study, Jenny sees her autonomy as being threatened by the thin ideal because it is about 'looking like everybody else'. Rather than accepting the thin ideal but conceptualising it in terms of an autonomous decision to lose weight, Jenny rejects the ideal which again constructs the self as autonomous.

#### 4.3.2 Contradictions: Rejection or Acceptance of the Thin Ideal?

In the above section the women rejected the importance placed on body size by those around them to assert that their own bodies were acceptable despite the fact that they were not 'conventionally attractive' and to challenge the idea that their identities were defined solely in relation to their body size. At other parts of the interviews with these women, however, this discourse was contradicted so that the women saw body size as important to them and defined fatness as less desirable than thinness.

In the excerpts from Jan above, there was a rejection of the 'fat is bad' discourse as well as a rejection of the way she feels she is valued in terms of her size by her parents. At other parts of the transcript however, Jan contradicts these assertions so that she defines fatness as 'bad' and accepts being valued by others in terms of her size. In these cases Jan is again rejecting the pressure which she has received from her parents to assert that she does not need to lose weight. Here Jan asserts that whilst her parents think she is fat, other people have told her that she 'isn't that fat really'. Thus there is a contradiction between Jan's assertions that 'who says you're not allowed to be fat?' and her assertions that this doesn't really concern her because she herself is not fat.

In the following quote, Jan actively uses the judgements other people have made about her size to assert that she isn't fat. She uses evidence from her boyfriend in her assertion that she is not really that fat:

- JAN                    But I go out with somebody that's erm I've been going out with somebody for 2 years that's a lot older than me he's quite big as well
- JILL                    How old is he?
- JAN                    He's 27 erm (.) and he's he's he doesn't care I could put on I could be like 20 stone and he wouldn't be bothered at all 'cos there isn't that peer pressure (Jan, Y3, P11).

In this quote Jan asserts that she has the unconditional support of her boyfriend against her parents because he doesn't care about her size at all. She illustrates this by

comparing herself favourably with a 'really fat' version of herself which implies that she herself isn't really that fat. Later on in the interview Jan again refers to her boyfriend as a source of support but in this case uses the discourse of 'I'm not that fat' more explicitly:

- JILL Does he [boyfriend] ever comment on what you eat or anything like that
- JAN No no ( ) he says to me like ( )
- JILL He's quite laid back about it
- JAN Yeah he says to me like well 'You're not fat, to me you're just not fat, I can't see what they're get on about' you know and like that mean that's makes me feel alright like completely relaxed I mean I don't I don't really care you know cos I know that he doesn't mind so when my mum and dad get on at me I just think like well he isn't bothered like so (Jan, P29)

In earlier quotes (section 4.3.1), Jan rejects the whole idea of body size as important to who she is as a person and asserts her right to be whatever size she is. In this quote, however, Jan once again rejects the criticisms her parents make about her body but does so by denying she is fat. Jan attempts to do this by presenting evidence that someone else - her boyfriend - accepts her size and accepts Jan for what she is. The contradiction here is that, in her attempt to show that her boyfriend is accepting of her size, Jan presents her boyfriend as actually denying that she is fat rather than accepting of her fatness. This can be seen in the line 'You're not fat to me you're just not fat, implying that being fat is wrong but as Jan is *not* fat this does not affect how Jan's boyfriend feels about her. The second contradiction in this quote is that in the earlier quotes Jan rejects the way in which she feels she is valued in terms of her size. In this quote, however, Jan actually explicitly refers to the judgements of others, which would seem to be a direct contradiction of her earlier assertions.

This quote shows the importance Jan placed on her boyfriend's opinions of her attractiveness and body size. This indicates the sense of confirmation which Jan received from her boyfriend, so that his opinion of her appearance and attractiveness is extremely important for her. At another point in the interview Jan explains that her parents have warned her that if she does not lose weight she will be unable to find a boyfriend and will never get married (see section 4.3.3). Thus the fact that she has a boyfriend and that he accepts her body (however partial this acceptance may be) is another way of rejecting her parents' criticism of her body.

In the following quote, Jan again asserts that 'she is not really that fat' whilst demonstrating this with the opinions of others. Here Jan talks about her experiences of being on a diet plan called Slim Fast which her parents had encouraged her to try and which involved the drinking of milk shakes in the place of two of her daily meals:

JAN                    I kept coming to school with them [the milkshakes] like you know 'Oh look what I've got to drink this dinner time' and people like 'You are mad, you're mad like you know what you drinking that for? You've no need to worry its not as if like you're really massive or anything. Just cut out sugar and stuff and just eat like like more healthier things than and just' (Jan, Y3, P13).

In this quote Jan again presents herself as 'not that fat' in opposition to her parents' criticisms and pressure. Thus the fact that Jan is 'not massive' is used to reject the pressure Jan is under from her parents to go on a diet. In this quote Jan also uses a health discourse so as to reconceptualise her concerns as being about health rather than beauty. Hence she avoids the contradiction with her earlier rejection of the thin ideal by reconceptualising fat is bad within a different discourse. This point will be discussed in more detail below.

The above quotes from Jenny (section 4.3.1) showed that she accepted her body for what it was, ignoring pressures to lose weight and conform to standards of beauty. This acceptance, however, does not seem to be an easy task for Jenny and it appears that she too sometimes feels pressured by the thin ideal. Despite her assertions about individuality and rejection of the thin ideal, Jenny still appears to feel its power. Hence in the next quote we see that she has not managed to fully escape from the thin ideal:

JILL                    How do you feel then about your size, your weight, those sorts of things?

JENNY                I'm fairly happy with it (inaudible) for myself but sometimes I think you know I wish I could like be really thin and flat chested or whatever but I mean you just got to accept yourself as you are haven't you (Jenny, Y14, P8).

Thus in this quote we see that whilst Jenny has an awareness of the pressures on women to be thin and rejects these pressures for herself, she is still affected by the cultural discourse that thin = attractive. Hence sometimes she still wants to be 'really thin and flat chested'. This contradiction illustrates the power of the thin ideal for the young women.

In this quote Jenny states that she is fairly happy with her body size for 'herself'. This implies that Jenny is aware of the way in which her opinion about her size may differ from other people's opinions, who, despite Jenny's apparent acceptance of her body and rejection of external pressure, may continue to value women in terms of their thinness. This difference between a woman's opinions and those of others around her may make a consistent rejection of the thin ideal extremely difficult.

Like Jan, Jenny also uses the health discourse to provide a reconceptualisation of the thin ideal:

JILL                    So how do you think you would feel then if you put a lot more weight on?

JENNY                 Erm ( ) unhealthy I wouldn't like to be any heavier I don't know I feel sort of it's not cos of pressure for - cos I want to do it cos I'd feel unhealthy you know I wouldn't I think if I felt any fatter I wouldn't be able to like enjoy things I wouldn't be able to like dance and stuff (Right) 'cos it would be sort of uncomfortable and unfit and stuff you know (Aha) just want to feel healthy (Jenny, Y14, P18).

In this quote we see the discourse of healthiness used by Jan as a means of reconceptualising the fat is bad discourse. Despite Jenny's rejection of the thin ideal and her ideas about acceptance she continues to see fatness as undesirable. She moves this rejection from a beauty / attractiveness discourse to a discourse which essentially medicalises and individualises body size by moving it into the health arena. The use of the health discourse enables Jenny to maintain the idea of the self as autonomous and active. Rather than being the passive victim of the thin ideal as defined in terms of attractiveness, not wanting to be fat is presented as a personal choice based on an individual's desire to be healthy. Jenny thus presents herself as not wanting to be thin because it would stop her from doing the things she wants to do. She does not reject fatness because she wants to be attractive, which is essentially about pleasing *others*, but because she wants to have personal freedom in terms of health and fitness.

The reconceptualisation of the thin ideal into health terms can be seen to mirror the way in which other young women in the study conceptualised their concerns about their body size as concerns of the self rather than as a response to externally defined ideals of beauty. Here Jenny presents a concern with the health of her body as an individual concern which is not related to social discourses and which therefore allows her to present herself as an autonomous individual. Like the other women, Jenny does not acknowledge the presence of discourses surrounding body size. Here there is a failure

to acknowledge that like, the equation associating thinness with beauty, the equation of thinness with health is also based on contemporary social discourses. Thus, as discussed in Chapter Two, there is a current move towards a 'fitness ideal' which defines the ideal body as one which is toned and devoid of excess fat. Thus the ideal is no longer just about the size of the body but also the actual texture of the body. Again Jenny constructs her desire to be thin in isolation from these discourses as part of her desire to present herself as autonomous and independent.

The interview with Jenny shows how difficult it is to escape from the power of the thin ideal. It is particularly difficult in terms of the relationships the young women had with their boyfriends which were based around the women's appearance and sexual attractiveness. For Jenny, there is again the rejection of the valuing of women in terms of their appearance although she admits that her boyfriend's opinion of the way that she looks is still important to her:

- JILL                    So does your boyfriend ever make comments about the size that you are or anything?
- JENNY                    No, no.
- JILL                    Right do you think that his opinion would matter to you?
- JENNY                    But if he did say anything I'd probably be very angry with him but I'd - it would sort of matter as well you know.
- JILL                    Right, so you would be angry because?
- JENNY                    Because he dared to make a judgement on me you know I want him to accept me as I am its like (inaudible)
- JILL                    Right.
- JENNY                    But I would think about what he said as well. (Jenny, Y14, P9).

This quote illustrates the importance of body size and attractiveness in sexual relationships at this stage of the women's lives. These women were coming to terms with their sexuality and attempting to explore their sexual attractiveness. They achieve a great sense of confirmation from their boyfriends comments about their attractiveness (see section 4.3.1). Thus, despite rejecting the thin ideal, Jenny finds it difficult to remain immune to her boyfriend's opinion of her body. At this stage of her life she may be unsure about her sexual attractiveness and the rejection of the thin ideal and the acceptance of the idea that 'its who you are that counts' does not provide her with

confirmation of this part of her identity. This provides some explanation for the use of contradictory discourses by Jenny and other young women in the study.

Both Jan's and Jenny's feelings about their body size are thus seen to be complex and contradictory. For both Jan and Jenny there is rejection of the concept of being judged by others in terms of their body size. This relates to their need to assert their autonomy and their identities as independent adults. However, at the same time it seems that both of them are still keenly aware of the opinions of others about their bodies and that their sexual attractiveness is therefore still important to them. For these women, the desire to establish sexual relationships with men conflicts with their desire to establish themselves as autonomous through rejecting the discourses surrounding women, sexual attractiveness and body size. Thus, whilst the women may reject the discourse of the thin ideal, this rejection is contradicted by the women's need to be desired and accepted in sexual relationships. One way in which the women reconciled this contradiction was through reconceptualising the thin ideal in terms of health rather than beauty, which allows them to be sexually attractive to others at the same time as presenting the self as autonomous. Here, health enables the women to present their concerns about body size in terms of an individual desire to be healthy, which does not relate to social discourses surrounding women's body size.

#### 4.3.3 Rejection of the Thin Ideal and the Mother Daughter Relationship: Pride, Conflict and the Female Role

For many of the women who rejected the importance of body size this rejection related to their feelings about femininity and the female role. In this study the female role was related to the women's feelings about their mothers and the way in which the women experienced their mother's concern about their daughter's body size. Thus in this analysis the role of body size within the women's relationships with their mothers is explored, in order to set the women's feelings about the female role in context. The women experienced their mothers as being concerned about their own weight with many of them having put weight on as they had grown older. This often meant that the women's mothers were concerned about their daughters' weight. The young women were therefore aware of the importance of their bodies to their mothers and the power which their body size had to please or displease her. Some of the women talked about the pride which their mothers took in their daughter's body size and physical appearance, with the young women again being displayed to others in these terms.

For other women, the emphasis placed on their size by their mothers resulted in conflict between mother and daughter. These women were those who rejected the importance of body size and who asserted that they were not concerned about their bodies. Here there



was a rejection of the emphasis placed on concern with body size, either because this was not a current concern for the women or because they rebelled against the thin ideal which their mothers espoused. In both these situations the dynamics between mother and daughter are related to the women's different attitudes towards femininity and women's roles, where the young women viewed their mothers' concern with body size as indicative of their attitudes towards women's place in the world and the role which they wanted their daughters to conform to. The conflicts between mother and daughter were particularly salient at this point in the women's lives, where the younger women were entering womanhood and were involved in asserting their independence from their mothers, and the older women were entering middle age and experiencing the departure of their daughters from their lives.

The importance of the young women's body size to their mothers is illustrated in the following passage from Lisa. Here Lisa shows her awareness of the pride which her mother feels about her, where this pride is based on the fact that Lisa is stereotypically attractive as well as on the fact that she is intelligent and a high achiever. Here, then, the interest which her mother has in her body is experienced positively because of the sense of approval which having an attractive body brings to Lisa:

LISA                      My Mum's really proud like when I go out with her she likes to show me off to everybody 'Oh this is my daughter' and you know stuff like that sort of thing my Dad does that too he says 'Oh this is my daughter and lay off' sort of thing but my Mum says 'Oh this is my daughter' and like introduces me and everything you see so she's quite proud about me she's quite proud that I'm doing 'A'-levels as well you see so she's likes to show me off (Lisa, Y15, P15).

In this quote we see the sense of approval which Lisa receives from mother because of the fact that she is attractive and can be shown off to her mother's friends as a source of pride and gratification. The pride her mother feels about her daughter's appearance is the pride and sense of achievement which comes from having produced the 'perfect' woman. Not only is Lisa attractive she is intelligent too, perhaps reflecting the pressure felt by women today to 'have it all', to be attractive as well as to have a successful career, a happy marriage and wonderful children. The fact that this feat has been brought about by Lisa's mother means that she is now qualified as a successful mother. She likes to show her daughter off as proof of her success.

Having a thin and therefore 'attractive' daughter may represent achievement for a mother because she can feel that she has brought her daughter up to fit into society

which continues to value women in terms of their appearance. In order for a mother to feel that she has brought her daughter up properly she must ensure her daughter is as stereotypically attractive as possible. In addition to this, a mother's pride in her daughter's thinness may be related to a feeling that she has fed her daughter well. She has not overfed her, she has taught her self-denial and restraint.

Lisa's awareness of the importance of her body to her mother can also be seen in the next quote, which shows the feelings of disappointment which are experienced by her mother's friend whose daughter does not conform to a thin ideal of attractiveness:

LISA                      My Mum's friend as well she's got a daughter whose erm she's 4 years younger than I am ( ) but she's really quite big ( ) my Mum's friend keeping saying to her 'What shall I do to make her lose weight?' and when she was younger when she was between 10 and 12ish sort of thing ( ) my Mum's friend used to say 'Well it's like Lisa when she was that age but she's lost a lot of weight you know it's fallen off her' so er I used to think well thanks you know but you know but I felt quite good cos it did fall off me and people had noticed but it's not seemed to leave her you see she's still got it so my Mum's friend is getting quite worried about it so you know. I think she's on a diet now you see and I mean she's only like 14 and erm I thought well you know she's on a diet she's only that age sort of thing but my Mum's friend is quite bothered about it so ( ) I think she must be quite erm disappointed in her size or something I don't know (Lisa, Y15, P17).

This account of the disappointment which Lisa's mother's friend feels in her daughter provides a contrast between the way in which Lisa's mother feels about her daughter. Lisa is aware that explicit comparisons are made between herself and the other daughter and realises that she comes off favourably in the comparison. Lisa feels pride because she has been noticed and approved of for losing weight and feels proud that her mother can feel in some way 'better' than her friend.

The discourse of pride versus disappointment is also illustrated in the following quote from Jan. In comparison to Lisa, Jan feels that her mother does not feel proud of her. This is because she feels that Jan is overweight and that she should attempt to lose weight. However, as discussed in section 4.3.1, Jan does not agree with her mother's judgement of her body and asserts that she does not want to lose weight because she should be liked for 'who she is' rather than for the size of her body. The conflicts which this causes between Jan and her mother result in Jan feeling that her mother is

disappointed in her size, and that this again relates to the fact that her mother wants her to conform to the stereotypical image of femininity:

JAN                    I think they [parents] worry too much about what other people think I think they think that well they said that I'm quite disappointing to them and I mean I don't know what they meant really I don't know whether they meant it as a, you know, a serious thing or whether its just a heat of the moment thing

JILL                    Right

JAN                    It like a bit disappointed because of the shape that I am really I think that they'd like me to wear you know little pretty dresses and still keep me like I was when I was young 'cos I was quite thin then (pause) but I don't know (laughs) (Jan, Y3, P6).

Here we see the feelings of disappointment which Jan's parents feel about her body size and the sense that Jan has somehow 'let them down' by failing to be as thin and attractive as they would like her to be. This means that they would prefer it if Jan was still a child because this would mean she would continue to be thin. Here other parts of Jan's identity are not valued, her appearance is the main factor by which she is assessed.

Any analysis of the mother daughter relationship and its effect on women's identity can be accused of 'mother blaming' and in this particular context of being deterministic about the mother's role in young women's internalisation of the thin ideal and the need to meet external standards. The mother-daughter relationship takes place within the context of a patriarchal society with a patriarchal discourse about a woman's worth being defined through her attractiveness to men. The power of the patriarchal discourse means that Lisa's mother takes part in her daughter's oppression because she herself has experienced this oppression. It is quite clear from the interviews that the young women's mothers are as much oppressed by the thin ideal as their daughters.

The conflict between Jan and her parents about her body size is more prevalent in her relationship with her mother. For Jan's mother the sense of disappointment which she feels relates to her attitudes towards what a 'woman' should be and what constitutes femininity in relation to the female role. In a second quote from Jan we see that the women's arguments about body size relate to underlying differences between how the mother and the daughter regard Jan's future role as a woman:

- JAN She'll say to me like 'Why can't you be more feminine?' and I say 'Well I suppose you either are or you're not' like ( ) sometimes I can be but it depends really I mean like I'm a girl so
- JILL So you're feminine (laughs)
- JAN (laughs) Yeah so there's some of it in there isn't there its just digging it out that's problem
- JILL So you're not behaving in this stereotyped way though that she thinks is?
- JAN No I'm not gentle and kind and
- JILL Sweet
- JAN Sweet and knit and things (laughs) I can't sew or anything you know
- JILL So she's pretty feminine then you'd say?
- JAN I mean she goes mad cos like she'll say 'You don't even know how to work this washing machine do you?' and I'll say 'Well show me how to do it' and she goes 'No no you're not going near my washing machine'. I'm thinking how contradictory can you get like she's like you know 'I'd hate to think who marries you' and you know 'You can't cook, can you' oh, oh God
- JILL What do you think she sees for you what would she like to do in your life do you know what I mean what's important for her?
- JAN I think she'd like me to be slim have like really long hair really long nails 'cos I bite my nails as well that's like a great disappointment to her erm I think she'd like me to be married and have lots of kids and stay at home and er just basically ( ) be happy smiley (Jan, Y3, P18).

In this quote it can be seen that Jan's mother associates her daughter's fatness with a lack of femininity. Here femininity is defined in terms of sexual attractiveness which is limited here to thinness. The fact that Jan is not stereotypically attractive and makes no effort to make herself more attractive by losing weight means that Jan's mother fears she will not be able to 'catch' a man and hence will not get married like a 'normal' woman. As we have seen in section 4.3.2 however Jan did currently have a boyfriend and took great delight in the fact that this provides her with 'ammunition' against the pressure she receives from her mother to lose weight. In addition to this, Jan's mother wants her daughter to be able to have children and then become a housewife and

mother. This fits closely to the life pattern of Jan's mother herself so that she can be seen to want her daughter to follow the same path as herself.

In the latter part of the quote it can be seen, however, that Jan's mother presents her daughter with a number of confusing and contradictory demands. Thus on one level she wants Jan to become more 'feminine' by learning to do household tasks, which will in turn train her for a similar life of domesticity to what she herself has experienced. On another level however she does not want Jan to carry out these domestic tasks in her house. Thus, whilst Jan's mother wants her daughter to become like her, at the same time she experiences this in terms of an undermining of her own role and position within the family. Thus the struggle which occurs around body size and femininity is also a struggle around the two women's power and influence within the family. This results in a sense of anger and frustration for Jan, who is confused about what her mother really wants from her.

On a broader level, Jan's disagreements with her mother around the relative importance of Jan's body size relate to the different attitudes which the two women have towards a woman's place in the world. As can be seen from the above quote, Jan's mother wants to create a daughter in her own image, so that not only is she thin and attractive (as Jan describes her mother) but also a dutiful wife and mother. In opposition to this, Jan rejects the importance of sexual attractiveness to her sense of her self and asserts that she does not want a similar role to her mother. Thus in rejecting the need to be thin, Jan rejects her mother's role in life as well as the sacrifices her mother made in being a wife and mother. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

JILL                    Did she take a lot of time out when you were kids?

JAN                     Yeah

JILL                    When did she go back to work?

JAN                     Not till er not very long ago er not very long ago at all like my dads like the breadwinner like

JILL                    So how does that fit in with what you want to do?

JAN                     Erm (pause) I'd like to I can't really see me having a career and I would like to have a family but I wouldn't just like that to be my life I wouldn't just like to stay at home and look after kids and you know make sure my husband's tea's on the table when he comes in I'd like to have a bit more life than that I think that's a bit a bit boring really

- JILL                    So what would you do for your job is that what you mean that you'd like to go out to work as well
- JAN                     Oh yeah I'd like to have a job yeah erm (pause) I do like children so I think something to do with children (Jan, Y3, P19).

Here then Jan rejects the tasks of reproduction and domesticity around which her mother's life has centred. Jan asserts that this life-style would be boring to her and that she would therefore like to work at the same time as bringing up her children. Despite the fact that Jan and her mother argue over Jan's lack of femininity, Jan has actually tentatively decided on a traditional 'female' career, focusing around the care of children, which is not very far from the tasks her mother was involved in. Despite this similarity the women continue to disagree about women's roles. This can be seen in a final quote from Jan who discusses the difference between herself and her mother in relation to sexist attitudes and feminist ideology:

- JAN                     Yeah yeah that's another thing that my mum says she says like ( ) there's not many jobs about and she feels really sorry for fellas cos its hard for them to get a job cos you can get a job in a shop but men are men are the breadwinners and they need something like you know
- JILL                    More fulfilling
- JAN                     Yes and er men can't work in shops and I say 'Oh yeah there's a law against it is there?' and 'Oh men can't work in shops Jan, don't be silly'. I say 'Oh right' I say like we go to the supermarket I'll say 'Oh look there's a fella over there on the checkout let's go' and she'll say 'There's only one though isn't there amongst all those girls' and I'll say 'Well, yeah, slowly but surely but men do work in shops' and then she'll say like 'Well yeah they stack shelves and do all these masculine things and girls sit there on checkouts' and I say 'oh God, someone pass me a bucket I'm going to vomit any minute (Jan, Y3, P20).

In this excerpt it can be seen that Jan's ideas about her future and the differences which she experiences in relation to her mother relate to the different ideas the two women have towards femininity and masculinity. Here Jan uses a feminist discourse to express the idea that jobs are interchangeable between men and women and that there are not particular jobs more suited to men than women. By contrast her mother takes the viewpoint that men must have the more lucrative and important jobs because they are

the main providers for their families. Again there is a fundamental clash between the women's views on women's role within contemporary society.

Finally in this section, there is an examination of Louise's account of her relationship with her mother and the role which body size plays within this relationship. In this situation, however, the meanings of body size are reversed, with Louise regarding her mother as too fat, and where fatness was associated with domesticity rather than a life organised around a successful career. Louise's relationship with her mother is again shaped by the differing expectations which the women have about women's lives. Like Jan's mother, Louise's mother can be defined as having had a traditional role as a wife and mother. At the time of the interview for the study, however, Louise's mother was divorced. She did not work but continued to stay at home and care for Louise and her older brother. In the following excerpt Louise illustrates the pressure she receives from her mother about her size, which are based around her mother's warnings about gaining weight when she gets older:

- JILL                    Would it bother you if you put a lot of weight on?
- LOUISE                 I'd say no but it probably would because my mother always goes on about it
- JILL                    What does she say?
- LOUISE                 Well she says 'I was like you when I was your age' ( ) mmm (laughs)
- JILL                    Is she quite - does she worry about her weight now?
- LOUISE                 Erm I think she does get a bit upset if we like go on at her but (laughs)
- JILL                    What do you mean, that you tease her about it?
- LOUISE                 Sort of but its only like fun she knows that I think, I hope (laughs)
- JILL                    So is she quite big now then?
- LOUISE                 She's not that big but she's you know
- JILL                    So does she erm does she sort of erm sort of get on at you a bit about it not to eat too much does she does she?
- LOUISE                 I think she does try to because she she tends to like start going on diets but like makes us suffer because we have to go on diets as well ( ) But it doesn't usually last very long so (Louise, Y4, P7).

This quote illustrates the conflict which Louise experiences over body size in relation to her mother. Louise feels irritated with her mother because she is not particularly concerned about her weight yet her mother is worried about her own weight as well as that of her daughter. This irritation comes from the fact that Louise's mother compares Louise's body to her own, with the warning that whilst Louise may be thin at this point in her life and hence is not concerned about her size in later life, she may put weight on. Here there is a direct comparison between the body of the daughter and the mother, so that the fact that Louise's mother put weight on as she matured means that it is likely that Louise will do the same. At this point in her life, however, Louise does not want to concern herself with such issues and feels that it is wrong for her mother to pressure her in this way. This occurs despite the fact that Louise and her brother pressurise their mother in the same way, through teasing her about her weight.

Later in the quote Louise expresses her anger that her mother attempts to control her weight by dieting. This anger is expressed in terms of a discourse of selfishness, where Louise feels that her mother is selfish because she makes the rest of the family 'suffer' by expecting them to eat what she wants. This behaviour is seen as selfishness despite the fact that Louise's mother does all the cooking for her children. This can be seen to relate to the stereotype of the selfless mother who puts the needs of her family before those of herself first (see Chapter Five). These issues are also explored in Studies Two and Three, where the women participating in the studies were themselves the mothers and grandmothers of other women (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

Much of Louise's attitudes towards body size and dieting seem to be constructed in opposition to those of her mother. Thus in the next two quotes from Louise we can see the contrast between her mother's attempts at weight and food control and those of Louise herself. In the first quote Louise describes her mother as having little control over her food intake:

JILL                      Right OK so why do your mum's diets usually fail then do you think?

LOUISE                    I think she gives in to sweet stuff like chocolates and cake ( ) she gets tempted (Louise, Y4, P8).

In this quote we see how Louise regards her mother in terms of weakness and failure. Whilst she tries to control her weight with dieting she is unable to resist food and hence over-indulges. In the following quote we see the contrast between how Louise views these transgressions in her mother in comparison to how she views them in herself:



- JILL            If you haven't been on a proper one [diet] have you done other things that?
- LOUISE        I have tried to keep off all sweets and that at a certain time
- JILL            Aha limit yourself
- LOUISE        I just get the urge now and then to eat like bar of chocolate like
- JILL            So erm it sort of ends that and you go back to normal?
- LOUISE        I don't think its that much harder if you have something now and then its not as if I have it like every day (Louise, Y4, P9).

Here Louise presents her philosophy about food in comparison to her mother's. Louise does not diet (because she is not concerned about her weight) but does have an awareness about healthy eating involving the restriction of sweet foods. She allows herself to eat the occasional 'forbidden' food as she feels this makes it easier to stick to the restrictions placed upon such foods. Her transgressions from the rules are regarded as different from her mothers. She feels an 'urge' to eat chocolate in what is almost a biological discourse which it is healthy to take notice of. In contrast her mother is 'tempted' and 'gives in' to her desire for chocolate and other sweet foods. Thus Louise presents herself as in control and sensible whereas her mother is presented as out of control and foolish.

Underlying the conflict between Louise and her mother are the differences between her mother's life and the plans which Louise has for her own future. Louise's mother does not work despite the fact that she is divorced and her two children are in their teens. In contrast to this Louise is planning to travel to Australia after her 'A'-levels, and intends to have a career in graphic design. In the following quote Louise refers to these differences:

- JILL            Do you think you'd feel differently about yourself if you put weight on?
- LOUISE        Yes I think you would, it depends on what kind of job you do or your environment around you I do think that would influence you
- JILL            (Pause) What, in terms of - what do you mean?
- LOUISE        Well if you don't like go to work you're not really bothered about your appearance and you probably would put a bit of weight on wouldn't you but if you're like working, say if you're like a fitness instructor you'd be (Louise, Y4, P11).

In this quote then Louise makes an indirect reference to her mother, who conforms to the idea of the woman who doesn't go to work and who is therefore not concerned about her appearance and thus gains weight. Here, then, Louise is asserting that whilst her mother warns her that she will put weight on as she grows older, Louise herself believes that she will not because she will not be in the same life situation as her mother. Thus for Louise fatness is associated with domesticity whereas thinness is associated with having a successful career. This means she will avoid becoming 'like her mother' both in terms of her body size and her more general life pattern.

#### 4.3.4 Summary

In summary, body size was not a particularly salient issue in the lives of several women participating in the study. These women had some acceptance of their bodies regardless of their size and believed that other parts of their identities were more important than their physical appearance. The women therefore rejected the pressure they experienced from other people about their body size. On one level this related to the women's need to assert their autonomy and their identities as independent adults. On another level, the women's rejection of the thin ideal of beauty related to the women's feelings about the female role, where the women rejected traditional femininity and asserted that they wanted different experiences in their lives to those which their mothers had experienced. Here the women's accounts can be seen to be constructed in relation to feminist discourse, which had clearly influenced the way in which these women felt about the importance of body size in their lives.

The women's accounts also contained a number of contradictions in relation to their rejection of the thin ideal or the importance of body size. These contradictions related to the fact that the women continued to regard the opinions of other people about their size as important, particularly the opinions of their boyfriends. For these women, the desire to establish sexual relationships with men conflicts with their desire to establish themselves as autonomous through rejecting the discourses surrounding women, sexual attractiveness and body size. Thus, whilst the women may reject the discourse of the thin ideal, this rejection is contradicted by the women's need to be desired and accepted in sexual relationships. One way in which the women reconciled this contradiction was through reconceptualising the thin ideal in terms of health rather than beauty which allows them to be sexually attractive to others at the same time as presenting the self as autonomous. Here health enables the women to present their concerns about body size in terms of an individual desire to be healthy, which does not relate to social discourses surrounding women's body size.

#### **4.4 The Meanings of Eating: Control, Need and Guilt.**

This section explores the meanings of food and eating for the young women. The first part of the section explores the emotional meanings of food for the women. This involves an exploration of the relationship between the women's 'moods' and the food they ate. Thus the women explained that their eating habits were closely related to their mood or emotional state, so that they ate more food when they felt depressed or bored, or when they felt they 'deserved a treat'. Here food provided the women with feelings of pleasure and enjoyment beyond the simple meeting of physical hunger.

The second part of the section explores the women's attempts to control their food intake. As the majority of the women participating in the study were concerned about their size, food was regarded as something to be controlled in order to ensure that they did not put weight on, or to bring about the weight loss which they desired. This meant that the women denied themselves certain foods and tried to restrict themselves to non-fattening foods. The control of eating resulted in the women asserting that their eating habits should be determined by their physical need for food, so that food should only be eaten when the women felt hungry and when they therefore needed food. However as the women attempted to control their food in relation only to hunger, the fact that they ate food for emotional needs resulted in feelings of guilt and anxiety.

The final part of the section explores the women's definitions of their eating behaviour. Despite the fact that the women were involved in the control of their food intake they did not perceive this as 'dieting'. Dieting was regarded as too extreme and as an inefficient method of losing weight from which the women wished to distance themselves.

##### **4.4.1 The Emotional Meanings of Eating: 'Treating the Self' with Food**

In this section the emotional meanings of eating are explored in relation to the way in which the women in the study altered their eating habits in relation to their mood or emotional state. Here food represented far more than meeting physical hunger with food providing the women with a sense of treating themselves or making themselves feel better when they were down or depressed. Food was also used in this way when the women felt happy or felt that they had gained a particular achievement in their lives. Here food was eaten as a celebration where the women felt that they deserved to eat the foods which they liked despite the fact that they might make them gain weight. Hence food brought the women great feelings of pleasure beyond the simple meeting of physical hunger.

In addition to this the women also ate when they felt bored, which was a common occurrence for the women in the sample. Here the women felt that they were 'stuck in the house' with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Here food provided a diversion for the women, providing them with something to do and giving them something to think about.

The following quote from Helen illustrates the way in which the women ate when they were depressed. Helen talks about eating in these circumstances in terms of an 'out-of-control' discourse which indicates the restriction she places on her food intake so that going beyond this restriction is regarded in extreme terms:

- HELEN                    Well like if I'm depressed or anything I start  
binging on chocolate
- JILL                     Right aha what do you mean by binging?
- HELEN                   Well er I'll go and get I'll get 2 bars of  
chocolate and eat at break time or something
- JILL                     Right is it generally do you eat it because  
you think its going to make you feel better is  
that why?
- HELEN                   I don't know I think when I'm depressed I  
start eating cos I'm I'm like a chocoholic and  
I like my chocolate so I don't know (Helen,  
Y1, P2).

In this quote, Helen explains that when she is feeling down she eats the foods which she regards as forbidden, which are also the foods which she most enjoys. Eating forbidden foods is described in extreme terms, so that eating two bars of chocolate is defined in terms of a binge and in terms of addiction as seen in the use of the term 'chocoholic'. Here the fact that chocolate is forbidden means that eating *two* bars is total over-indulgence. The above quote also illustrates the way in which the women found it difficult to articulate exactly why they ate forbidden foods when they felt depressed or when they were in other emotional states. When the women were asked why they felt that they ate when they felt depressed they were not able to give any in-depth account of this, beyond the fact that they enjoyed chocolate and so it made them feel better when they were depressed. There was no account of *why* chocolate made them feel better or why the women felt that they wanted to eat such foods when they were feeling down.

This difficulty in articulating the reasons behind eating in response to certain moods is further illustrated in the following excerpt from Louise:

- LOUISE I quite like chocolate ( ) if I've got put under pressure and I just want to like relax I just eat a bit of chocolate
- JILL Right I see ( ) right and erm why is that do you think that its something that you deserve or
- LOUISE I think its its just kind of a break so I just like calm down
- JILL Right ( ) do you get quite pressured by work
- LOUISE I can do its just that (inaudible) I know when I was taking my GCSE's there was time when I wouldn't eat and erm I wouldn't eat and as I was like getting nearer and nearer I just started to eat and eat and eat more and more
- JILL Right what do you think what were the thoughts running through your mind then when you when you ( ) started to eat
- LOUISE I don't know I just felt like it (laughs)
- JILL And why do you think you reached for food ( ) was it I mean it might not have been a particularly conscious thing ( ) Is it not something you thought about?
- LOUISE I didn't really think about it I just (laughs) (Louise, Y1, P 1).

In this excerpt Louise explains the way in which her eating habits are affected by her experiences of studying. Thus when Louise is under pressure at school she eats chocolate, which is a food she particularly enjoys. She explains this in terms of the fact that eating provides her with some structure to her studying as well as a break from it. Here eating a favourite food such as chocolate enables Louise to calm down as she takes a break from the pressure of her school work.

In addition to this, Louise's eating habits were affected much more dramatically when she was studying for her exams. Whilst she was studying Louise didn't feel like eating but as she got closer to taking the exams she began to eat 'more and more'. Here however Louise is unable to explain the way in which her emotional feelings about her exams influenced her eating, and the way in which this varied as the exams got closer. Thus, when asked about why she thought she ate in this way, she states that she 'just felt like it' and she 'didn't really think about it'. Louise is unable to understand exactly why she ate in this way, her need to avoid food or eat more of it was not available to conscious thought but was something which was simply experienced as a need for particular style of eating. The women's difficulties in articulating the reasons or thoughts behind these needs made it extremely difficult to investigate the emotional

meanings of food in any great depth. At both the interview and analysis level it was difficult to theorise exactly why the women ate in response to their emotions, so that all that was obtained was the fact that the women did eat in these ways and hence food and eating were complex issues for the women.

The fact that the women ate forbidden food resulted in feelings of guilt for the women in the sample. This guilt related to the fact that the women had 'broken the rules' about food as well as the fact that their insubordination would lead to them to put on weight. This sense of guilt is illustrated in the following passage from Jan:

- JAN I'd say I do eat more things when I'm bored (Right) er if I'm just sat like really bored like in the common room or whatever I tend to eat things like I'll eat like a packet of crisps or you know an apple or something
- JILL Is that more when you're at school than when you're at home or does it happen whatever
- JAN Er I think its more when I'm at school (.) (laughs) when I should be doing something else
- JILL (laughs) You're more bored when you're at school than you are anywhere else perhaps (laughs) don't know. Okay ( ) er how does it make you feel after you've done that ( ) does it affect you in anyway what do you think are your thoughts afterwards?
- JAN Er sometime I think erm (pause) 'Oh God just look at what I've eaten!' sort of thing but other times I think ( ) if I think if I think I've eaten a lot in one particular like hour or whatever I tend to not eat like for the rest of the day or whatever like thinking that you know its going to really help you know (laughs) it like stops me from feeling guilty about what I've eaten (Jan, Y3, P3).

In this quote then we see the way in which the young women ate out of a sense of boredom which was often expressed in terms of eating providing them with something to do when nothing else was available to them. For Jan this results in feelings of horror and guilt at what she has eaten. This horror seems to take place in relation to Jan not being aware of the food that she has eaten. Thus in the line 'Oh God just look at what I've eaten!' she shows how the control which she attempts to exercise over her eating habits is over-ruled for the period whilst she is eating the foods which she normally forbids herself and tries to avoid. After eating these foods however she assesses her food intake in relation to these rules and realises that she has eaten far more than she

'should'. This leads her to attempt to compensate for this by totally restricting her food intake for the rest of the day by eating nothing at all.

The guilt felt by Jan is also illustrated in the following passage from Lisa. Here Lisa also responds to overeating by attempts to severely restrict her food intake:

LISA                   Erm when I'm due on I eat a lot a chocolate well I like to eat a lot of chocolate but then I can't cos it gives me spots so I don't like to eat a lot of chocolate really but I do when I'm feeling a bit low

JILL                   Right that's interesting I was going to ask you about that erm this mood thing. So you're feeling low and you think right I want to eat something I want to eat chocolate why do you think that is? Cos it comes out again and again

LISA                   I think it gives me more energy I don't know really (Right) so but no I just sit there and think I'm totally depressed and especially now my exams are coming up and I just have to go downstairs and binge and then I feel guilty about bingeing you see I'll have to go on a crash diet.

JILL                   Right so what's involved in this bingeing then? what do you mean?

LISA                   Erm I usually get a cup of coffee and then some biscuits and then whatever else we've got in really dive into the fridge and indulge myself.

JILL                   Right okay do you eat quite a lot of food then do you think?

LISA                   I do when I'm really depressed I don't usually when I'm not feeling depressed I just eat at normal meal times just depends on how I'm feeling (Lisa, Y15, P1).

In the first part of the excerpt we see that Lisa attempts to control her eating of certain foods for their effects on parts of her physical appearance other than her weight. The fact that she avoids chocolate because it is bad for her skin adds another source of guilt to the fact that Lisa does eat these foods when she feels in a particular mood. As seen in the above quote from Helen, Lisa constructs her occasional transgressions from the control of her food intake in terms of being 'out-of-control' around food. Thus she describes her eating in terms of bingeing as well as 'diving into the fridge' which suggests a voracious appetite which bursts out of Lisa when she is no longer able to control her eating.

In the above quotes it can therefore be seen that the women ate in response to emotional needs rather than simply when they felt hungry. Here food was regarded as something which brought the women a great deal of pleasure, so that it was eaten to make the self feel better. At the same time, however, the fact that the women felt that their food intake was in need of control resulted in feelings of guilt and 'naughtiness' for the women when they ate more than they felt that they should. As will be illustrated in the next section, this guilt came from the fact that the women felt that they should only eat when they were physically hungry because this was only when their bodies really 'needed' food. This means that the emotional functions which food served for the women could not be acknowledged as some form of 'coping mechanism' which was employed when the women felt particular emotions. Instead it was regarded purely in terms of a break in the women's control of their eating and hence was associated with guilt and stress.

#### 4.4.2 The Physical Meaning of Food: Need, Necessity and Hunger

In this section the meaning of food and eating in relation to a discourse of need and hunger is explored. The women asserted that one should control one's eating so as to only eat when one was physically hungry and when one therefore really 'needed' food. Eating when one was not physically hungry was forbidden to the women because this meant the women did not 'need' food, and because their bodies did not need this food for 'survival' it would result in the women gaining weight. This meant that the women attempted to deny themselves food at all times unless they could define themselves as physically 'hungry'.

The result of the discourse of need for the women was that they felt a great sense of guilt about food and the fact that they ate foods which were defined as forbidden to them because they were not eaten when the woman was actually hungry. The women also felt depressed after eating such foods because they were now likely to put weight on and have to struggle to lose it again in the future. At the same time they felt a sense of anger and defiance that they had to control their food intake in such a restrictive and rigid way. This resulted in the women eating forbidden foods out of a sense of defiance and rebellion, with a determination to enjoy the foods which they normally denied themselves.

The discourse of need is illustrated in the following quote from Maggie who explains her attempts to control her food intake in order to avoid gaining weight. For Maggie trying to keep to her self imposed rules about food is a difficult task because she tends to eat forbidden foods such as chocolate when she is depressed. Here we can see the way in which the emotional meanings of food conflicted with the women's use of a



restrictive physical need discourse which denies the women the comfort they can gain from such eating:

- MAGGIE            If I'm having a really bad day or really down I usually have some chocolate, I buy it for boredom as well if I've got nothing else to do
- JILL                So if we go to the first instance then when you are fed up and you've had a bad day where do you think that food something that comes in then?
- MAGGIE            I don't know really usually because you feel so drained and you are actually hungry (Right) I usually - I don't eat unless I'm hungry (Right) but I'm hungry most of the time
- JILL                Right so do you think it is wrong to eat if you're not hungry?
- MAGGIE            Yeah
- JILL                Why?
- MAGGIE            Because you obviously don't need food if you're not hungry
- JILL                So you should only eat when you need it?
- MAGGIE            Yeah (Maggie, Y13, P5).

In the first part of the quote Maggie explains the way in which food is eaten in order to meet the women's emotional needs, which are here expressed in terms of feeling either down or bored. This is problematic for Maggie, because she attempts to eat only when she is hungry. This means that Maggie attempts not to eat in response to other urges to eat which are not related to physical hunger but to changes in her mood or her feelings about herself. Thus eating when one is down or bored is forbidden because it involves eating when Maggie isn't actually hungry. Unfortunately Maggie feels hungry most of the time so that it is very difficult for her to decide when she should and should not eat. The rule is that one should only eat when one is hungry because only then can one be sure that one needs food and hence one will not put weight on. However the fact that Maggie feels hungry all the time means that she must need food all the time. However she feels that she should not eat all the time as again this may cause weight gain.

In the quote above Maggie uses the need and hunger discourse to justify the fact that she eats food which she regards as forbidden because of their fattening nature. She justifies the fact that she eats forbidden foods by asserting that she feels 'drained and hungry' and hence eating chocolate in this instance is legitimised. Here feeling down is not regarded as an emotional state but as a physical state which results in the feeling of

being drained. Thus Maggie is asserting that her eating chocolate is not over indulgence, but something which she needs because she is hungry. The fact that Maggie needs to explain her eating in terms of feeling hungry indicates the sense of guilt and greed which Maggie feels about eating generally.

In the next quote Maggie goes on to repeat this message about hunger and need but shows that she may actually be unsure about the validity of these needs or her ability to judge her own needs for food:

JILL                   What about erm do you think that do you sometimes think 'Ooh I really deserve this food' I really think that I'd done something so I'm going to treat myself

MAGGIE                Yeah

JILL                   Okay can you give me an example of that?

MAGGIE                It's usually related to school if I've done well at school like when I passed my exams and went out for a like meal a slap up meal (Right) I can't think of any other incidences

JILL                   So it's like a reward then. Do you ever feel guilty about eating?

MAGGIE                Yep when I eat in between meals, if I've eaten a lot and it makes me feel depressed

JILL                   Does it?

MAGGIE                Yeah

JILL                   In what why do you think that is?

MAGGIE                Because I am concerned about my weight and I would like eat less so if I eat more then it makes me depressed

JILL                   Right so are you consciously trying not to eat between meals then but sometimes that doesn't work you do

MAGGIE                Yeah

JILL                   Why's that? Just because you can't ?

MAGGIE                It's just because I'm just starving really

JILL                   Right I see

MAGGIE                Or I think I am (Maggie, Y13, P6).

In this quote Maggie asserts that she does feel guilty about eating and that this guilt relates to the fact that she is concerned about her weight and does not want to put

weight on. On one level Maggie uses a hunger discourse to define when it is permissible to eat. On another level this rule conflicts with other rules about eating which define 'proper eating' in terms of just eating at meal times and not eating between meals. The fact that Maggie feels hungry between meals means that she finds it difficult to decide which food rule she should follow. Should she follow the 'don't eat between meals' rule or the 'eat when you're hungry rule?' At the end of the quote Maggie illustrates the way in which these conflicting discourses resulted in the women feeling confused about their needs for food as well as their feelings of hunger and when and when not to eat. Thus in the line 'I'm just starving really or I think I am', Maggie is unsure either about what her needs really are. This may reveal a worry about how in touch with her hunger Maggie is, or whether she believes she is hungry because she thinks that she wants to eat something. Maggie distrusts her self and perhaps blames herself for the fact that she cannot avoid eating when she feels that she should not.

For another woman, Nicky, there is a great sense of guilt at eating when she feels it is not 'necessary', a guilt which is related to the fact that Nicky wants to lose weight and feels that her failure to do so is related to her own lack of will power.

NICKY                      If I eat too much something that's sweet then I feel as though I start to feel ill for eating it then I feel guilty I think 'Oh I didn't need to really eat all that if I just eaten a little bit or none at all' but that's all (Nicky, Y10, P8).

In this quote we see the attention which Nicky focuses on what she eats as if she is conscious of every mouthful. Again there is the discourse of necessity, that you should only eat what you need. There is also a strong sense of guilt at eating more than one needs which is associated with feelings of sickness and illness.

Relating to the discourse about needs and hunger is a discourse about entitlement to food which was used by some of the women. As illustrated above, the young women felt that one should not eat more than one needs because this is unnecessary, but also fundamentally because the 'extra' food will lead to excess weight or a failure to lose weight. For the women in the sample who felt that they were fatter than the majority, this resulted in a feeling that if one was fat one was not therefore entitled to eat at all. This is shown in my interview with Jan with whom I discussed her feelings about her weight and the way this affected her eating habits. Jan did not enjoy eating which seemed to be related to the self-consciousness she felt when eating. This self-consciousness related to the judgement she felt from others about her eating but also to

a deeper sense of personal disentanglement which resulted from her feelings about her fatness.

In the first quote Jan explains that she does not really enjoy eating. She presents this as 'strange' because of her body size, which illustrates her awareness of cultural discourses surrounding fatness. Here fat people are considered to greatly enjoy food and thus their overeating is the cause behind their fatness. Thus Jan is aware of the fact that she does not fit these stereotypes:

- JILL                    Do you enjoy eating?
- JAN                     Erm ( ) well ( ) it might sound a bit silly but no I don't really enjoy eating at all
- JILL                     Why's that (pause) and why do you say it sounds silly?
- JAN                     It sounds silly because I'm so big you'd think that I'd like to like eating all the time ( ) but like going out for a meal or whatever it just doesn't appeal to me I'd soon as just like eat like little bits here there and everywhere er (Jan, Y3, P1).

Later on in the interview Jan explains this lack of enjoyment of eating in terms of the tension she feels when eating. This tension is based on her feelings about what other people think about her and the fact that she is fat:

- JAN                     Er sometime I think erm (pause) 'Oh god just look at what I've eaten' sort of thing but other times I think ( ) if I think if I think I've eaten a lot in one particular like hour or whatever I tend to not eat like for the rest of the day or whatever like thinking that you know its going to really help you know (laughs) it like stops me from feeling guilty about what I've eaten
- JILL                     Right so do you think that you do feel guilty quite a lot about food?
- JAN                     Yeah I think especially if I'm out if I'm out say in town and I'm eating something I feel like everybody's staring at me and I feel like they're thinking 'Oh no' sort of thing 'She shouldn't be eating that cos like she's really big' (Jan, Y3, P4).

In this quote Jan describes the sense of guilt which she feels about eating. Here she assesses what she eats in relation to some norm of eating which she feels she should not exceed, If she does eat more than this she feels a sense of guilt and attempts to reduce this guilt by denying herself any more food for a certain period of time.

In the latter part of the passage Jan talks about her sense of not being entitled to food because of her size. Fat people are not allowed to eat because even small amounts of food are taken as evidence that that person is overeating. The fat person must present herself as continually on a diet, otherwise she is blamed for her fatness and regarded as greedy and out of control around food. In the next quote we see how this results in Jan feeling as if she is continually being assessed about what she does and does not eat. It is interesting that Jan uses the statement 'just *look* at what I've eaten' in relation to eating. It is as if she is seeing herself through the eyes of others and assessing herself in the same terms as she believes everybody else to be assessing her.

JAN                    Even if it's salad even if its salad like my mum puts a bowl of raw salad in like the table in like middle of the table and she'll say like 'Have some more salad, Jan' I feel like its a trick question like I get some more salad there's going to be big trouble you know its like that all the time its like I must I mean I must be a nervous wreck or something its like I'm sat there and I'm like oh no

JILL                    Do you feel tense?

JAN                    Yeah I feel like I feel like I couldn't enjoy it even if I wanted to

JILL                    Right does it affect your stomach

JAN                    Yeah I get a lot a lot of stomach aches

JILL                    Do you?

JAN                    Yeah its like I'm like 'Oh no its like its teatime oh no' (Jan, Y3, P26).

In this quote then Jan describes the sense of confusion she feels about whether she is entitled to eat or not. Her experiences of being told to lose weight through dieting and the feelings which she has about other people's attitudes towards her size have resulted in feelings of confusion. Thus when her mother offers her foods which are not fattening and therefore not forbidden to her Jan continues to feel that she is not really entitled to this food. She feels that even if she eats this food she will be criticised for it because any food is considered to be the cause of her fatness and to be moving her further away from the possibility of losing weight.

At the same time as feeling guilty about eating for emotional rather than physical needs, the women in the study felt a sense of anger and defiance that they had to control their food intake in such a restrictive and rigid way. Here, eating involved an assertion of needs and a right to needs in a discourse of anger and frustration at the rigidity of food

rules. This resulted in the women eating forbidden foods out of a sense of defiance and rebellion with a determination to enjoy the foods which they normally denied themselves. Here the women asserted that they 'deserved' the foods they enjoyed because of something they had achieved or endured which made them feel they had a right to override the restrictions they ordinarily placed on their eating habits.

This assertion of needs is illustrated in the following quote from Louise, in response to a question about her feelings of greediness. Here there is an assertion that Louise sometimes eats forbidden foods even when she is not depressed, which might legitimise her lack of resistance to a certain extent. Instead she asserts that she eats foods because she feels that she deserves it and that her need to eat such food is justified:

JILL                    Do you ever feel greedy is that something that you ever feel?

LOUISE                Erm every now and then ( ) you know at the weekend I find right I've been at school I've had enough of it I'm just going to like watch television pig out I have times like that (Right) Its not necessarily if I'm depressed or anything I just feel like well I deserve it I've done a week all week at school so

This quote gives us a sense of defiance which Louise feels about food, yet the fact that she told me this story as a result of a question about greediness suggests that she does feel greedy yet she also defies that feeling of greed and 'wrongness'. Louise also talks about the demands that she feels have been made on her by her week at school. She may be feeding herself to counteract these demands.

#### 4.4.3 The Pathologisation of Dieting: Control and Autonomy

This section of the analysis explores the women's definitions of dieting behaviour. Whilst many of the women were concerned about their weight and wanted to lose weight, very few of them described themselves as being on diets. Diets were regarded as extreme behaviours involving either very small amounts of food or dietary substitutes which were perceived as unhealthy and unnatural. Being too concerned with weight and dieting was thus pathologised and regarded as obsessiveness.

The following quote from Caroline illustrates the way in which the women regarded dieting as involving the extreme denial of food so that women who diet hardly eat any food at all. In contrast to this Caroline's own eating habits are presented as less extreme and more 'sensible' than those of other women:

CAROLINE            All they [friends] eat is fruit all the time and if they eat crisps they eat low fat crisps

and one of my friends just gets a bottle of 1 Cal and just fills herself up on that and then she doesn't want to eat anything else, she just has 1 Cal and it makes her feel bloated and she doesn't want any food that's how she's done it really

- JILL Right and what do you think about that?
- CAROLINE I don't think its very good I wouldn't do it
- JILL Right right so with you you'd just you'd try a different a different way to that
- CAROLINE Well I'm not going to diet I'm just going to cut down on food, chocolate and
- JILL What do you mean by a diet then what's your sort of definition or what would you regard as a diet?
- CAROLINE Erm ( ) probably not not eating very much not eating ( ) - eating like low fat things a lot of the time, like, erm crackers and things like that that's what most of my friends - like Riveta and (Right) that's what they seem to be doing instead of cutting down they're eating fruit and crackers and things like that but they're eating chocolate as well and getting themselves up to their 1,000 calories a day but I don't think that's right. I think they should be using their calories, eating like balanced meals but using - instead of like eating crackers and then saying 'Oh I've still got 200 calories I'll have a bar of chocolate' (Caroline, Y8, P11).

In this quote Caroline asserts that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to lose weight. Her friends are involved in the 'wrong' kind of diets which involve eating very little or eating 'diet' foods, such as those which are low in fat. In contrast to this, Caroline defines her own means of food control as the 'right' way to lose weight. This involves 'cutting down' on those foods regarded as particularly fattening. In addition Caroline asserts that one should eat 'balanced meals' which involve more standard foods than those eaten by her friends. Here the discourse of the 'proper meal' is introduced.

The young women's assertions about the 'right' and 'wrong' way to diet may relate to the women's perceptions of the research they were taking part in. The high profile of eating disorders in the media and popular culture (see Chapter Two) may have sensitised the young women to the extreme behaviours involved in anorexia and bulimia. Thus the women may have perceived the research to be about assessing women to see whether they ate properly or whether their eating was disordered. There is thus a pressure on the women to present themselves as 'normal' rather than having an

eating disorder. This can be seen in the above quote from Caroline who defines her friends' eating habits in extreme terms which may be perceived as the behaviours involved in eating disorders. In contrast to this Caroline asserts that she herself is 'sensible' about dieting and is not involved in such extreme behaviour.

The distinction which the women made between diets and their behaviour is shown again in the following quote from Maggie. Here diets are identified as more planned than 'normal' behaviour which she defines in terms of 'cutting down':

- JILL                    Would you say that you were on a diet?
- MAGGIE                No not a diet just try not to eat the things that I shouldn't eat, I try not to eat between meals.
- JILL                    Right, what would being on a diet involve then?
- MAGGIE                Cutting out on fatty foods, the amount I eat.
- JILL                    Do you think there is something wrong with going on a diet? Cos I'm quite conscious that people make a really big distinction between what they're doing and what's a diet, do you know what I mean?
- MAGGIE                A diet's got some - where its like properly planned and worked out probably by a doctor (Right) erm and that's its like worked out exactly what you can eat and how much you can eat and
- JILL                    So it's much more rigid?
- MAGGIE                Yeah.
- JILL                    Do you think it's also more serious then?
- MAGGIE                Yeah, I think if you're on a diet you've got to have something to show at the end you can't be just messing about on the diet one day or another (Maggie, Y13, P11).

Whilst Maggie describes her own behaviour in terms of 'cutting down' on fattening foods and the amount of food that she eats, diets are presented as much more extreme involving eating less regardless of whether foods are fattening or not. In addition, diets are something which are defined by doctors who put women on diets as a form of 'treatment' for being overweight. This medicalisation of diets means that they are regarded as much more serious than the control which Maggie attempts to exercise over her own food intake. They are something which one embarks on expecting to lose weight because one has stuck to the diet for a long period of time. In contrast to this Maggie's attempt to lose weight through 'cutting down' is something which one may



only carry out for a short period of time and which one does not expect to be as successful as a 'proper diet'. In this respect diets may be regarded as something which only women defined as 'medically overweight' need to go on. Women such as Maggie, who are not 'overweight' (although they still wanted to lose weight), are not in need of such diets.

The women's rejection of diets may relate to their desire to present themselves as autonomous which, as seen in sections 4.2.2 and 4.3.2, was an important issue for this sample of women. Thus the fact that diets are defined by women's doctors may imply that women on diets are not attempting to lose weight because they themselves want to. Instead they may be losing weight because they had been advised to lose weight by others who regard them as overweight. In addition the fact that women on diets are following the instructions of other people may imply that they are not in control of their attempts to control their weight. Here they have to gain advice from their doctors, which implies a lack of self control and autonomy. Thus for the women participating in this study, being on a diet may represent both being controlled by others and hence involves being a dependent rather than an autonomous individual.

#### 4.4.4 Summary

In summary, the young women were involved in the control of their food intake although they regarded this control as far less extreme than that which other people were involved in. The women felt that they should only eat in accordance with physical hunger so that eating more than this resulted in feelings of guilt and anxiety. Here the fact that eating involved the meeting of emotional needs was not seen as a legitimate reason for eating.

Despite this control the women did not define their behaviour as dieting but as 'cutting down'. Dieting was seen as much more extreme than 'cutting down'. This rejection of extreme food control is likely to relate to the women's desire to avoid being defined as eating disordered. In addition the women's rejection of diets which were defined by others may relate to the women's desire to be autonomous and to lose weight for themselves rather than for anybody else.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

This chapter has explored the meanings surrounding body size and food for a group of women aged between sixteen and eighteen who had not been diagnosed as having an eating disorder. The final section of the chapter aims to summarise the main findings of

the thematic analysis of the interviews with the women in relation to the initial research aims of the study. The findings are related back to the relevant literature and the points to be discussed in comparison to the other studies (see Chapter Nine) are outlined.

### **5.1 Body Size, Sexual Relationships and Sexual Attractiveness**

The findings of this study indicate that body size was very important in the young women's lives because of its relationship to sexual attractiveness. Sexual attractiveness was important at this point in the women's lives because of their desire to establish sexual relationships with men. Having a thin and therefore attractive body was vital in ensuring that the women managed to 'catch a man', and so being in a relationship confirmed a woman's feelings of confidence in her body size. The women's desire to lose weight can be linked to the way in which the young women constructed their feelings about their bodies in relation to the thin ideal of beauty, which equates thinness with attractiveness, and which defines women's value in relation their physical appearance.

The emphasis which the young women placed on their sexuality and sexual attractiveness was paralleled by the importance placed on the women's bodies by others in their lives. The women's bodies were particularly 'visible' in the women's relationships with their boyfriends, where their bodies were displayed by their boyfriends as a source of pride and status. The sense of visibility surrounding the young women's bodies resulted either in feelings of pride and approval or in feelings of self-consciousness when the women felt that their bodies did not receive the approval of others.

The importance placed on body size in the young women's relationships with others illustrates the need for a more complex conceptualisation of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies than is currently present in mainstream psychological research. As discussed in Chapter Two, recent research on the social factors surrounding body size has conceptualised dissatisfaction in terms of the influence of media ideals on women. This conceptualisation neglects the role of wider social attitudes towards body size. The findings of this study indicate that any theorisation of these issues needs to consider the role which women's relationships play in women's feelings about their bodies. Thus rather than women simply being influenced by media ideals they also come into contact with social discourses through their interaction with others. This fits in with a symbolic interactionist theorisation of the self which is the theoretical model developed in this thesis (see Chapter Nine for a further discussion of this issue).

## **5.2 Body Size, Food and Autonomy**

A major finding of this study relates to the theme of autonomy. At this stage in the life span the women were concerned with establishing themselves as autonomous and independent individuals who had their own opinions and identities and who were therefore uninfluenced by the opinions of others. In relation to body size and food, this resulted in the women rejecting the influence of social discourses or interpersonal pressures on their feelings about their bodies. Thus the women asserted that they did not want to lose weight because they were influenced by others but because they themselves wanted to be thinner. Here thinness was presented as an individual ideal rather than one defined in a social context.

The need for autonomy can also be seen in the finding that the women did not define their control of their eating habits as actual 'dieting'. Here dieting was constructed as an extreme form of food control involving women in eating either very small amounts of food or 'unnatural' slimming foods. Whilst the women's rejection of dieting may relate to their attempts to avoid being defined as having a 'disordered' relationship to food, it may also represent an attempt by the women to construct themselves as autonomous. Here dieting was defined as involving a set of eating rules defined by others, such as women's doctors. This implied a sense of the women being able to control their own food intake as well as being 'told' to go on a diet by someone else. This conflicted with the women's need for autonomy thus resulting in a rejection of the label of 'diet' for the women's food control methods.

The women's assertions of autonomy can be related to social discourses surrounding femininity and women's worth and value. As discussed in Chapter Two, these discourses define women's worth in terms of their appearance (Bordo, 1993; Ussher, 1989). The women's accounts indicate that there was a close relationship between their feelings about their bodies and their sense of self. Physical appearance was extremely important to the women's sense of themselves, where the women felt that they would 'feel better about themselves' if they lost weight and where 'feeling bad about the self' was associated with feeling fat and unattractive. Again then, the meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to social discourses.

The use of both a thin ideal discourse and an autonomy discourse can be related to the importance of developing a strong sense of self worth and value, in isolation from the opinions of others and to the importance of establishing relationships. On one level, wanting to be thin was related to women's feelings about themselves because thinness is surrounded by social discourses which equate thinness with happiness, confidence and success. On another level, it was related to the importance of sexual relationships in the

women's lives, so that thinness was associated with being desirable and hence with establishing relationships. Both these issues were important for the young women.

These findings have implications for the applications of research on the role of cultural factors in women's dissatisfaction with their body size. As discussed in Chapter Two, research within mainstream psychology has viewed dissatisfaction in terms of the internalisation of media images of women, who are portrayed in terms of a thin ideal of beauty. Here women are conceived as comparing themselves to the ideal and hence feeling unhappy when their bodies do not conform to this standard. If such research has the aim of understanding the 'causes' behind women's dissatisfaction with their bodies in order to reduce this dissatisfaction, it may be counter productive for adolescent women. Many of the young women were themselves aware of this theory and rejected it in their assertions of autonomy. They regarded such a theory as implying that they were not autonomous individuals and that they were the 'passive dupes' of sociocultural factors or media images of women.

### **5.3 Resistance and Feminist Discourses**

A small number of women in the study (n=4) acknowledged the role of cultural or media factors in their own and other women's dissatisfaction with their body size. These women challenged and questioned the external pressures surrounding women in relation to their size and asserted that they should be valued for 'what I am, not for what I look like'. On one level, the use of a feminist discourse can again be related to the women's need to assert their autonomy and independence and to develop a sense of self worth and value. Here the women's acknowledgement of the social discourses surrounding body size involved the recognition that these discourses attempted to influence women to abandon their individuality in order to all 'look the same'. The women who acknowledged the existence of social discourses therefore rejected them in order to construct the self as autonomous.

The women's need for autonomy can also be seen in the contradictions contained in the accounts of the women who rejected the importance of body size. Whilst asserting that women should be allowed to be whatever size they wanted to be, the women continued to want to avoid weight gain thus implying that 'fat is bad'. Here, however, the women constructed their concern with body size in terms of a concern with health. Here health was again constructed as an individualised concern which was not related to social discourses. Again the women were able to construct themselves as autonomous.

On another level, the women's rejection of the thin ideal related to the women's feelings about the female role, where the women rejected traditional femininity and

asserted that they wanted different experiences in their lives to those which their mothers had experienced. Here the women's accounts can be seen to be constructed in relation to feminist discourse which had clearly influenced the way in which these women felt about the importance of body size in their lives.

The findings of the study indicate that this was only the case for the minority of women participating in the study, so that few of the women appeared to be influenced by feminism. It is possible that this relates to the contemporary backlash surrounding feminism which occurred at the time in which these young women were growing up and entering puberty and adolescence. This backlash may have influenced the young women's feelings about body size and sexual attractiveness so that the women continued to regard their physical appearance as an important part of their identities and their sense of worth to both themselves and others.

Such a conceptualisation of the women's minimal use of a feminist discourse does not account for the fact that a small number of women in the sample did use this discourse. The women who did use a feminist discourse can be seen to have experienced relationships where body size had been a particular issue and where the women felt particularly evaluated in terms of their body size. Thus for Jan, for example, there was a great deal of conflict in her relationship with her mother over her size. The use of a feminist discourse can thus be related to the fact that this discourse may have had particular meaning for these women in relation to their experiences of relationships. Here then the use of different discourses can be related to the women's actual biographical experiences, where there is active reflection upon different social discourses which are used on the basis of the meaning they have for the individual (see Chapter Nine)

A further contradiction in the accounts of the women using a feminist discourse related to the inconsistencies in women's feelings about the opinions of others about their bodies and the role which this played in their feelings about their bodies. Whilst these women rejected the social and relational pressures surrounding body size, the women defined their bodies in relation to the definitions and approval given by other people (particularly their boyfriends). Here then the women used a combination of contradictory and opposing discourses to construct their experiences.

This combination of discourses can be related to the power and pervasiveness of certain social discourses which make it difficult for women to conceptualise their experiences in alternative terms. Thus the women in this study attempted to construct their experiences in relation to an alternative discourse but this discourse did not adequately

account for their experiences and feelings. Here whilst the women used a feminist discourse, they continue to be involved in relationships which are structured around the thin ideal. Thus whilst the women rejected external pressures through a feminist discourse, this discourse did not adequately account for their experiences of sexual relationships and the importance of their body size in these relationships.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the meanings of food and body size for the young women were related to the importance of sexuality and autonomy at this stage of the women's lives. The women participating in the sample were concerned with establishing their identity as sexual individuals who were sexually attractive and hence capable of establishing sexual relationships with men. At the same time however the women were concerned with defining themselves as autonomous individuals who had an identity which was separate from and independent of 'external' opinions and influences in the form of interpersonal relationships or social factors. The combination of these two needs for the women were found to be closely related to the role which body size and food played in their lives, as well as to the contradictions which were found in the women's accounts.