

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

**VOLUME 2**

**By**

**Jillian Rachel Tunaley**

**Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry**

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **STUDY TWO:**

#### **THE THIRTIES AND FORTIES: DIVERSITY, CHANGE AND RESISTANCE**

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

This chapter explores the meanings surrounding body size and food for women aged between thirty and forty five, looking 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. In terms of age factors there is an investigation of the influence of the woman's position in the life span and the specific experiences which this brings, and an exploration of the effect of being a particular age in relation to societal discourses surrounding women in this age group. In terms of cohort factors there is an exploration of the influence of the specific social, cultural and historical time period in which the women were born, experienced childhood, passed through puberty and adolescence and developed into young and middle adulthood.

The potential issues of age and cohort for this age group of women are explored below to provide some background for the study and to outline research questions. 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 Eight.

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

This section of the chapter discusses the literature surrounding women in their thirties and forties in relation to body size and food in order to provide some background for the study and to outline its research questions. It begins with a discussion of the diversity of the life experiences of women in this age group in order to discuss the issues surrounding

the sample criteria of the study. This is followed by a discussion of the way in which this diversity of experience relate to the meanings surrounding body size and food for women in this age group.

The women on which this study is based were selected in terms of a specific age range of thirty to forty five years. The age group of the study (defined here as middle adulthood) represents a mid-point between Studies One (sixteen to eighteen year olds) and Three (over sixty year olds). In addition, the lower age range of thirty was chosen because thirty is often regarded as a negative 'landmark' for women signalling emergence from being 'young' and hence being defined as 'sexually attractive' in relation to discourses surrounding the 'thin' and 'young' ideal of female beauty.

This age group of women can be seen to bridge the boundaries of definitions between early and middle adulthood. There are debates surrounding how to define these stages of the life span, and over which chronological ages define each stage. The designated ages are often arbitrary and are not absolute or distinct (Lerner, 1986). Thus, Levinson (1986) defines early adulthood as between the age of 17 and 45, with the transition to middle adulthood beginning at age 40. Alternatively, Havighurst (1972) defines early adulthood as between the age of 18 and 35 and middle adulthood as between 35 and 60. In this study the women are referred to as being in 'middle adulthood', although it is recognised that some of the women participating in the study could be defined as being in the stage of early adulthood.

As will be discussed below (section 3.1), the women in this study were not selected in relation to their marital status or to the presence or age of children. In part this relates to the difficulties in obtaining participants conforming to very specific sample criteria (see section 3.2 below), but also because the study aims to explore and hence acknowledge the diversity of the lives of women at this stage of the life span.

Life span studies have traditionally defined women's lives in terms of the family life span, so that women are conceptualised as passing through a number of different phases based on their marital status and the ages of their children (Murphy, 1987; Allatt et al., 1987). Hence women are categorised in terms of stages in the family life span such as (i) single, independent and childless (ii) married and childless (iii) married with young children (iv) married with teenage children (v) married with children having left the family home (vi) death of one spouse (vii) death of remaining spouse (see Murphy, 1987). Such models have been criticised for their presentation of an idealised 'family form' and for their prescription of restrictive life patterns for women, which denies the importance of work or other experiences in their lives. As discussed in Chapter Five, this forms part of the way in which life span research has focused on the reproductive events

of women's lives, such as menstruation, pregnancy and the menopause (Unger and Crawford, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Ussher, 1989; Howell, 1981; Barnett and Baruch, 1978) which in turn links to the restriction of women in patriarchal society to heterosexual, reproductive or domestic roles (Itzin, 1986, 1984).

There is now substantial evidence to suggest that few of the lives of contemporary women follow the pattern suggested in family life span models. This is due to increases in divorce rates, the number of single parents, and the number of women returning to work whilst their children are still young. In addition to this an increasing number of women are now remaining single all their lives or are choosing not to have children. Women's lives are thus becoming increasingly diverse as women attempt to cope with the financial, social and psychological implications of these changes. Any study of women at this life stage needs to take this diversity into account. In addition, however, it needs to be recognised that despite the statistics about the 'breakdown of the family' women still have traditional expectations about their lives. For example, in Griffin's (1985) study of young women's entry into the job market, women continued to expect their lives to be shaped by marriage and children in the traditional pattern of the family life span.

Having outlined the diversity of life experiences for women of the age range which this study explores, there is a need to outline the way in which these experiences relate to the meanings surrounding body size and food for women.

## **2.1 Sexuality and Sexual Relationships**

One of the main issues explored in this study, as well as in the thesis as a whole, relates to the relationship between the subjective meanings of body size, women's feelings about their sexuality and sexual relationships, and the social discourses surrounding female sexuality at different points in the life span. As discussed in Chapter Five, these social discourses involve a socially constructed ideal defining female beauty in terms of a young body (Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; Chernin, 1983; Sontag, 1972) which is devoid of any signs of physical ageing in the form of wrinkles, weight gain or 'sagging' body parts (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Gerike, 1990; Sontag, 1972). In contemporary Western society, this emphasis on a young beauty ideal results in women becoming sexually ineligible at a much younger age than men and consequently women begin to be concerned about 'getting older' much earlier in their lives (Sontag, 1972). For many women, the age of thirty is experienced as the first 'landmark' in these concerns, representing the end of being regarded as a 'young woman' by both herself and others. Such discourses are likely to affect how a woman feels about her own sexual attractiveness, as she moves past the young beauty ideal, as well as how she feels about the sexual relationships she is currently involved in.

Study One explored body size and food in late adolescence, focusing on women's developing sexuality and initial experiences of heterosexual relationships, where sexual attractiveness was important in relation to the young women's attempts to 'catch a man' (Chapter Six). In contrast to this, Study Two explores body size and food in relation to the experience of being in a longer term relationship, in terms of women's attempts to 'keep their man' and maintain relationships. This exploration takes place in relation to the potential 'threat' which other younger, and hence more attractive (in accordance with social definitions of female beauty), women represent.

## **2.2 Body Size, Food and Motherhood**

As well as exploring sexuality and sexual relationships, Study Two also examines the influence of children on the meanings surrounding body size and food. The meaning of body size is therefore explored in relation to the weight gain associated with pregnancy, which many women experience as physically awkward and unattractive (Ussher, 1989), and the longer term effects of pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding, all of which result in a body which is less firm and more fleshy than stereotypical beauty ideals (Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984).

As discussed in Chapter Five, pregnant women or mothers are culturally defined as asexual (Ussher, 1989) as part of the Madonna whore dichotomy and the cultural stereotype defining the wife and mother role in terms of the self sacrificing care and nurturance of others (Orbach, 1993, 1988). On this level, concern with one's own sexuality and sexual appearance (and hence with one's body size) may be conceptualised as selfishness, as women are taught to care for the bodies of others before their own (Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1993). Such a discourse ties into conceptualisations of beauty concerns as signs of women's inherent vanity (Bordo, 1993; see Chapter Two). Thus whilst vanity and preoccupation with physical appearance may be tolerated in adolescent women, by the time women are wives and mothers they may be expected to forgo their interest in fashion and cosmetics in the interests of their homes and families.

On another level, women who 'give up' on their appearance after marriage and children may also face disapproval and criticism. Thus at the same time as being encouraged to pay less attention to their appearance, women are warned that they should not 'let themselves go' through paying little or no attention to the way they look. 'Don't let yourself go' is used as a threat and a warning for women in order to avoid the loss of the husband to a more attractive (and usually younger) woman. Heterosexual women are therefore encouraged to care for their appearance in order to 'please' their man, but she must not go beyond this to a personal interest in her appearance as this would signify self interest and hence a lack of femininity.

### **2.3 Cohort Factors, Body Size and Food**

A further issue to be considered in this study involves the influence of cohort factors on the meanings surrounding body size and food. The women interviewed in Study Two were born in the 1950s and 1960s and hence had experienced a different social and cultural environment to the women interviewed in the other studies. On one level, there must be a consideration of the fact that because ideals of female beauty are socially and historically constructed (see Chapter Two), women of different cohorts will have experienced different social discourses surrounding body size and food. This means that the subjective meanings of body size and food, which are theorised as being constructed through a process of interaction and active reflection upon social discourses, may be different for different cohorts of women. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is evidence to show that the beauty ideal has become increasingly thinner over the last three decades. Therefore for the women in the age group of this study, the thin 'Twiggy' ideal of the 1960s emerged as the women were growing up and entering early adulthood. There is 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.

A second cohort change which needs to be considered in this study centres around changes in cultural definitions of women and the female role across the twentieth century. The growth of the women's movement in the 1960s resulted in challenges to many of the prevailing cultural attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour. This involved the challenging of the double standard of sexual behaviour and a move towards sexual and reproductive freedom for women. In addition to this, women in this period began to move into the work place so that marriage and children did not automatically mean leaving employment for a life of domesticity and child care.

The influence of popular feminism on women is likely to vary with the age at which feminism was encountered. For the older women interviewed for Study Three (Chapter Eight), the second wave of feminism was experienced in their thirties and forties, perhaps when they were already settled with children and a husband and when they had had no chance to develop the skills necessary to develop a career outside the home. Similarly the young women interviewed for Study One (Chapter Six) had experienced childhood and adolescence in the 1980s era of 'post-feminism'. Here feminism was declared by many as an out-moded and out-dated concept despite the fact that many of the oppressive and discriminatory practices towards women continued to exist (Faludi, 1992). In contrast to these two groups, the women in Study Two grew up at a time when the women's movement was being established and when the work of the movement appeared to be resulting in changes in cultural attitudes and practices. Subsequently however, they too have experienced the backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992). The effects of

experiencing the changing face of feminism at different points in the life span are therefore explored in this study.

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

#### **3.1 Sample Criteria**

The study was designed around two main sample criteria centring around life stage and clinical status. These criteria were formulated as below:

##### (i) Age Range: Thirty to Forty Five Year Olds

As discussed above, the age range of thirty to forty five was defined because it represented a mid-point between the age ranges involved in Studies One and Three. In addition to this the lower age range of thirty was chosen because thirty is often regarded as a negative 'landmark' for women signalling emergence from being young and hence sexually attractive.

##### (ii) Acknowledging Diversity

As discussed in section 2, this chapter aims to explore the diversity of women's experiences in middle adulthood, rather than defining women in terms of their position within the family life span. In order to explore this diversity an attempt was made to recruit women who were married, divorced and single as well as women who did and did not have children.

##### (iii) Clinical Status

As in Study One, a third sample criteria for Study Two involved the women's clinical status in relation to body size and eating. The research carried out for this thesis aims to explore the meanings of body size and food for women who are not diagnosed as having an eating disorder. Thus a further sample criteria of this study was that the women should not be clinically defined as having an eating disorder.

#### **3.2 Recruitment Process**

The sampling criteria for Study Two were defined at the beginning of the main stage of the research when the life span design of the whole of the main study was decided upon. It was not until the recruitment stage of the research that a number of problems were identified in gaining access to women meeting such criteria. These problems focused around two main areas. Firstly, of the three age groups investigated in the thesis women in their thirties and forties were identified as the least likely to have the time necessary to take part in the study. This is because women of this age group are likely to be involved in both paid work outside the home as well as the care of the family and the home. It was

decided that offering a small payment for taking part in the study would provide some incentive for participation in the study. The amount offered was relatively small (£3 per interview) because of the difficulties of obtaining such money from the University. However for many of the women, particularly those who were recruited from a college of further education (see below), this amount was a big enough incentive to take part.

A second problem identified at the recruitment phase of the research centred around the identification of possible locations where women meeting the sampling criteria were to be found. In Study One (Chapter Six) and Study Three (Chapter Seven) participants were recruited through the school or leisure activities which the women of these age groups were engaged in by virtue of their age. Thus, the young women were selected by identifying the school year which corresponded to the age criteria of the study. The older women were recruited from recreational and educational groups created for people specifically of their age. In contrast to this, women in their thirties and forties do not tend to be involved in such age-related activities. It was therefore decided that recruitment would take place at a number of different work and leisure locations, which were thought to be likely to involve women in the thirty to forty five age group.

The locations which were chosen for recruitment included locations I had access to through my status as a researcher at a university as well as locations in the wider community. The university locations included the university student union building and one of the university hospitals. Locations within the wider community included a local church hall where recreational and leisure activities were carried out and a local doctors' surgery. Recruitment was also carried out at a local college of further education which ran a large number of academic and non academic courses attended by many different sectors of the population. A number of women meeting the criteria of the study were identified as studying at the college on access courses. These courses generally lasted one or two years and provided people who had left school without qualifications to gain access to further education. It was therefore decided that recruitment within the college would be mainly directed at this group.

In all recruitment locations, recruitment was carried out by a similar process, although brief details for each of the individual locations are given below. Firstly, permission was obtained from the appropriate sources to allow recruitment to take place. Secondly, details of the study were displayed on large posters in each of the five locations. The posters gave details about the main aims of the study and age requirements of the study and provided information about the length of the interviews. The poster also offered volunteers a small payment (£3) for taking part (see Appendix Two). My university address and telephone number were then provided to enable interested volunteers to find out more information and arrange an interview.

Recruitment details for the individual locations were as follows:

(i) University Student's Union: Secretarial and Catering staff

Permission to display recruitment posters within the union was obtained and the posters were then displayed on staff notice boards which were used to provide staff with trade union information as well as advertising activities and events (such as aerobics classes and jumble sales).

(ii) University Hospital: Nursing, Secretarial and Catering staff.

Recruitment at this location was carried out in two main ways. Firstly, posters were displayed on staff notice boards (which were similar to those in the university student's union) at various points around the hospital. Secondly, a more active recruitment process was carried out in the hospital cafeteria. This involved distributing leaflets with details about the study to the nurses, administrative and technical staff who were eating there. Leaflets were placed on the tables but I also directly talked to people about the study and asked if they would like to take part. I also gave leaflets to a member of the catering staff to distribute in the kitchens. The leaflets gave the same details as the posters and again provided contact details for interested volunteers.

(iii) Further Education College

Recruitment at the college was carried out in a number of stages. Firstly posters were displayed around the college, with volunteers instructed to call at the student union office of the college to arrange interviews. Here a timetable was provided for volunteers to fill in when they would be able to come for interview. The second stage of recruitment involved more direct contact with students at the college. Contact was made with one of the tutors on the women's studies module of the access course. This tutor agreed to tell her students about the study based on the information given on the posters. Again volunteers were asked to make an appointment for an interview by coming to the student union office.

(iv) Church Hall

Recruitment in the church hall involved the displaying of posters in the entrance to the hall where they could be seen by people attending recreational and educational events.

(v) Local doctors' surgery

In order to display posters about the study in the doctors' surgery permission was obtained from the practice. The posters were then displayed on a notice board in the patients' waiting room.



### **3.3 Participant Characteristics**

A total of nineteen women were recruited for the study. One woman was recruited from the doctors' surgery but was eventually excluded from the study. In the course of the interview with this participant it emerged that she had previously been diagnosed as bulimic and was still suffering from this disorder. This woman was excluded from the study because she did not meet the sample criteria. Eighteen participants were therefore included in the study. Twelve of these women were recruited from the further education college, although only ten of these women were currently studying at the college. The remaining two women recruited from the college had studied there previously and had seen the posters about the study when coming back to visit. Of the remaining six women recruited for the study, three were employed at the university students union, two were recruited from the church hall and one was employed at the university hospital.

The women ranged in age from 31 to 45 years, with an average age of 38. Half of the women interviewed for the study were currently in a relationship (n=9). Six of these women were married and three were living with their partners. Two of the women who were currently in relationships had been divorced and were now with their second husband or partner. Of the nine women not currently with partners, eight had been in previous long term relationships but were now either divorced or separated.

Divorce or separation was particularly prevalent in the women recruited from the further education college as only four of the twelve women at college were in a relationship at the time of the interview. Of the remaining eight women, one woman had never been in a long term relationship and seven were divorced, or were separated from their husbands or partners. For the six women who were not recruited from the college, five were currently in a relationship (although two were on their second marriage or partner). Fourteen of the women interviewed in this group had children (average number 1.78, range 0 to 4) with one woman in the group being pregnant at the time of the interview. The implications of the differences between the women recruited from the college and the women recruited from other sources will be discussed later in the chapter (section five).

All but one of the women participating in the study were white, with the remaining women being of African-Caribbean origin. The majority of the women (n=10) recruited for the study were not currently employed because they were full time students. The women were planning to go on to study for degrees and other courses in higher education. They planned to be social workers, nursery nurses, teachers, counsellors or legal executives, or to do further courses in history and communication studies. The women interviewed had been or were currently employed in a variety of jobs. These included administrative and secretarial work, recreational officers, retail management, marketing and sales, factory work, cleaning, catering, care assistants, community work,

nursing and midwifery, and housing. Their partners were sales representatives, catering workers, students, police officers, unemployed, engineers, and fitters.

Interviews with the middle women lasted between 30 minutes and one-and-a-half hours with an average of 62 minutes.

### **3.4 Design**

The design of the interviews for the study was similar to that of Study One (Chapter Six) in that it was based around a flexible interview guide. The guide listed potential areas of discussion, which allowed some comparison across interviews and across samples, but also allowed the women to explore areas which they saw as relevant to the interview. The guide listed possible areas of discussion grouped under headings related to particular areas of interest (see Appendix Two). The majority of these areas were similar to those on the interview guide of Study One. However there were exceptions to this, particularly in relation to the different relationships which the women were involved in because of their position in the life span. Thus whilst questions in Study One focused on the women's boyfriends, friends and family of origin, questions in Study Two additionally focused on the woman's family since her marriage. Other areas also related to the different life experiences of these women, such as the influence of pregnancy and childbirth on feelings about body size.

### **3.5 Procedure**

#### **3.5.1 The Interview Process**

As the women taking part in the study were recruited from a number of different locations the interviews took place in a variety of different places. All the women recruited from the college (n=12) were interviewed in a room at the student union of the college. Although the room was comfortable with easy chairs and coffee making facilities, it was quite noisy because it was next door to a busy office. Luckily this noise did not appear to affect the women although the poor quality of the tapes of the interviews occasionally made transcription difficult.

Of the six women recruited from the other three sources, five were interviewed in their own homes and one in the psychology department of the University. The interview carried out in the psychology department took place in a small, quiet interview room furnished with easy chairs. Home interviews generally took place in the kitchen or living room. In these situations the women's children were often in the room and the interview had to be flexible enough to accommodate noises and interruptions. Here an attempt was made to be as relaxed as possible, with pauses whilst the women 'checked' on their children or when children needed a drink or to be taken to the toilet. This was part of the

way in which I attempted to reduce the power differentials in the research process through valuing the time and effort the women were contributing to the study and thus not restricting the time which I myself spent at each interview.

The interviews began with a brief introduction, providing details about the aims and research questions of the study. I also gave the participant my name, details of my status as a postgraduate research student and information about where I was studying. Again this represented an attempt to decrease the power differentials in the interview relationship through presenting myself as a person rather than a 'faceless' expert. The women in this study were more up-front than the young women and asked questions about myself and the study at the start of the interview, rather than waiting until the end of the interview as the young women did. This helped to establish a relationship with the women as we exchanged common experiences of further and higher education or discussed career plans.

Following this, the format of the interview was explained to the women. This involved informing the participant that the interview would last for approximately one hour although it was stressed that this depended on how much time the woman had available and how much she had to say. The participant was then assured that the interview would be both confidential and anonymous. This was followed by asking for the woman's consent to the interview being audio-taped. If consent was obtained (which it was in all cases) the format of the interview guide was explained to the women, who were given a copy of the guide to read before the interview started. Again, the participants were informed that the guide was not meant to be inclusive or to be followed in any particular order, and that the aim of the interview was to explore whatever experiences she thought were relevant to the discussion. When the participant had read the guide the tape recorder was switched on and the interview began.

As in Study One, the interview was managed in three stages, including a 'warming-up' stage, the main body of the interview and a 'winding-down' stage.

### Warming-up Stage

The aim of the 'warming-up' stage was to put the participant at ease and establish some connection between the researcher and the participant. This involved asking the woman details about her age, past and present employment and whether she was in a relationship or not. It also included questions about her partner's job and whether she had any children. For the women studying at college there was also a discussion about their current course and plans for the future. Background information was also useful at this point because it avoided interruptions later in the interview. This part of the interview was

extremely interesting to carry out as the women had had a wide variety of different experiences.

### Main Interview Stage

The main part of the interview involved the discussion of the areas on the interview guide. The interviews generally began with straightforward questions about the woman's personal eating habits, such as 'Do you enjoy food?' Following this, however, the majority of the interviews were very flexible and rarely stuck to the order of questions listed on the guide.

### 'Winding-down' or Ending Stage

The final part of the interview involved the 'winding-down' or 'ending' stage. This involved asking the woman for feedback on the interview through asking whether there were any questions which she had thought I would ask but which had not been raised in the interview. The women were also asked if they had any further comments to make in order to provide the participant with another opportunity to make any final remark or comment which they might not have felt appropriate to raise at another point in the interview.

As in Study One, the winding down phase involved ensuring that the participant did not leave the interview feeling upset or vulnerable. As stated above, a small number of the women in this study were extremely distressed about their body size and eating habits. For some of these women the interview represented the first time they had explored these feelings and behaviours. It was therefore extremely important to ensure that these women did not leave until they felt that they could cope with the feelings they had explored in the interview. In addition some of the women who were distressed in the interview expressed a need for help with their feelings about body size and eating, particularly those who had not talked about their distress before. As I am not a qualified counsellor or therapist I found these interviews difficult because I felt I had little to offer the women in terms of practical advice and help. I was concerned that I had 'used' my participants, encouraging them to share their experiences with me for the sake of research data, whilst receiving little in return. In these situations the women were offered information about counselling services or were given the address of the Eating Disorders Association in order for them to find out about self help groups in their area.

For the women who were not particularly distressed in the interview such support was not needed. Nevertheless I felt it was important to ensure that the woman felt she had been listened to and that her experiences would be taken into account. All interviews were ended by thanking the woman and telling her that I had enjoyed talking to her and that she

had said some interesting things which would be useful to the study. When she felt that she was ready, the 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, any difficulties which I had experienced in carrying out the interview and possible ways in which my interviewing technique could be improved. This was followed by notes about the themes raised in the interviews, as well as how these themes related to the literature and to themes arising in 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

In comparison to Study One, the majority of the women in Study Two were confident and skilled in reflecting upon and talking about their experiences. Of all the interviews I carried out for the thesis, the interviews for Study Two were the most enjoyable and the most relaxed. In part this can be explained by the fact that these interviews were the last I carried out for the thesis and so benefited from my increased confidence and improved interviewing skills. In addition to this, however, the fact that the women were quite close to me in age also made the interviews enjoyable as well as easier to carry out. I found that I identified with the experiences of these women far more than those of the young or older women. This also seemed to be the case for the women themselves as they asked a number of questions about my experiences and my feelings in the interviews. In these situations I openly shared my own experiences with the women.

### 3.5.3 Method of Analysis

#### Transcription

Analysis of the interviews followed a similar method to that described in Study One (Chapter Six). Analysis began immediately after the interviewing stage with the taking of field notes as described above. These field notes were extremely useful because the analysis of the interviews did not take place until some months later. During this break other parts of the research were carried out and the tapes from the study were transcribed. In this case only one of the tapes was transcribed by myself with the remaining tapes being transcribed with secretarial help. In these cases all identifiers were removed to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Again I 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

Following the transcription of the transcripts, a more complete familiarisation with the transcripts took place. This was achieved by detailed readings of each transcript as well as underlining interesting passages and adding notes and comments in the margins. Following this the transcripts were slowly read through on the computer screen and a cutting and pasting procedure again took place (Morse, 1992). Passages from the text were labelled as particular themes for which a separate computer file was created and named. 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 'M5, P22'. This label consisted of an identifier for each woman which took the form of the letter 'M' which distinguished between the different age groups of women interviewed in the main study (the women in this study were in the middle of those in Studies One and Three), followed by a number relating to the chronology of the interview. The second part of the identifier consisted of a number representing the page in the transcript from which the passage came.

Some of the themes identified in the first stages of analysis were originally vague and unformulated. For example a file labelled 'eating and mood' was created which consisted of all pieces of text where the women discussed the way in which their mood affected their eating. Other themes were more specific, drawing on earlier analyses of different age groups for example. Thus the identification of the themes of resistance and autonomy in the young women study meant that all references to such a theme in the interviews for the current study were also put into a file labelled 'resistance' or 'autonomy'. Following this original cutting and pasting, a more detailed analysis of the themes was carried out. For each theme, all the instances within the theme were read in a complex process of comparison, looking for similarities and differences. Gradually this is built up into a theorisation about the theme. In addition to this many of the themes were either subdivided (particularly the less specific themes) or combined with other themes, or individual passages within the themes were transferred from one theme file to another.

Whilst this method of analysis made splitting the transcripts into themes relatively straightforward, the quotes were again divorced from the individual women at the end of the second stage of the analysis process. The 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 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 relating to the way in which passages in this file linked to passages in other files and how these fitted together for the individual woman. Diagrams were also drawn in an attempt to conceptualise the links between themes for each woman.

In addition, it was at this point in the research that I began to write biographies of the women interviewed for the study (see Appendix Three). These biographies detailed the woman's personal history as well as the form of the interview (in terms of how relaxed she was or how difficult I found interviewing her). Whilst the thesis contains biographies for the women in all three studies, for Studies One and Three these biographies were written after the analysis had been completed. In Study Two however the biographies were written as the analysis took place. Whilst they did not contain any thematic analysis for the individual women, they provided a sense of 'who the woman was' which helped reduce the feeling of depersonalisation. Once an individual picture of the links and contradictions between themes had been put together these pictures were put themselves put together to create a fuller picture of the contradictions and links for the sample as a whole.

The analysis process also continued with the writing up of the analysis. A number of different drafts of the analysis were written as the themes were further clarified and reconceptualised. In fact it was not until I attempted to write up the analysis in chapter format that the analysis became fully explicated. 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.

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

The thematic analysis of the interviews is split into three main parts. The first two parts of the analysis focus upon the women's experiences of body size in terms of the subjective meanings surrounding fatness and thinness and the way in which the women experienced their body size in their relationships with other people in their lives. There was a great deal of diversity in these meanings as the group had greatly differing attitudes towards body size. There was thus a number of women who were concerned about their size and who regarded thinness as the 'best' body size to be. Alternatively there were a group of women who rejected these attitudes and asserted that they were no longer concerned about their size. To add to the diversity there were also a small group of women who could be placed in both of these two groups. In the analysis which follows this diversity is dealt with by nominally splitting the women into two groups for whom body size had distinct meanings. An attempt is made to discuss the overlap between the two group in an analysis of the contradictions involved in the women's accounts of their experiences.

The first part of the analysis therefore deals with the meanings surrounding body size for those women interviewed in the study who were concerned about their size and wanted to

lose weight. For these women thinness was seen the 'superior' body size, symbolising sexual attractiveness and the desire of others, physical health and fitness, and the transformation of the self and of one's life. By contrast, fatness symbolised visibility, exposure and rejection by others.

The second part of the analysis discusses the meanings of body size for those women in the sample who questioned the importance of body size and physical appearance in their lives. This involved the women in the rejection of the external pressure surrounding body size and in the questioning the way in which they felt their bodies were defined as the most important part of their identity.

The third part of the analysis discusses the alternative meanings surrounding body size for the women who questioned the importance of body size in their lives. These alternative meanings involved valuing fatness for its associations with space and power as opposed to the vulnerability of the thin body. In addition, the body was reconceptualised and valued in terms of its biological functions rather than its decorative value.

The final part of the analysis explores the emotional meanings surrounding eating for the women. In an environment where many of the women had few other sources of pleasure and gratification because of financial and childcare responsibilities, food provided the women with a means of 'making themselves feel better' or 'cheering themselves up'. In addition it provided a means of coping with the loneliness which some of the women felt after the breakdown of marriages or relationships. Here eating represented a way of 'caring for the self' or a means of 'containing' feelings of distress in the absence of someone to talk to about these feelings.

#### **4.1 The Thin Ideal of Body Size: Visibility, Acceptance and Transformation**

This section explores the subjective meanings associated with fatness and thinness for those women in the sample who regarded thinness as 'better' than fatness and who therefore wanted to lose weight. The section begins with a discussion of the meanings of fatness for those women in the sample who defined themselves as fat and who were treated by other people as fat. Here fatness was experienced in terms of visibility and exposure because of the negative scrutiny and judgement the women received because of their size.

The section continues with a discussion of the meanings which were associated with thinness both for the women in the group who defined themselves as fat as well as those who 'felt fat' and who therefore wanted to be thinner than they currently were. This



begins with an exploration of the way in which thinness symbolised the acceptance of others and the sexual desire of men. In addition to this thinness was associated with transformation women in terms of the transformation of the self and the women's lives more generally. Here thinness was equivalent to being a 'better person' and was also conceptualised as bringing about control, escape and freedom from the everyday constraints of the women's lives.

#### 4.1.1 The Meaning of Fatness: Rejection and the 'Critical Gaze'

A small number of women in the group (n=3) defined themselves as fat and had been fat since childhood or adolescence. For these women fatness was experienced in terms of being judged and criticised by others because of their size which resulted in feelings of visibility and exposure. Thus there was an awareness of the 'critical gaze' of others in a rejection of the self by others because of the size of one's body. This is illustrated in the following quote from Suzanne:

JILL                   Um, so does it bother you in particular situations? I mean is it more of a more uppermost in your mind when you're with particular people or when you're in a certain place or a certain mood or

SUZANNE               Erm, well it usually quite obviously when you're like going out in public or you think you're going to be seen or if you've got to go for an interview or anything like that, when you think, you know, that somebody will be looking at you critically and you think 'Oh', you know, 'Hold it in and pull it in' and 'I wish I hadn't had breakfast this morning' as if it would make any difference at the last minute! And things like that, public situations. I don't feel so bad about it at home. Erm also it's down to erm well not now but before when I was having a period, er, before a period I'd feel really fat and bloated and that'd - do you know what I mean - take it more out of proportion than if

JILL                   Mmmmm ( ) uh huh ( ) you feel bloated.

SUZANNE               Yeah and 'Oh my goodness!', you know, 'What are they going to think, 'oh God she looks fat or'' or that kind of thing (Right uh huh) Er, most of the time, but mostly in a public situation I'd think that somebody would be looking (Right) and also things like it sound silly I wouldn't go swimming (laughs) if I thought, you know what I mean, (laughs) if I thought 'Oh I've put some weight on I'm not going' (laughs) 'Oh I'll go another time' or something like that

JILL                   Oh right, so it's not particularly people that you know then, that you're bothered about? It's, it's just with strangers or

SUZANNE            Yeah, or maybe it's people that maybe I haven't seen for a while and you meet them again and they might think, 'Oh God, she's put weight on' that kind of thing. (Suzanne, M17, P3).

In this quote then we gain a clear sense of Suzanne's feelings of being looked at because of her size and of the sense of exposure she feels in public situations. Going out in public represents a threatening situation for Suzanne because she feels that everybody will look at her and criticise her because she is too big. The line 'What are they going to think, 'Oh God she looks fat', expresses the shame Suzanne feels about her size and the feelings of rejection involved in being fat. Thus Suzanne feels she is being rejected by all the people she encounters, because of her size she is not acceptable and is disapproved of by these people because her body is too big.

The sense of exposure and visibility which Suzanne feels about her body in public situations results in an attempt to hide away from the gaze of other people. This can be seen in Suzanne's attempts to reduce the size of her body by 'holding it in'. Alternatively, the visibility of fatness is decreased through avoiding going out or by avoiding situations such as swimming where her body will be particularly exposed and hence particularly visible. For Suzanne then, any experience of going outside the home involves encountering the critical gaze of other people. It is only when she is at home that Suzanne is able to feel less conscious about her body as only then does she feel 'safe' from the critical gaze which she receives from other people.

The avoidance of social situations is also seen in the interview with Jean who again feels that her size exposes her to the ridicule of others:

JILL                So do you think that if you lose a lot of weight do you think that you'll feel a lot differently about yourself?

JEAN                Yes I know I will, I did do last time, I got a lot of confidence.

JILL                Confidence with other people, is that what you mean?

JEAN                Yes yes and I was a lot more confident and - whereas I like to keep in the background now I don't like my photo took. I went out dancing and I mean now I'm not all that keen on going out at all. I help run this single parent group and they used to go out at night and when I used to go out with them I didn't feel comfortable so I stopped going out with them as well.

JILL                Right, so when you're thin you feel like you want people to see you and you get more attention, that sort of thing?

- JEAN Yes I mean like last week I was away with the ( ) staff we took a party of it was a youth club trip really, we took some handicapped in wheelchairs and we took our students - special needs, some of our special needs students - and I felt a bit out of it last week because most of them were wearing trousers and I, I took a pair of trousers with me but I wouldn't wear them.
- JILL Right, I suppose they show your body off much more.
- JEAN Yes and yet there were a coloured woman and she was as big as me and she wore her trousers but I daren't, you know what I mean?
- JILL Mm, because you feel like everyone's going to look at you and think
- JEAN Yes and laugh and that you know (Jean, M9, P19).

In this passage there is again a discussion of the way in which women feel highly visible because of their bodies. This results in the desire to hide oneself away from others so as to avoid ridicule and the pain of rejection. At other points of the interview however Jean explains that she is often lonely and that this often leads her to break the diet she attempts to follow in order to comfort herself and make herself feel better. Here loneliness leads Jean to gain weight but yet being fat also contributes to her loneliness as she feels her fat body is unacceptable to others and that it must be hidden away from them. She is thus caught in a constant cycle of weight loss and weight gain.

Also in this excerpt from Jean is the sense of difference and exclusion she feels. This is seen in the line ' I felt a bit out of it last week because most of them were wearing trousers and I took a pair of trousers with me but I wouldn't wear them'. Here then Jean's size makes her feel excluded from other people because of the comments she feels they will make about her appearance. At the same time however this quote illustrates the self blame Jean attributes to this sense of difference and of being 'cast out'. Rather than assigning her feelings to the fact that she is criticised by others on the basis of her size, Jean attributes her feelings of difference to her own inadequacies. This is seen in her comparison of herself to another woman who is also fat but who feels able to wear trousers and hence 'exposes' rather than 'hides' her body. The fact that another woman who is equally as fat as Jean can apparently feel 'confident' about her size makes Jean feel that her feelings are her own fault rather than the fault of others.

The quotes from Suzanne and Jean illustrate the sense of difference which the women felt at being fat. It is as if they feel singled out from other people because of their size and that, unlike others, they cannot 'merge' into the crowd, so as to be treated with indifference or be ignored. Feeling fat is thus about feeling constantly on display to

others and about being out of control of this display and the judgement of the body. The experience of being ridiculed by others because of one's size also results in feelings of being invaded or intruded upon by others. This can be seen in the following quote from Rachel, who explained that she has had a 'weight problem' since childhood which she believes was caused by the steroids prescribed for her asthma:

RACHEL            There was one a comment was made when I was younger when I was working - a bloke once said to me 'You're always laughing and happy you, it's because you're big' (Right) and I used to think that's awful that. I mean, he doesn't know what you're feeling inside, you know like just because you're laughing you're not - but that's what a lot of people think (Uh huh right) that's in my opinion.

JILL                It's a sort of stereotype about it?

RACHEL            Yeah.

JILL                Sort of jolly personality, sort of thing?

RACHEL            Hiding everything else that's there, yeah.

JILL                Do you think that's true for you? Do you think you've, sort of, built up that sort of?

RACHEL            Well I've never even thought about it (laughs) I should never have thought about it until it was mentioned to me, and I thought 'Oh, that's awful'. It never even entered my head that I was like hiding something. I suppose, yes, I suppose everybody deep down is hiding something, but it wasn't making me that happy all the time really.

JILL                So this idea that if you're fat you're really unhappy inside, but yet you're sort of

RACHEL            Happy on the outside, yeah. (Rachel, M12, P17).

In this quote, then, Rachel is angry that an assumption about her identity was made solely in relation to her body size. She is angry that someone makes judgements about her without really knowing her and by simply comparing her to stereotypes of fat people. These assumptions about identity added to the women's feelings of being exposed and intruded upon by others. The above quote also illustrates the assumption that fat people are somehow unhappy inside and that if they were only able to lose weight they would feel happier. Here then an assumption is made about a woman's state of mind or feelings about herself solely in terms of body size.

#### 4.1.2 Thinness, Sexual Attractiveness and Being Desired

The above section outlined the way in which fatness was associated with being rejected by others so that fat women feel self conscious whenever they are in a public. A more specific rejection experienced by the women in relation to fatness focused around sexual

rejection by men, because of the associations between fatness and sexual unattractiveness. Here, in contrast to their feelings of exposure discussed above, the women who defined themselves as fat felt invisible because of their size. Whilst fatness was about being visible, it was also about being sexually invisible in terms of not being sexually desired by men. Whilst the women wanted to avoid the visibility of fatness, which resulted in criticism and rejection by others, they wanted the visibility which they felt thinness would bring them. Here thinness was about being noticeable in terms of being subjected to the admiring, rather than the rejecting, gaze of others.

The desire for the visibility of thinness in terms of sexual desire of others was also expressed by women in the sample who did not define themselves as fat but who nevertheless wanted to be thinner than they currently were. This is dealt with in the second part of the section.

For many of the fat women, anxieties about sexual attractiveness had been particularly acute in adolescence where the absence of the desire and attention of men was again associated with feelings of difference and of not fitting in. This is illustrated in the following quote from Rachel:

JILL                    So was it blokes at school or was it girls as well?

RACHEL                Oh both, it was terrible, yeah. You know, calling you fatty and things like that and

JILL                    Right so do you think that had quite a big effect on how you felt about yourself then? In that sort of stage of growing up?

RACHEL                Yeah, yeah especially the last year of school I mean, when like everybody started to get boyfriends and everything, and like, and you don't, because you're, like sort of being on the outside. (Rachel, M12, P5).

In this quote then we gain a sense of the visibility Rachel felt in childhood when she was teased about her size and the sense of being singled out which this caused. In addition the quote illustrates the feelings of rejection which the women felt about their weight in terms of the absence of the attention of boys. Although Rachel wanted to avoid the visibility her body gave her in terms of the critical comments she received from others, there is also a sense that she was in some way invisible in terms of the way she did not receive any attention from boys. Thus whilst Rachel wanted to avoid one sort of visibility, at the same time she wanted to have the visibility which having a thin attractive body would have given her. This illustrates the constant scrutiny that women's bodies are under whether they are fat or thin and the balance which women attempt to strike between the

negative visibility of rejection and ridicule and the positive visibility of sexual attractiveness and the desire of others.

For Rachel this lack of acceptance in terms of her size resulted in marriage to a man on the grounds that she was 'grateful' he found her attractive 'despite' the fact that she was fat:

JILL                   And how do you think it was affected by whether you were in a relationship with somebody - with a bloke or not. Was it affected by that? When you got married did it change?

RACHEL               I don't know um ( ) when I got married which was (inaudible) I suppose at the time. I didn't get married until later on like, until I was about twenty three I think. And I'd had a few boyfriends in between but, I don't know, I didn't want to be left on the shelf at that time, which is an awful thing to say but - so I got married. It was the biggest mistake of my life really but you know. But it's taught me a few things, I don't regret it but, yes, at the time I thought, like, I didn't want to be stuck at home, you know, forever with my parents and - and somebody actually found me attractive, you know, because I was, like, a bit overweight, you know, just like with little things like that, and so (Yeah) I just went for it (laughs)

JILL                   Right so you, sort of, felt quite surprised that somebody found you attractive?

RACHEL               Yeah I did, yeah, I mean, I have had boyfriends before, don't get me wrong, but like, they were just like odd things, you know, they weren't like long term relationships and things. And I was quite satisfied then and then, er, and then I got married. (Rachel, M12, P7).

In this passage we see the importance to women of being attractive and being desired and wanted by others. This relates to the discourse surrounding women's bodies which defines them as their main asset in life, leading them to happiness and fulfilment through their ability to 'catch a man', get married and hence, in Rachel's case, achieve an independent adult identity. For Rachel being found attractive by a man was also important because it gave her a sense of 'belonging' and a sense of no longer being different to everybody else. This was so important to her that she married the first man who found her 'attractive enough' to ask her to marry him. There is thus a sense here that being fat involves having to settle for second best in terms of sexual relationships.

For the women in the study who did not define themselves as fat, the desire to lose weight was again related to the need to be sexually attractive to men in order to both establish and maintain a relationship. Here sexual attractiveness was again seen as a

woman's most important asset in attracting and keeping a man. This is shown in the next quote which comes from Fiona, who did not define herself as fat, but who was nevertheless concerned about her body size:

FIONA                      Initially, I used to think, 'Oh God I'm not coming up to scratch here', when I first met him. I've known him for three years now and I don't really bother. Occasionally, I get this 'Oh, I don't like you to do that' in which case I tell him now. I used to think 'I've got to strive to look better' because I was - you know what you're like when you first start a relationship - sometimes you get a bit infatuated and a bit silly (laughter) or I do sometimes and you think 'Well I'm not coming up to scratch here' and you've got to

This quote shows that at the beginning of her current relationship Fiona's body size was extremely important to her in terms of ensuring her partner found her sexually attractive and hence continued to want to be in a relationship with her. She also states that because she now feels confident in her relationship she does not place so much emphasis on her body size and sexual attractiveness. However in the next quote it seems that this confidence is not consistent and that Fiona continues to feel that she must change her body in order to keep her man and avoid the threat of other thinner, and hence more 'attractive', women:

FIONA                      But I mean he does on occasions say 'Oh God, she looks gorgeous, isn't she lovely?' - somebody walking past in the street or somebody in a bar or somebody on television. I used to think, 'My God, I've got to try and make myself look better - I've got to make more effort.' He'll occasionally go to so and so on television, 'Oh God, she's gorgeous'. But it does make you feel very threatened and it does make you think 'Well if he's with me and I don't look anything like that person there and could never look anything like that person', it becomes a threat and it's all very tied up on that. (Fiona, M4, P).

Here then we see the fear Fiona feels about being 'fatter' than other women. Being fat is associated with being less desirable and hence Fiona lives with the constant threat of being rejected and replaced if she gains weight. Because of this, Fiona feels she has to compete with other women and make 'more effort' to be thinner. Thus we see the idea of thinness as something which has to be achieved by women, by hard work and effort. Here Fiona wants to be 'the best' in terms of her body size. Only when her body is the best does the threat of other women subside. For Fiona then being thin is about her need to be in a relationship because this is the main way in which she feels she is valued by her partner. Fiona needs to be thin because only then can she be sure that she will be desired.

In addition to the threat of thinner women the women in this age group were also threatened by the presence of younger women who, as they are defined socially as more attractive than older women, represent as further source of insecurity in relation to women's appearance. This is illustrated in the following quote from Elaine as she recalls how she used to feel about her attractiveness and its role in her relationships:

- ELAINE            I think women, certainly in relationships, er, you know, putting a bit of weight on, you're told, 'Oh get some weight off you're getting fat and ugly' don't you?
- JILL                Uh huh. Yeah. Was that like yours?
- ELAINE            Yeah and I was being erm threatened by younger slimmer women if you're relationship's not very like you know, steady.
- JILL                What? You mean they might run off with them?
- ELAINE            Yeah.
- JILL                Right, yes.
- ELAINE            And they often do don't they? (laughs) New models.
- JILL                (laughs) Right.
- ELAINE            My friend's husband ran off with a sixteen year old girl and his daughter were actually sixteen and she was devastated you know so it happens (laughs)
- JILL                So you think that when you get older there's a new pressure there? As well as wanting to be attractive for blokes you've got that added pressure of younger people being there - and the fact that society values younger women
- ELAINE            Yeah, yeah. Especially if you're not confident and got a lot of self esteem then its just added onto how you feel about yourself (Elaine, M14, P).

For other women in the sample, there was a move away from the importance of sexual attractiveness and being desired by men, and hence a decreased emphasis on the size of their bodies. These women were in 'secure' long term relationships and had young children. Like Fiona and Rachel, these women also felt that attractiveness had been extremely important in enabling them to 'catch a man' but this was felt to be a part of their adolescence and early adulthood and was replaced by the responsibilities of maturity in the form of having a home and a family to look after. This is illustrated in the following quote from Penny:



PENNY I think you go through a stage when you think you're fat and then you're not actually fat, if you know what I mean, but you think you are fat and then you go through a silly phase don't you - I think you do when you're younger anyway. You tend to go through a silly phase where you think that you're fat and you're not. You go and try clothes on and they just drop off you and you think - I have been through that

JILL Why do you think that is then?

PENNY I think when you're sort of coming up just before your twenties you get a bit sort of thinking about lads looking at you and you sort of get vain don't you - I think you get a bit vain. I think once you're married and you've got your kids you're sort of more stable.

JILL You think?

PENNY I think so yes.

JILL So don't you think it matters so much your appearance generally?

PENNY Yes, I wouldn't say let yourself go like there's some people having children just let themselves go and they don't bother - they don't do anything but I think you should, you know, bother about yourself but not to an extent where you're looking in the mirror every five minutes. You haven't got the time anyway. When you've got the kids you've got to put them first sort of thing (Right) You more or less don't get time for yourself. Your attitude changes, you know, completely from yourself to them.

JILL So it's not being centred on how you are looking and what you're doing and all about you -

PENNY It's more what they're looking like and are they clean and tidy, sort of thing. That's what I find anyway. It's like spending money. If you'd rather spend money on yourself you don't you spend money on kids instead (Penny, M1, P).

In this quote concern with body size is represented as an 'obsession' of adolescence and Penny's wish to attract men in this earlier period of her life. However once Penny had 'caught a man', got married and had children her sexual attractiveness ceased to be as big an issue in her life. On one level this is related to the different responsibilities in Penny's life, so that the large amount of time involved in caring for her family means that there is little time left for her to be concerned about, or make changes to, her appearance. On another level however, Penny's decreased concern about her body size and appearance relates to her feelings about the valuing of the self in relation to others. Here caring about one's appearance is presented as selfishness because it involves meeting the needs of the self (i.e. the vanity of wanting to be attractive to others) rather than the needs of her

family. Here the time involved in improving one's appearance is time which should have been spent on the care of one's children.

In the quote from Penny above, concern with body size is constructed as a 'silly phase' occurring in adolescence where one is extremely vain and concerned with one's self. This vanity discourse places concern with body size within the individual so that there is no conception that concern with appearance represents a meeting of external standards and hence represents the 'pleasing of others'. Wanting to be attractive is seen as the concern of the woman herself, it is she who wants to be thin and she who wants to be desired by others. This conceptualisation is in stark contrast to the way in which body size is conceptualised by other women in the sample (section 4.3 below) who rejected the importance placed on body size because it involved being oppressed by others and a removal of personal autonomy and the rights of the self. This difference in the conceptualisation of concern with body size will be discussed in further detail in section five.

A final point to raise from the quote from Penny is the idea that whilst she asserts that women should not be overly concerned about their body size and appearance they should nevertheless try not to 'let themselves go'. Hence there is the idea that one should 'bother about oneself' but that one should not 'be looking in the mirror every five minutes'. Thus whilst one should give all one's time and energy to the care of one's children, one should not let this 'show' in terms of looking tired or through gaining weight. Being a mother should appear to be an effortless process because 'proper women' do not find taking care of children an effort or a difficult task in their lives. Taking care of one's appearance is important in maintaining one's femininity so that one can manage the role of the 'attractive wife' as well as the 'selfless mother'. Here then maintaining one's appearance is all about pleasing and meeting the needs of others in conforming to the role of the 'perfect' woman.

The discourse of 'not letting yourself go' also relates to the women's fears about ageing. Here the women felt it was important to have some concern about one's body because otherwise the effects of age will take over. Thus letting yourself go was seen as something which women tend to do as they get older and which the women wanted to guard against. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from Angie

ANGIE

Yes, my other two sisters are fit, one used to run, the middle one who is tall and slim, she has a lot of problems with her back though and they keep fit by swimming and that because it helps their back cos its one of the best exercises you can have or do to ( ) well yes I think that for me I like to think that you know I'm getting older I like to look after my body

than just let it go, I try and do some sport of some form (Angie, M3, P11).

For Angie these fears about ageing and letting oneself go relate to Angie's mother and the way in which she has aged:

JILL                    So you are quite conscious about the effect that food has on the way that you look

ANGIE                    I am now yes plus now that I am getting older because I don't think your body, unless you keep really fit, I don't think your body can break it down like it used to. I mean I am naturally slim, I only weigh about 7 stone 2 but erm ( ) I don't know I am more conscious of it I think, and I think a lot of emphasis is put on to women in magazines and tall slim ladies and things, and my mum, she's taller than me but she used to be really slim but she has put weight on over the years and never lost it and I feel threatened by the fact that - if I got like that I wouldn't eat, I think. You know, or I wouldn't eat, I would limit myself, although I don't think I ever would, I try and swim and I try and keep active, I mean I might put a stone on or something I don't think that's bad but with me being tiny I do feel a little bit conscious of the fact that I wouldn't like put a lot of weight on and I'm only a very small frame (Angie, M3, P3).

Here then there is a fear that if one does not continue to be vigilant about one's size through watching one's diet or taking regular exercise, one will automatically gain weight.

In summary, the women in the sample associated thinness with sexual attractiveness so that achieving thinness was important in order to achieve the desire of men and hence enable women to 'catch a man'. This was seen as being particularly important in early adulthood when 'catching a man' was important in the women's lives. Following this the women felt that sexual attractiveness became less important in their lives, both because of the time pressures that they were under and the need to be involved in the care of others rather than the care of the self.

#### 4.1.3 Thinness as Health

In addition to thinness being associated with sexual attractiveness and being desired by others, it was also associated with health. For the women in the sample who defined themselves as fat the association of fatness with unhealthiness represented another pressure which was placed upon them to lose weight. Thus as well as feeling sexually

unattractive as a result of the comments of others and the sexual rejection of men, the women were also advised to lose weight 'for the good of their health'. This can be seen in the following quote from Rachel:

- RACHEL            I've got a boyfriend at the moment and he's always nagging me, you know, to try and lose some weight while I'm -
- JILL                Does that bother you?
- RACHEL            No I just don't take any notice these days (Right) probably I should I don't know if I should do or not.
- JILL                What does you say to him then when he says that? What does he say I mean?
- RACHEL            Oh he's not awful or anything he just says it would be good for my heart and he's right basically, I mean, he's right, if I lost some weight then my asthma wouldn't be half as bad these days. I know all these people are right, having a go at me, but they just don't know what it's like to do it - it's hard - and it's not them actually dieting it's me so -
- JILL                Does it make you feel like less confident when he says things like that about you
- RACHEL            Yes sometimes, but, but I get it off my parents as well anyway I get it off a lot of people really - that 'You should lose this' and 'If you were half a stone lighter you wouldn't feel so bad', and get it off the doctor, you know, and all this (Rachel, M12, p).

This quote highlights the way in which fat women are pressured to lose weight 'for the good of their health' and the way in which this makes it extremely difficult for fat women to reject the pressures about their body size. Whilst it may be relatively simple to reject pressures to lose weight in order to look more attractive, it may be more difficult for women to reject pressures upon them to improve their health. As can be seen from the above quote the pressure from Rachel's boyfriend and parents is compounded by the advice Rachel has received from the medical profession about her weight. The power of the medical profession cannot be underestimated here nor the pressure to look after one's health in a society becoming more and more obsessed with health and fitness (Bordo, 1990; Mitchell, 1983; see Chapter Two).

This health discourse is also interesting in terms of the way Rachel constructs the pressure she receives from others about her size. Rather than being presented as oppressive and manipulative, Rachel presents the pressure from her boyfriend in terms of 'he's not awful or anything' implying that her boyfriend is not cruel in his comments and that he only does so for her 'own good'. This is also seen in the line 'I know all these

people are right having a go at me'. Thus rather than the pressures being represented as 'wrong' they are presented as essentially 'right'.

Despite this Rachel rejects the pressure upon her to diet. Here the rejection is about Rachel's past experiences of dieting which she has found to be extremely difficult and which did not lead to long term weight loss. Rachel is thus asserting the validity of this knowledge as well as her right to use this knowledge to reject the idea that she should be on a diet. This rejection forms part of the theme which will be discussed in section 4.2.1 which relates to the rejection of external pressure about body size.

In the following quote we see how Alison justifies the pressure to lose weight which she received from her parents in her childhood. At the age of nine Alison was sent to the school dietician and put on a 'special diet' because she was overweight. Whilst Alison feels that this made her feel very self conscious about her body so that she has struggled with her weight ever since, she is able to justify this because her parents were interested in the 'good of her health':

- JILL                   And do you think, do you think you were over -
- ALISON                Oh I was overweight. I mean, I must have been, I was very tall, I must have been about eight stone, something like that - for a nine year old, that was, er, verging on obese really (Right) but it stopped it. I didn't get thin, but I stopped putting weight on.
- JILL                   Right and that was then they gave you a special diet to take with you did they?
- ALISON                It was the school dietician.
- JILL                   Oh I see.
- ALISON                Yes, the dietician. Erm, so erm, I think it did help but it made me very conscious about weight then (Mmmmm) but it probably, you know, for health reasons it was a good idea (M18, P3).

Thus in this quote health is again presented as a reason for losing weight and as an excuse for pressurising individuals about their size. In the next quote from Alison we see the way that pressure about health is justifiable whereas pressure about appearance is not:

- JILL                   Right. Do you think it is very unhealthy to be slightly overweight?
- ALISON                Er, no not slightly overweight but um, yeah, I think er, people should be more concerned if

er, you know, they're getting too overweight - then it becomes a danger signal. So, I mean, it's their, I know it's their decision anyway - and it's still what they're personality's like is what is the important thing - but I think people should be concerned if they become overweight (M18, P19).

This quote is particularly important in relation to the discourse surrounding body size to be discussed in section 4.2.2. This discourse defines body size as unimportant in relation to personality so that its 'what inside that counts'. Alison strongly endorses this statement in the above quote. However she makes an exception here on the grounds of health. Whilst an individual's personality is more important than her appearance, health is seen as even more important than this. Again pressure about body size is justified on the basis of health.

#### 4.1.4 Thinness as Transforming the Self: 'If I'm thin I'll be a better person'

In the above sections the women's experiences of their body size were linked to the attitudes of other people towards their size. These attitudes involved the women being valued by other people in terms of the way that they looked rather than other parts of their identities. This defining of identity in terms of appearance was also used by the women themselves. This was seen in comments that if they lost weight they would somehow 'feel better about themselves'. This often involved the women in stating that they would become more confident about 'who they were' if they lost weight and that they would then become 'more comfortable' with themselves. Thus becoming thin was associated with changing the self because of the close association between sense of self and physical appearance.

This idea that losing weight is about transforming the self into a better person is shown clearly in the next quote from Fiona:

FIONA                    And again, if somebody says something about me I immediately revert to 'Oh, I've got to go on a diet'. Again, if somebody criticises me I think I've got to lose weight or if something's going wrong I've got to lose weight because if I lose weight I'll be better.

JILL                      So you don't mean comments about your appearance you mean comments generally?

FIONA                    Comments in general but especially about my appearance. I mean, I do revert to that mentality which is silly. I mean the fact that I'm actually too hungry to go actually through with it now is quite good but I'm still thinking that way. (Fiona, M4, P19).

In this quote then we see how for Fiona negative comments about herself are interpreted as an indication that she is too fat and that she must lose weight. She assumes that if she loses weight she will be 'better' not only in terms of her appearance but in terms of her personality more generally. Thus she states that 'If I lose weight I'll be better' which implies that 'improvements' in one's appearance are associated with improvements in the self. Thus as well as thinness being about becoming more acceptable and desirable to other people, it was also about becoming more acceptable and desirable to the self.

For many women losing weight was associated with feeling more confident about 'who they were' including a sense that they would be 'more comfortable' with themselves. This is shown in the following passage from Carol as she talks a period earlier in her life when she was particularly concerned about her weight:

- CAROL            Well that was when I'd come back from London you see and I knew I was over weight and I wanted to get rid of this - it must have been about half a stone cos I've always been sort of round about between a size 10 or 12 and I was getting to where a size I couldn't get into a size 10 and a 12 was getting uncomfortable (Right) I didn't feel comfortable as a person.
- JILL                Oh right that's interesting what does that mean
- CAROL            Well I felt bulky and I couldn't run and I had these huge bosoms (laughs) which I never had before oh god I couldn't cope with that ( ) but I don't think I was silly with it you know not to the extent where to go away and be sick.
- JILL                Right do you think you felt differently about yourself then when you were over weight, is that what you mean.
- CAROL            Oh yes my self confidence was badly drained, I think added to which I'd felt bad about being away from home and being lonely, and maybe like I did, not as a reward but it was a comfort to think, and it occupied the time (Right) because if you leave work and you say have well left at say five o'clock half past five by the time I got back in it was maybe six, you know what do you do between six and perhaps ten or eleven when you were ready to go to bed and you are on your own.

In the first part of the quote Carol talks about the discomfort she felt when she felt overweight. Here then there is a feeling of *physical* discomfort because Carol is too large to fit into her clothes and because she finds it difficult to move about as freely as she is used to. In addition to this however there is also a more *emotional* or *inner* discomfort experienced in relation to the self. This discomfort with the self is experienced in terms of feeling a lack of self confidence which Carol not only feels about her body and appearance but about her identity more generally. In this passage then we see the way in

which the women themselves associated their identities with the way they look so that if they felt badly about their appearance they felt badly about themselves. This again relates to the extreme emphasis placed on women's appearance and the way in which appearance is regarded as defining female identity.

#### 4.1.5 Change your Body, Change your Life: Thinness as Freedom and Control

In addition to thinness being associated with becoming more acceptable to others and to the self, changing one's body through losing weight was also seen in terms of bringing about changes in more general areas of the women's lives. Thus as well as the women feeling that they would be a better person if they lost weight, the women believed that there would also be a transformation in what they would be able to achieve in life. This desire for transformation related to the constraints in the women's lives which resulted in the women being unable to change their lives. For this reason then becoming thin offered the women the fantasy of escaping from these constraints as well as of achieving control over their lives. This feeling of control was linked to the large amounts of control involved in achieving and maintaining a thin body. This theme of 'change your body, change your life' illustrates the power attributed to 'being attractive' by the women which relates to the emphasis placed on appearance in definitions of female identity.

The association of thinness with transformation is clearly illustrated in the following quote from Mary:

MARY                    I think it comes from the media though and then obviously you internalise that in some way that you're going to be a better person if you're that shape.

JILL                    Yes, has it changed as you've got older? I mean when you were maybe in your teens how did you feel about these sorts of things then?

MARY                    Erm well I think I always felt that I was overweight then but I wasn't I was only about nine stone and about the right size and shape. But I always felt like I should be slimmer or a different shape - dissatisfied with different parts of my body and that I'd like some, this that and the other.

JILL                    Right, so has it always been like that then as you went into your 20s and 30s or has there been different times when it's not been as big an issue or

MARY                    It wasn't a huge issue for me then I don't think it was just there in the background and I think it's I think it's still there you know the desire to be a particular shape. I'd feel much more attractive, I'd have more friends and all this sort of thing I'd be more successful. That comes into it for me (inaudible) this image of this successful woman.



- JILL                   What would you like to do?
- MARY                   To be successful? Er I suppose that I don't know lots of things go through my head. I don't know whether I'd like to be it but I have a sort of an image of a successful business woman (Right) but I don't know whether deep down it's me not in this day and age anyway (Mary, M13, P9).

At the beginning of this passage, Mary presents the media image of the thin ideal (see Chapter Two). Here the association of body size with the self is illustrated, with the idea that if one changes the size of one's body one changes the self for the better. Again changes in body size represent a transformation of the self. For Mary becoming thinner also involves transformation and improvement in diverse areas of her life, so that she will become successful in her relationships and her career. Here success is related to being 'acceptable' both to the self and others. Being thin is seen as bringing about acceptance by those around her so that she will be able to have access to new areas of life. There will be no constraints on Mary if only she were thin. Again we see the way in which fatness is seen as symbolising an unacceptable self (as well as an unacceptable body) with thinness representing acceptance both by others and the woman herself.

For Mary this discourse of life change was in stark contrast to the actual opportunities for change which were open to her. Mary was currently living on income support and felt that her job prospects were poor. She was constrained in this by her son who had special needs and who 'played up' when Mary attempted to find work or change their living situation. Mary had consequently just dropped out of the access course she was taking at the F. E. college explaining that she had 'found it too much for her'. Thus for Mary becoming a successful business woman is an unlikely development in her life, yet thinness provides her with the fantasy that it can be achieved. Thus thinness represents all the things Mary would like in her life which she does not feel she currently has and which she is unlikely to obtain. By having this fantasy Mary can visualise the possibility that her ultimate desires can be met by the simple process of transforming her body size. Thinness is about the removal of constraints and having the freedom to achieve what Mary would like in her life. It may be that having the fantasy of transformation is Mary's way of coping with the unhappiness she feels with her life because it at least makes a better life seem attainable. Thus thinness is about the fantasy of freedom of opportunity removed from the realities of everyday life.

In another part of the interview Mary reflects upon whether thinness will really bring about this transformation of her life, thus highlighting the fantasy aspect of the transformation theme.

JILL Do you think it's, do you think if you felt slimmer do you think you'd feel differently about yourself? Do you see what I mean? Do you think it's related to those sorts of feelings? That we identify - ?

MARY I don't think it would make any drastic difference to be honest. I mean, I think, okay if I became a size fourteen, got lots of nice clothes - if you don't feel good about yourself it would come out in some other way. Er, it certainly might cheer me up a bit! But um, I don't think it would make a major difference.

JILL Right. So it's not maybe that good, it's just an appearance or whatever then?

MARY Yeah you know, because I think if you feel good about yourself on a really deep and solid level then, no matter what shape you are, it's not really going to make that much difference you'd feel good anyway. I mean, I think it does make a difference but not a huge difference - not for me anyway. (Mary, M13, P7).

In this quote then we see that whilst Mary is aware of the 'lure' of thinness and the opportunity to look attractive and wear nice clothes, she does not really think her life would improve that much by becoming thinner.

The association of thinness with removal of constraints and barriers to a 'better life' is also seen in the interview with Rachel. Here there is a strong emphasis on thinness as equated with personal freedom and autonomy and the 'breaking free' from the rules of other people.

RACHEL I suppose I have this vision that if I get really thin, like, I can just go out there and do whatever I want to do and ( ) and sort of thing (Right) and nobody's saying I can't do it sort of thing and - I don't know (Rachel, M12, P29).

The fantasy aspect of thinness is shown again here in Rachel's use of the word 'vision' in the line 'I have this vision that if I get really thin'. Again thinness provides the enticing fantasy that change and freedom is within the woman's reach. In addition to the idea that thinness will bring about changes in her life, thinness for Rachel is also about freedom from the control of other people. Like Mary, Rachel feels that there are constraints on her life which do not allow her to 'go out there and do whatever I want to do'. Being thin is about being able to escape from these constraints in order to be autonomous and in control of one's own life.

The idea of thinness as representing the control of one's life was also found in the interview carried out with Suzanne. Here the control involved in controlling one's eating

habits and in maintaining a thin body was felt to symbolise a wider sense of control and personal achievement. In the following quote Suzanne explains the failure she feels when she is not able to achieve this control:

JILL                    So when you were fat was it the opposite from that then? Not when you were fat but when you put weight back on?

SUZANNE                Yeah, I think so. The feeling that, you know, erm you're this age and you can't even, you know, like how can you be in control of your life if you can't even control how many chocolate bars you eat or how many hamburgers you have or (Suzanne, M17, P8).

In discussing the meanings of thinness in relation to the fantasy of transformation it is important to be aware of the way in which this fantasy is presented to women in media images of 'ideal women' (see Chapter Two). The fact that the women are aware of the fantasy element of the 'lure' of thinness again indicates that women actively reflect upon social discourses rather than passively internalising this discourse. In addition to this however it is important to avoid the implication that the meanings which women associate with thinness are simply fantasy and that they do not correspond to any external reality in terms of the women's experiences of the world around them. As discussed in the review of the literature (Chapter Two) and as illustrated in the quotes already presented, women do experience rejection from others if they are fat (section 4.1.1) and they do experience more sexual attention and approval from men if they are thinner (4.1.2). Thus in relation to these aspects of women's lives the transformation associated with thinness extends beyond fantasy and relates to the reality of women's lives.

#### 4.1.6 Summary

In summary, this section of the analysis has explored the meanings of fatness and thinness for those women who saw thinness as 'better' than fatness and who wanted to lose weight in order to achieve thinness. Body size was important to these women because of the relationship between thinness and sexual attractiveness. Here the desire to be sexually attractive was related to the women's desire to maintain sexual relationships with men as well as avoid the threat of younger and thinner women. For this age group of women, the need to be attractive was tempered by the women's role as the carer of others as part of the wife and mother role. For the fat women in the group the desire to be thin was related to the wish to receive the sexual gaze and attention of men as well as the wish to avoid the critical gaze of others and the feelings of exposure and self consciousness which this produced.

On another level the pressure which women experience from others about their size is also related to apparent concerns for women's health, where fatness is associated with

unhealthiness. Finally, body size was surrounded by a discourse of transformation for the women so that becoming thin symbolised the transformation of the self, where the women's physical concept was intimately associated with their self-concept, and the transformation of women's lives in terms of offering the fantasy of escape from everyday constraints.

## **4.2 Rejection of the Thin Ideal: Autonomy and Self Definition**

The following section involves a discussion of the rejection of the external pressure surrounding body size and a questioning of the way in which the women felt their bodies were defined as the most important part of their identity. This discourse was used by many of the women in the sample, particularly those who were recruited from the college of further education. In general this discourse was not used by the women whose experiences were discussed in section 4.1 above, although there was some overlap with women who wanted to be thin and who valued thinness over fatness also rejecting the importance of body size in their lives.

The analysis is split into two parts. Firstly, there is an exploration of the way in which the women challenged the pressures upon them from other people to be a certain size, with the assertion that their bodies should be to please themselves rather than others. Secondly, there is an analysis of the women's questioning of the importance of their body size in their identities, with the assertion that they were 'more than their bodies' and that their identities should be defined and valued in other ways.

### **4. 2.1 'Pleasing the Self Before Others': The Rejection of External Pressure**

This section analyses the women's rebellion against the idea that their bodies existed in order to please other people who pressurised them into being critical of their own bodies and hence into the needs to change their bodies. Here then there is a rejection of the visibility and scrutiny from others which we have seen to be associated with body size and the assertion by the women that their bodies were there to please them rather than others. There was also a more general rejection of being defined and controlled by others rather than by the self. Thus the women's discussions of body size involved an assertion of the right to self definition and autonomy as opposed to definition of the self by external others.

Whilst many of the women rejected the importance of body size to their identities and the external pressure to be a certain body size, this did not always result in the women rejecting the concept of a thin ideal of beauty. Thus whilst the women might assert that so much emphasis should not be placed on body size this did not mean that they themselves did not want to be thinner. For these women the rejection of external pressure and the importance of body size were about assertions of autonomy. They were asserting their

right to be whatever size they wanted whether this meant becoming thinner or not. Thus they asserted that 'Its up to me whether I lose weight or not.'

The rejection of external criticism and pressure is seen in the first quote from Karina:

- JILL                   Right when did you put the weight on then?
- KARINA               Its about five or six years now.
- JILL                   And you think you've changed quite a lot, is that what you're saying?
- KARINA               Yes I have changed because I was introvert before now I'm more extrovert because er if people pull your leg often enough you either build up a thick skin or you cringe in a corner somewhere and I went the other way, I came out of the closet so to speak and said 'Right to hell with it, this is me, it doesn't bother me.'
- JILL                   So becoming fat fatter sorry, was quite a good thing then?
- KARINA               Yes, positive, positive for me, I have got friends who are like three times the size of me, so, then they are other friends who are like Gina who are skinny little things (laughs). There again I have the all the right curves in the right places, even though it might be double (laughs). (Karina, M5, P6).

At the beginning of the excerpt Karina talks about the pressure she has felt from other people about her size. Here she presents the two alternatives which a woman can do if she is bigger than people think she should be. One alternative is to 'cringe in a corner somewhere', thus accepting the criticism and attempting to hide away from it. This ties in well with the 'hiding' discourse where the women who defined themselves as fat wanted to hide their bodies to avoid the shame and embarrassment they felt about them (see section 4.1.1 above). However as can be seen from the quote above, Karina has chosen the second alternative and has thus decided to reject the criticism that others have made about her size, asserting that she no longer cares about what other people think. Karina has decided that she will no longer be influenced by the opinions of others and that people should accept her body as it is.

In the last part of the quote, it also becomes clear that rather than accepting the definitions of the 'attractive body' defined by other people, Karina is redefining what she thinks is attractive. Thus she asserts that whilst her body may be big she still has 'all the right curves in the right places'. Thus here she suggests that fatness can be sexually attractive and that thinness is not necessarily 'better.' Again she rejects the definitions and

pressures of others and chooses to make up her own definitions. This will be explored in more detail in section 4.3.3.

A further point to make about the above quote from Karina relates to the way in which I as the interviewer talk about body size. This can be seen in the way in which I ask 'So becoming fat, fatter sorry, was quite a good thing then?' In this question the difficulties which surround talking about body size are highlighted and the implications which surround terms such as 'fat' and 'fatter'. Here I consider the term 'fat' to be potentially insulting and critical of Karina and hence I rephrase the question in terms of 'fatter'. This can be set in the cultural context of negative attitudes towards fatness which have clearly influenced me as a individual and hence as a researcher. As discussed in Chapter Two, the term 'fat' is now being reclaimed by some writers as a purely descriptive term, removed from its traditional negative connotations, which avoids the medicalisation and judgements involved in the terms 'obese' and 'overweight' (Brown, 1985; Barron and Lear, 1989). Whilst I endorse this viewpoint and refer to women as 'fat' in the interview analysis, the difficulties surrounding body size terms cannot be so easily rectified in face to face conversation. Thus in the interview with Karina discussed above, using the term 'fat' could have been interpreted by Karina in terms of an attempt to treat her feelings about her body size in a sensitive way in an attempt to avoid criticising her by describing her as 'fat'. Alternatively it could also have been interpreted as colluding in the discourse which defines fat as wrong or undesirable.

The way in which Karina redefines attractiveness in her own terms is also seen in the following excerpt where Karina again rejects the idea that thin is necessarily better than fatness:

KARINA                    it isn't always there it's it's just like a fad thing its like if I see something I really wished I could wear or if I had got - I've a sewing machine - but if I could be bothered to make that ( ) item summat like that and another time I think to myself, why bother (laughs) you know what I mean like not everybody's supposed to be the perfect figure eight (Karina, M5, P5).

In this quote then Karina shows that she is not rejecting the idea of losing weight totally as she would actually like to lose some weight. Thus the rejection of external pressures to be thin is not necessarily about rejecting the idea that one wants to lose weight. It is about asserting one's own right to choose what size one wants to be, whether this be fat or thin. This provides her with the freedom to reflect upon whether she really does want to lose weight or not. Thus whilst starting the quote with the idea that she does want to lose weight it ends with the line 'Why bother? Not everybody's supposed to be the perfect figure eight'.

For many women the assertion of the right to be whatever body size they wanted went with a specific rejection of the control of their identities by men. The women rejected the comments they had received about their bodies from their partners as well as male control on a more general level. Many of the women who used this discourse were recruited from the college of further education. For many of these women 'going back to college' represented the outcome of struggles with their partners so that many of the women had rejected a life of domesticity and marriage in order to return to education. These points will be discussed in more detail in section 5.

The following quote from Karina illustrates that having the freedom to choose whether she wants to lose weight or not is related to her move towards freedom from the other constraints in her life:

KARINA            My mode of dressing is changing more and more like, you wouldn't have seen me in shorts, I've wore trousers, even though I'm small and fat I know I probably shouldn't wear trousers, but the more I've put on weight the more I have stuck to trousers.

JILL                The more happy you are with them?

KARINA            Yeah er I've started wearing shorts now because its summer, I haven't shown my knees in God knows how many years, I am lucky I am the colour that I am so it doesn't look that bad you know what I mean? (Yeah) Erm its it is a positive sort of like I suppose the way I dress you could say is almost a statement about my personality I'm getting weird in the way that I wear clothes so and er

JILL                Why do you think it is happening now rather than when you were in your twenties or whatever.

KARINA            I think its because now I'm back at college as a mature student I'm going through my second childhood again you know what I mean things that I couldn't do when I was young I do it now because I have got older and because like I haven't got a partner or anybody to turn round and say to me 'No you can't do this' I mean like alright I probably won't get many comments today if they see me sporting my shorts (laughs) but then it will be like you know take me as I am this is me, you know what I mean. (Karina, M5, P9).

This quote is again about rejecting the opinions and pressures of others. As Karina says at the start of the quote, there is the 'rule' that because she is 'small and fat' she 'shouldn't wear trousers'. Here she identifies the rules which surround body size which women internalise but which Karina herself has rejected. At the end of the passage she

explains how this is applied more generally in her life as she discusses her experiences of studying at the F. E. college on the access course. College has provided Karina with the chance to escape from external constraints which she has experienced in the past and with the freedom to do whatever she wants to do. This applies to her body size as well as other areas of her life in an assertion of the rights of the self over those of others.

The assertion of the rights of the self is also seen in the interview with Tess. In the following quote Tess sums this up in the phrase 'I'm not out to please you, I'm out to please me'.

TESS                    I remember in my teenage years it was very much false eyelashes, hair pieces, mini skirts, oh a whole way of dressing. I wouldn't even go to the shop without my eyelashes on and now I wear no make-up and I'm grey at the roots (inaudible) and it, I don't know, I don't know how I can explain it but there's a whole host of men in here - I would feel that it's not an issue, this is me, sod you if it's not you know I'm not out to please you I'm out to please me. But this didn't happen to me when I was younger these feelings weren't there I've had to get strong first, I wish I'd have felt this then I wouldn't have played those days because they are games (Tess, M10, P22).

For Tess then the assertion of autonomy and the right to 'please the self' occur in opposition to the pressure to please men. When she was younger Tess wore make-up and particular types of clothes in order to be 'attractive' to men. At this stage in her life however she has decided that she is no longer prepared to do this and that she no longer cares about attracting men in this way. At the end of the quote however Tess identifies how difficult it can be for women to please themselves before others. She describes this in terms of 'I've had to get strong first' and brings in a discourse of maturity which relates having the strength to reject these pressures to the growing awareness and wisdom of growing older. As we see in the next quote Tess's feelings about her own body size are related to a wider theory which she has about women and the way women are socialised into femininity:

TESS                    It's a very female thing as well where we're into this image to trap a man if you look this way. I mean it starts from right right right the way back looking at my Janet and John books and I don't know if they're allowed now but it's almost the woman performing in a certain way to please the man, even if it's making cakes for when he comes home or and John goes off and it's always this you've got So there's



all this thing about er everyone's telling us how to perform and how to look and what we should do with our bodies to catch a man but it's just a big chunk of a female's life body image and you know its emphasised, I mean these models, these really beautiful Jerry Hall where are these people? It's not reality so what game are we playing here? (Tess, M10, P21).

For Tess, women are concerned about body size because they are socialised into thinking that their bodies are there to please men. By changing their bodies to meet norms of sexual 'attractiveness' women are able to 'catch' or 'trap' a man into a relationship. Hence the sole purpose of a woman's body is to meet other people's assessments of what constitutes an attractive body. As we saw in the previous quote from Tess however, she now rejects this defining of her body by others, asserting that her body is for her rather than for others.

Finally from Tess there is a passage which illustrates the emphasis which the women who rejected the importance of body size placed on personal autonomy. In this quote Tess describes the additional pressure which can be put on women by other women when they do not reject the attractive / pleasing others function of their bodies:

TESS                    One of them said 'Why do women feel the need to dress in short, tight skirts, low tops that expose their bodies, wear red lipstick, present this image' and she wasn't being derogatory in that way she wasn't saying 'Why are they doing this?', she was saying 'Why do we feel the need?' Well I came to the conclusion that a woman's body is her's, she chooses what to do with it, she feels that she wants to dress that way because she's got a sexuality about her and it enhances that sexuality and that's okay. (Tess, M10, P22).

Like Karina, Tess rejects the pressures which are put upon women to be a certain size, or to look a certain way. She asserts that it should be women's choice to be whatever size or look however they themselves want to. Thus there is not a rejection of the idea that thin is attractive and fat is ugly but a rejection of the pressure to please others with one's body. A woman should have the autonomy to look however she wants and to value her body in whatever way she wants.

The discourse about pleasing the self rather than others was related to the women's experiences of relationships with men, with the women feeling that these relationships had been characterised by the pressure on them to meet the needs of the man at the expense of the woman herself. This is clearly seen in the interview carried out with Elaine who talks about her past relationships in terms of being expected to please her male partner and to allow him to define and control her sense of self. For Elaine being in a

relationship was not only about having to please other people but was also equivalent to being defined by one's partner:

ELAINE            I mean, I know I'm talking about me now and not my daughter and I'm relating now to thinking how my daughter is now - and she's really thin, well not really thin she's like average size but she's nice and lovely and slim - and she thinks she's fat and all her friends think they're fat and think they're ugly and, you know, all like that and I can remember being like that, not being happy with how I was, but then I think you grow, or hopefully a lot of us do, we grow to like ourselves.

JILL                Uh huh what changes? Why is it that that changes like that?

ELAINE            I don't know ( ) for me I'm no longer er, in a relationship (Right) er, I've been on my own now for ten years and in that ten years I've found out about myself. I didn't know about myself before 'cos I was always being told you know? (Mmm) I mean, from being little and starting school I think you're told you're lazy or you're stupid or you're fat. Then you go into relationships and if they're not very nice relationships you're told that you're ugly - and you believe it don't you? (Mmm) so for me personally, once I were out of all that, I started to learn about myself and like myself. And I thought 'I like myself, I'm a nice person.' and you're a better person for it. (Elaine, M14, P5)

In this quote Elaine describes how in both her marriages she felt her sense of self was defined by her husband with the result being that she did not know who she really was. Only after the break-up of her second marriage was she able to define herself in her own terms and find out that perhaps she was not as bad a person as both her husbands made her out to be. Here then feelings about the self are related to feelings about body size which are indistinguishable for many women.

#### 4.2.2 'Its What's Inside that Counts': Rejecting the Importance of Body Size to the Self

In addition to the rejection of external pressure and the assertion of the right to be whatever body size one wanted to be, there was a rejection of the way in which the women felt they were solely defined and valued in terms of their size and attractiveness. In a discourse about 'Its what's inside that counts' the women rejected the importance of body size and physical appearance, asserting that they were 'more than just their bodies' and that emphasis should be placed on the woman's personality or intellect rather than the way she looked. This is seen in the following quote from Karina, where we see the anger she feels at the way she is objectified by the attention focused on her body:

KARINA           Everybody is madly in love with my boobs, but I just think this is a summer thing that we're going through this phase like and its affecting the men's brains at this time of year they you know its tits and ass time (laughs) so I stopped being I stopped dressing sort of like to show off my assets when I was about 25 I think I sort of turned round and said I am more than just a pair of boobs, I have got a brain.

JILL               Right oh I see. What sort of things did you used to wear.

KARINA           Low cut tops constantly low cut anything that sort of made your boobs stand out more but I've stopped doing that now, if anything I tend to try and cover up nowadays, some people are sort of more attracted to me (Right) which is weird, mind you its nice for a change. (Karina, M5, P7).

It is interesting that Karina here refers to her 'boobs' as her 'assets' which defines them in term of their 'market value' in terms of their ability to attract men. This illustrates the way a woman is taught to regard her body as her 'passport' to life, enabling her to 'entice' a man into marriage and a family. As we have seen in section 4.1.2 some of the women in the group continued to regard their bodies in this way. For Karina however there is a rejection of this as she asserts that she has another 'asset' - that of her brain.

In the second part of the quote Karina comments that despite no longer wearing clothes to show off her breasts in order to attract men she still finds that men are attracted to her. Thus despite no longer conforming to the stereotypical image of the attractive woman she is still found attractive by men. Here then Karina is discovering new definitions of sexual attractiveness at the same time as asserting that this is not the only part of her identity which has value.

Karina's rejection of the importance of her body in defining her identity forms part of a wider redefinition of her aims and aspirations in life. Her rejection of 'using her assets' and hence of 'enticing' a man with her body as seen in the above quote is part of a general rejection of the stereotypical 'life plan' for women consisting of finding a man, followed by marriage and children. This is illustrated in the next excerpt from the interview with Karina as she discusses the break-up of her marriage:

JILL               Did your husband ever comment on the sort of way that you looked

KARINA           I think he was content, he was content to have a woman in the home and to be able to go and please himself with other women so that if he wanted to go out and have a good time he'd have his perfect figure eight on his arm and then if he wanted a home life with a family and that

there'd be me you know this lump sat in the living room (laughs) But er

JILL And you got fed up of that?

KARINA That wasn't my, this is something that I have always wanted to do and suddenly it was like, if you'd go out to a social evening or something like that, its like 'Oh here comes Bill - and his wife' and they've known me for God knows how many years and suddenly they'd forgot my name you know what I mean? It were like I've got a personality, I'd got a brain I want to use, I don't know what I am doing, but I want to use it so that were it.

In this quote Karina again asserts that she has an identity including a 'personality' and a 'brain'. Here this is contrasted with the way in which Karina felt she was valued inside her marriage, when she was defined solely in relation to her husband. She feels she had no independent identity of her own and that marriage had somehow brought about a 'loss of identity'. For Karina the assertion of her identity involved rejecting stereotypical definitions of what a 'woman' was which she feels involves valuing a woman in terms of her sexual attractiveness rather than her intellect or personality.

In the final quote from Karina we see how her assertions of autonomy discussed in the last section and her assertions about the importance of her identity other than her appearance are brought together.

JILL What about this thing about your personality, I'm really interested in that, you said I wouldn't be underweight for my personality.

KARINA I was very quiet and shy.

JILL And you directly relate that to the size that you were.

KARINA Yes cos I was thin and quiet and shy and if I went out I would be the one that would try and squeeze to the back of the crowd so that nobody would notice me and things like that. I mean I've just sort of like come out of my shell and its like the bigger I've got is the more like I'll push myself in front, my mouth will shoot off sometimes without my thinking what I'm saying and things like that.

JILL So its about being quite visible then, being big.

KARINA Yeah and also in the clothes that I wear as well, I wear bright colours, I don't wear dark colours to try and hide it except for sometimes if at winter I can't wear shorts then, so I'll probably pick black leggings you know what I mean to make my legs look a bit thinner, I occasionally wear black tops but I don't always

wear them, but I think that goes on my mood swings, its not for my size its just the mood that I am.

JILL                    So its like you want people to notice you now

KARINA                Yes and dye my hair and things like that, bleached it (laughs) I think, I always said that if I was a bit slimmer I would have been a definite punk rock definitely. But erm I'm doing it but in a different sort of way, sort of like, I pick my clothes that I can be extrovert but at the same time sort of like in some sort of control like if you can ( ) I don't know how to explain that its weird (Karina, M5, P18).

In this quote Karina explains that she now wears the clothes that she wants to wear rather than those which others might define as 'suitable' for her because of her size. Here then she is asserting her right to autonomy, rejecting the influence of others in an 'I am what I am' discourse. In addition to this Karina is referring to her sexuality and her right to control what importance is placed on this by other people, particularly men. Thus in the line, 'I can be extrovert but at the same time in some sort of control', she asserts her right to look however she wants whilst still controlling the attention she may receive about her body. She thus wears clothes which assert her individuality and personality which suit her rather than others. Whilst these clothes may draw attention to her this is attention to Karina's personality rather than solely to her sexuality and sexual attractiveness to others.

The theme of 'I'm more than just my body, I've got a brain' was also found in the interview with Elaine. In the following quote she explains that she will pass this message on to her daughter (now aged thirteen):

JILL                    What sort of messages do you pass on to her [daughter] when she's worried about her weight?

ELAINE                Er, I try to get across, you know, I can understand why she's feeling as she is because every time the television comes on, every time she opens a magazine it's all billboards and everything isn't it but you know I give her a lot of positive things and say she's really beautiful and stunning, eating alright, you know? Concentrate on putting something in her brain and then she's got to, you know, your looks will not get you anywhere but your brains will sort of thing'

Hence in this excerpt we see that Elaine is teaching her daughter to value herself not only for her body but for her brains as well. This is an alternative to the 'change your body, change your life' theme found in other interviews where the women believed that they would succeed in life if only they could lose weight and become more stereotypically attractive (see section 4.1.5 above). Here Elaine is attempting to steer her daughter away

from this and, like Karina, asserts the importance of the intellect rather than her appearance to her daughter's identity and potential achievements in life.

#### 4.2.3 Transitions between Discourses

As discussed briefly in the introduction to the thematic analysis, there was some overlap in the use of the discourses surrounding body size (as presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2) with some women in the sample wanting to lose weight because of the associations of thinness with being accepted, desired and with changing one's self and one's life at the same time as rejecting the pressures upon them about their body size and the way in which their body size was seen as the most important part of their identity. These women there appeared to be in a transition with the women involved in a process of re-evaluating their feelings about body size.

An example of this process of transition is seen in the interview with Rachel. As discussed in section 4.1 Rachel describes herself as always having had a 'weight problem' and she continues to want to lose weight. In the following quote we see however that she is now involved in a process of reflection upon the meaning of body size in her life, so that whilst she still wants to lose weight she no longer regards it as so important as she once did:

JILL                    So do you think it's changed as you came here [further education college]? How you felt about things like that?

RACHEL                Oh yeah. Over the last two years, while I've been going to college and that, it's not been such a big thing you know? Like the weight thing hasn't been as bad and I think there's worse things in life isn't there, than being overweight? But, I don't know, I don't think you should be pressurised to lose weight anyway I think it's up to you if you want to lose it, and if you feel better for losing it. I mean, I always felt that not dieting but exercise is the best thing. And it really annoys me that I can't do it at the moment. I can't wait for the holidays (M12, P12).

In this quote Rachel again refers to college as a significant experience in relation to her feelings about her body size, in line with the other women from the college sample. In this quote there is a combination of the valuing of other parts of an individual's identity and of the rejection of external pressure about body size. Thus she has realised that 'there are worse things in life than being fat' which questions the importance of body size and physical appearance in her life. Similarly there is an assertion about autonomy and that Rachel herself should be able to control her body size and decide whether to lose weight or not. At the same time however Rachel does want to lose weight and she 'can't wait' to do so.

At other parts of the interview Rachel again asserts her growing sense of autonomy in relation to the pressure she has received about her weight:

RACHEL I've got a boyfriend at the moment and he's always nagging me, you know, to try and lose some weight while I'm -

JILL Does that bother you?

RACHEL No I just don't take any notice these days (Right) probably I should I don't know if I should do or not.

JILL What does you say to him then when he says that? What does he say I mean?

RACHEL Oh he's not awful or anything he just says it would be good for my heart and he's right. basically, I mean, he's right, if I lost some weight then my asthma wouldn't be half as bad these days. I know all these people are right, having a go at me, but they just don't know what it's like to do it - it's hard - and it's not them actually dieting it's me so -

JILL Does it make you feel like less confident when he says things like that about you

RACHEL Yes sometimes, but, but I get it off my parents as well anyway I get it off a lot of people really - that 'You should lose this' and 'If you were half a stone lighter you wouldn't feel so bad', and get it off the doctor, you know, and all this. I know it's awful but the more they have a go at me the more I don't bother.

JILL Yeah I can believe it

RACHEL I ignore it I think that I'll do it when I want to do it. And when I do it it won't be for anybody but me, you know, sort of thing. I mean, that's what I tell my boyfriend as well. That when I do it it'll be for me and not for him.

This quote indicates that Rachel is unsure about whether she should or should not try to lose weight. This is related to the pressure placed upon Rachel to lose weight for the good of her health (see section 4.1.3). Whilst it may be relatively simple to reject pressures on the self to lose weight in order to look more attractive, it may be more difficult for women to reject pressures upon them about their health. As can be seen from the quote the pressure from Rachel's boyfriend and parents is 'backed up' by the advice Rachel has received from the medical profession about her weight. The power of the medical profession cannot be underestimated here nor the pressure to look after one's health in a society becoming more and more obsessed with health and fitness.

This health discourse is also interesting because of the way Rachel then constructs the pressure she receives from others. Rather than being presented as oppressive and manipulative, Rachel presents the pressure from her boyfriend in terms of 'he's not awful or anything' implying that her boyfriend is not cruel in his comments and that he only does so for her 'own good'. This is also seen in the line 'I know all these people are right having a go at me'. Thus rather than the pressures being represented as 'wrong' as in the interview with Karina they are presented as essentially 'right' although Rachel still rejects them. Here the rejection is about Rachel's past experiences of dieting which she has found not to be extremely difficult and which do not maintain weight loss in the long term. Rachel is thus asserting the validity of this knowledge as well as her right to use this knowledge to reject the idea that she should be on a diet.

On a deeper level this rejection is again about asserting the rights of the self over others. Thus Rachel accepts that other people may only 'have her best interests at heart' but nevertheless she rejects this pressure. Instead she asserts that from now on she will only lose weight when she wants to and that she will no longer be 'bullied' into this by other people.

#### 4.2.4 Health versus Appearance : Reconceptualising the Thin Ideal

The relationship of health to attitudes towards body size has already been discussed in terms of the pressure fat women experience over their size. Thus in section 4.1.3 there was a discussion of the way in which the women found it difficult to resist the pressure put upon them to lose weight if this pressure was presented in terms of health. In these situations then the thin ideal is reconceptualised in terms of health rather than appearance. This reconceptualisation was also used in the women's discussions of the 'its what inside that counts' discourse. Hence on one level body size was defined as less important than 'what's inside a person' but on another level thinness was valued in terms of health.

For Elaine there is an assertion that there is nothing 'wrong' with feeling fat. At the same time this comes with the proviso that one should be healthy. This is shown in the following quote:

JILL                      So what would you feel like if she put weight on?

ELAINE                  Like as in overweight you mean? Erm, I mean only thing I'd be concerned about there would be health, I mean, you know. I think if you've no health worries associated with your weight then, you know, you should be just happy as you are and what you are ( ) you know just be happy (Elaine, M14, P16).



Again then we see the use of a health discourse in relation to the acceptability of fatness. In the quote from Elaine the assertion that one should be accepted for whatever body size one is comes with the proviso that one should be healthy and that this is more important than however attractive the person is. In quotes from other women however there is an assumption that being fat is always associated with poor health. This is seen in the following quote from Alison:

JILL                    Do you think it's very unhealthy to be slightly overweight?

ALISON                Er, no not slightly overweight but um, yeah, I think er, people should be more concerned if er, you know, they're getting too overweight - then it becomes a danger signal. So, I mean, it's their, I know it's their decision anyway - and it's still what they're personality's like is what is the important thing - but I think people should be concerned if they become overweight. (Alison, M18, P19).

In this quote Alison balances her belief that body size is not important and that it is the choice of the individual with her beliefs about health and body size. Here then we see how concerns about the health of an individual over-ride concerns about de-emphasising the importance of attractiveness and asserting the autonomy of the individual. Fatness is reconstructed in terms of a health discourse which continues to regard fatness as inferior but which places this in concerns about the welfare of the individual. This relates to the analysis of health in Study One where the health discourse was used as an argument for not wanting to be fat even when the discourse of fat = unattractive and the valuing of women in terms of their appearance is rejected (see Chapter Six). Here then a health discourse could be conceptualised as a reworking of the fat is inferior discourse in relation to an increasing emphasis on health and fitness and in the presence of feminist discourses rejecting the objectification of women.

### **4.3 Alternative Meanings of Body Size**

The women who challenged the importance of body size and asserted their right to self definition also reconceptualised the meanings of the body size and female body. These alternative meanings centred around two main areas. Firstly, the women asserted the power of largeness which thus valued fatness rather than denigrating it. This power was contrasted with the vulnerability of the thin body both in terms of its physical capabilities and its susceptibility to the attention of others. This attention was focused around the unwanted sexual attention associated with having a thin and therefore 'sexually attractive' body so that fatness represented a form of protection against the feelings of exposure which could arise from being thin.

Secondly, there was a rejection of the emphasis place on the appearance of the body as the women asserted that their bodies had a function as biological entities rather than simply as decorative exteriors. Here then new meanings of the body were defined as the women explored what contribution their bodies made to their sense of self and what their size said about themselves. These women were exploring definitions of women and women's value in the world.

#### 4.3.1 Visibility, Space and Power

For women who rejected the pressures on them to be thin, the feelings of visibility which other women associated with fatness were reversed. Thus rather than fatness being seen as a negative state (as in section 4.1.1), it was interpreted in terms of the power and strength which comes from being big enough to 'take up space in the world'. Similarly rather than being seen as a positive size, thinness was associated with vulnerability and a lack of power. This reversal of meanings is best illustrated with quotes from the interview carried out with Karina who saw her gain in weight as being intertwined with changes in her life which involved her becoming more autonomous and assertive:

- KARINA                    Sometimes I think to myself, why bother (laughs) you know what I mean like not everybody's supposed to be the perfect figure eight, and if I was a perfect figure eight - I don't know I think a lot with my weight is like has made my personality, so that if I was to become this figure eight, I think I would probably become a boring person (laughs) do you know what I mean
- JILL                         Right when did you put the weight on then, how how
- KARINA                    Its about five or six years now.
- JILL                         And you think you've changed quite a lot, is that what you're saying.
- KARINA                    Yes I have changed because I was introvert before now I'm more extrovert because er if people pull your leg often enough you either build up a thick skin or you cringe in a corner somewhere and I went the other way, I came out of the closet so to speak and said 'Right to hell with it, this is me'. It doesn't bother me. (Karina, M5, P5).

In the last part of the quote Karina refers to what she sees as the alternative reactions one can make to the criticisms fat women receive about their size. The alternative of 'cringing in a corner somewhere' refers to the feelings of visibility and desire to escape and hide described in section 4.1.1. The other alternative, which is the one Karina has decided to take, is to defy those who criticise one's weight and assert one's right to be fat. Thus here Karina associates her weight gain with becoming more extrovert in comparison to her introverted thinner self. She feels that her fatness represents the space she takes up in

the world and the 'noise' that her new extrovert self makes. In addition to this Karina has also redefined her body in terms other than those associated with appearance and decoration. She is aware of her body as strong and feels pride in this strength as shown in the next quote:

KARINA            Well I have noticed things like if people get into er I used to go out with some friends if they got into an argument or a fight or something like that, I mean they're all tall and skinny people, athletic, they call for me for help (laughs) and I'm thinking who wants this little fat body to come bopping and sort of like are you starting something (laughs) so and its weird that, I generally get that its sort of like this broad shoulder.

Here then Karina is breaking away from the femininity discourse which defines the female body as fragile and non-functional. She asserts that as well as providing her with space to be heard, her body represents power and strength outside of its ability to attract through its slimness and smallness.

In an addition to this Karina's pride in the strength and power of her body may be a reaction against the stereotypes associated with fatness. This is seen in the following quote from Karina:

KARINA            Me and my friend were only talking about that a couple of months ago, saying isn't it funny that if you're big people do always open up to you more, I don't know why that is erm because of what they call, I mean people'll say I'm always laughing, you know that I mean, and I mean sometimes say to myself I hate this Cheshire grin thing that I've got stuck on my face when they start on me I mean if I let my smile slip just a little bit, everybody's sort of like, what's wrong Karina, what's wrong, you know what I mean and there's nothing wrong. By the end of the day I feel so depressed that I'll look for something to be wrong (laughs) (Karina, M5, P20).

Here then we see the pressure Karina is under to constantly be cheerful and live up to her 'fatty' image. Her assertion that her body is powerful and can represent a physical threat may be a rejection of this 'cosy image'.

The power of having a large body is also discussed in the interview with Mary. Here however size is considered in terms of protection from male threat as shown in the following quote:

MARY                I saw this woman on Oprah once and er I mean she was ever so big and you know you just wouldn't mess with her. Do you know what I

mean? You couldn't imagine anybody 'cos she looked so fierce and tough and she took up all the space, you know? And it is powerful. It is powerful. Size is powerful. Whereas men can be, sort of, physically big in a, sort of, a male sort of way, women can be sort of, vastly big. Knock 'em through the wall

In this quote Mary talks about the toughness which can come from being big together with the idea that because fat women take up physical space with their bodies they cannot be pushed around. In the following quote it becomes apparent why this power is important to her:

MARY                   About six months ago I did start to lose quite a bit of weight and I found myself actually getting quite frightened. And I thought and it just seemed to me like some voice came from within and er, 'My God I'm going to be slim', and I was really surprised at this so maybe there is some connection with it I don't know.

JILL                    You, kind of, felt quite threatened by the fact that you might be slim - because that would mean that you might get sexual interest?

MARY                   Yeah yeah, I think so it was connected to a sex thing and I suppose it's my own internal messages you know that if I am slim then I'd be sexually attractive or whatever and er I don't know.

JILL                    Right so what did you do?

MARY                   I put weight on.

JILL                    Was it a conscious thing?

MARY                   A sort of half and half conscious thing, you know, I found myself eating the next day - as much as I could.

JILL                    And did you then feel better, once you'd regained the weight? Did you feel safe again?

MARY                   Yes I did

JILL                    A kind of protective layer, you mean?

MARY                   Yeah you can hide away in it, can't you really?

In this quote then Mary talks about the visibility of the female body discussed in section 4.1.2. Whilst the fat body is visible and receives negative comments, the slim body is also extremely visible because of the attention it gains from men. For Mary sexual attention is extremely threatening (as seen in the quote below) which is probably related to the sexual, emotional and physical abuse she experienced as a child. As she explains in the next quote she does not want sexual attention of any kind and one way of avoiding this is to protect herself in a layer of fat:

- MARY           Especially when I think of the street and everything. I saw this group of guys and they were leering at this woman down the road, next door to me, they were leering at us and I felt so threatened I just went in and door closed. If I was slimmer that would be (inaudible)
- JILL            Right yeah so you become something that men look at and men think that they have the right to comment on
- MARY            It's horrible
- JILL            It is horrible
- MARY            It is I felt really threatened I just don't want it part of my life you know? And yet there's nothing you can do about it
- JILL            That somebody could just comment on your body. You know, it's a real sort of
- MARY            Invasion (Yeah) Its invasive 'cos you know so easily how men act on it as well it's not just comments (Mary, M13, P20)

For Mary then being thin is about being vulnerable and powerless, leaving one open to the unwelcome sexual attention and advances of men. Mary experiences male attention as invasive, as occurring without her permission, regardless of whether she wants it or not. Thus for Mary being big is about taking up space in a male world where men usually take up the space and in which thin is equivalent to submission and being over-powered.

#### 4.3.2 Function versus Decoration: The Female Body as a Biological Entity

The meanings of body size were also reconceptualised in terms of a challenging of the decorative function of the female body and an assertion that the body should be valued for its biological and reproductive functions. Here the women rejected the idea of their bodies as simply being something to be looked at by others. This firstly involved a recognition of the female body as being designed for the function of child bearing. This resulted in the women accepting the more 'female' aspects of their body, in terms of fleshy hips, stomachs and thighs, together with the recognition of the value of the body in being able to create new life. Secondly, the body was valued in terms of its healthiness in terms of the fact that whilst the appearance of the body might not be perfect it was at least functioning in a healthy and reasonably efficient way. Thus, rather than the body being denigrated, it was regarded with a sense of acceptance and recognition of its potential and achievements. Running through these new definitions was also a discourse of maturity as the women moved away from the obsession with appearance in their youth to a recognition of the value of the body in one's thirties and forties.

In the first quote, Bridget outlines her rejection of the idea that her body should simply be valued for the way that it looks. She explains this in terms of a growing wisdom which has changed her feelings about the different uses of her body:

JILL                    I mean, do you enjoy food or is it

BRIDGET                Yes I do enjoy food a lot but I feel I'm quite relaxed about enjoying food, I don't, but I think that's at the point I've got to in my life really, but I mean I presume it's easier for me because I'm not particularly fat and I'm not particularly thin and I don't see things, I don't think I'd get fat, but there have been times in my life when I have seen myself as fat, I think it's something that's come to me with older age as part of wisdom which has come from feminism I think and my involvement with feminism and understanding that I actually didn't want to buy into having to have this er (Bridget, M16, P3).

In this quote direct reference is made to the influence of feminism on Bridget's feelings about their bodies. In the next quote we see how Bridget's changed attitudes towards her body are also related to her experience of childbirth which put her more 'in touch' with her body. She was able to regard it in a positive way through experiencing its positive role in creating and giving birth to a baby. Here she became aware of her body as having a different function to simply being an external 'shell' to be presented to the world and valued for its appearance to other people.

BRIDGET                I do think my body image changed quite a lot when I had my first child because I can remember afterwards thinking how amazing it was that my body had got through this fierce thing and I saw, even though it was all dilapidated and falling apart afterwards, I saw it as a friend because part of labour is actually going into yourself and dealing with it and all these body things happen and I definitely saw my body as a friend and it had seen me through this and it would see me through a lot more, and I was less critical of it. But I mean I am aware of my body ageing and all that sort of thing so it's perhaps different now if I don't care about the size but I care more about the quality of it that it all goes saggy and I think that I should do more exercise and stuff but it doesn't affect what I eat really, I'm not bothered about eating. (Bridget, M16, P3)

Here then we see how childbirth led Bridget to experience her body as something other than an external 'shell' which others may or may not admire. She values her body for what it 'can do' rather than what it 'looks like'.

This valuing of the body in terms of what it can achieve is also seen in the next quote from Bridget in which she emphasises the healthiness of her body which she sees as more important than the way it looks:

- BRIDGET            I think it does change as you get older because I was talking to this woman who's the same age as me on the Women's Studies course this year, we were talking about this, and she just said 'Well, you know, as long as it's all right, as long as there's nothing wrong with it, I don't care what it's like really', you know, and I feel like that now.
- JILL                As long as it's working.
- BRIDGET            As long as it's working and it's healthy and it gets me around its done very well you know, you can't expect, I don't want anything different than that.
- JILL                Right, I think that must be related to having children then.
- BRIDGET            Yes I think it's probably related to having children, I think it's related to getting older and really you know recognising your mortality really and knowing people that things go wrong with. (Bridget, M16, P10).

Here then there is a general acceptance of the body for all its imperfections. Bridget values her body for the fact that not only has it provided her with children but that it also enables her to live a healthy and active life which other people may not be so fortunate to have.

This valuing of the body for its effectiveness as a physical entity is also seen in the following quote from Elaine. Here Elaine compares herself to a young disabled woman, who is referred to here as Jane, whom Elaine looked after in the past. Elaine asserts that having a non-disabled body should be recognised as a blessing and that one should be grateful for this rather than constantly criticising one's body:

- ELAINE             Because I've got friends who are thin and they're unhappy about being thin, so we're never happy are we? (Yeah) Just be happy you can sort of get out of bed in the morning and you've got a choice. You can make decisions for yourself and communicate with (Right) I've worked with disabled people, mentally and physically and I think, you know, if I were twenty stone or whatever, you know I'm just lucky, really lucky you know. Because you do, you hear people moaning about I've got a spot on my chin or whatever - well, we do it, we've all done it haven't we, you know? 'Oh God I'm

putting weight on I've put another ounce overnight 'and I always think of Jane who I used to look after and you know if only I could wake up every morning and see her and I be so happy to just be able to get out of bed and go to work or the dole office even, you know? She can't do anything for herself at all. That's what keeps me going anyway when I have a low and I'm griping to myself. I think you're alive you know? (Mmm) You can make things happen. I've got control over my life anyhow to some extent haven't I? But she hasn't, she has everything done for her, dragged here and there 'and if she could talk I'm sure she'd tell everybody to 'f' off! (laughs) (Elaine, M14, P20)

#### 4.3.3 Pregnancy as 'Undesirable Weight Gain'

The alternative meanings of the body discussed above are brought into sharper focus through comparing them to the way in which other women in the sample regarded pregnancy and the biological functions of the body. Here, the idea of valuing the female body for its 'potential for creating new life' was not welcomed. Pregnancy was seen as negative because it resulted in undesirable weight gain. Alternatively, women saw pregnancy as positive but only because it was the one time in their lives when they were able to eat as much as they wanted without feeling guilty about weight gain.

In the following quote from Fiona we see the fear which pregnancy aroused in some of the women because of the inevitable weight gain.

JILL                   Right what about children - do you think that that's going to have a great effect on your eating habits?

FIONA                 I don't know.

JILL                   Do you want children?

FIONA                 I would like children, yes. It's erm - not yet though I don't think (Laughter) I'm going to have to hurry up (Laughter) to wind myself up a bit er, but yes I mean another friend of mine who is 34 has just had her first child and she went through agonies because she found she was pregnant and she knew she was going to put weight on and again, because she was fairly sporty and again had not sort of any eating problems but was aware of her food she went on a massive diet in her first month well just before basically she found out she was pregnant because she was so scared she was going to put weight on - and again a couple of my other friends have said 'Well we're pregnant great - we want children but we don't want to go through the agony of taking off a stone of weight after we've had it.'



And again, there's something I've thought about - well yes, you have to, its natural and it's part of being a woman that you will gain weight when you're pregnant. But I've thought about well do I really want to go through that! And again, it's all linked to eating and not wanting to put weight on, and having to experience that, which in some ways is very self-absorbed (Fiona, M4, P14).

Here then Fiona is persuading herself that she has the body of a woman with reproductive capabilities. Thus in the line 'yes, you have to its natural and its part of being a woman' she grapples with the fact that she would like children but that weight gain is part of being pregnant and she does not want to gain this weight. In a second quote Fiona talks about the way that pregnancy makes a woman have a 'body like a woman':

FIONA                    I was chatting to a couple of my friends - one of my friends, my age, has had two children now. She was always very very slim but never - she was always one of these people that could eat anything and remain the same weight. She actually became pregnant and lost weight and became thinner after her first two children. But even she said "Well, I wasn't really looking forward to it because I knew for the first time in my life I was going to have boobs and a bum and legs (laughter) Now you know how the rest of us feel (laughter)

Thus here Fiona demonstrates that for many women having 'boobs and a bum and legs' is a state to be avoided and hence that 'looking like a woman' is also to be evaded if at all possible. This is referred to in the following quote from Bridget who remarks that the current societal ideal is not womanly:

BRIDGET                I find it strange that thin women () I mean I'm not sexually attracted to women but if I was sexually attracted to women I find fatter women much more beautiful than thin women, because they represent something decidedly womanly and all that and I'm sure that it's true of lots of men, I'm sure lots of men do like fatter women but it's all this sort of media hype probably all put out by the dieting industry. (Bridget, M16, P10).

In the following quote from Suzanne it can be seen how pregnancy may be the only time when a woman is able to have a 'woman's body'. By this Suzanne means that pregnancy allows a woman to be in its natural state:

- JILL                   What was it like when you were pregnant then? I mean, how did that affect you, that you got a big stomach (laughter) did that bother you?
- SUZANNE               No it didn't actually with my first one I was a lot smaller than I am now so er in a way there's like I didn't feel I don't know, guilty or you know there's like that permission that you can be fat when you're pregnant. But I didn't - I wasn't as big then. But there is that feeling that, you know, it's okay to be fat if you're pregnant, you're a woman so
- JILL                   Right so did that mean that you could eat what you wanted then?
- SUZANNE               Erm, yes I think it did I think because you can eat what you wanted you felt - you didn't tend to eat maybe as bad as you do when you feel that you're all time swinging between losing weight or cramming it down your neck (Suzanne, M17, P8)

Here then it can be seen that being pregnant gives women 'permission' to be fat and that this may be the only time in her life when this is acceptable. It is as if pregnancy reasserts that a woman is biologically different to a man and hence that her body may be different to a man's. This is in stark contrast to the current Western ideal of the female body which, as we have seen (Chapter Two) demands a toned, almost sexless body devoid of breasts, hips or stomach which are naturally bigger and fleshier in women than in men. Only in pregnancy can a woman move away from this male ideal and be allowed to have a body which is different i.e. fatter than that of a man.

#### **4.4 The Meanings of Food and Eating: Loneliness, Distress and Meeting Emotional Needs**

This section explores the emotional meanings surrounding food and eating in terms of the way in which the women ate according to different emotions and feelings. The lives of the majority of the women in this group were constrained in some way by either financial restraints or the responsibilities of child care. In these situations the women were unable to socialise and hence had few sources of pleasure in their lives. Here eating represented a major source of pleasure for the women, and was actually one of their only means of 'making themselves feel better' or 'cheering themselves up'.

These feelings were particularly prevalent for those who were no longer married or in relationships for whom there were additional conflicts surrounding the breakdown of their relationships. For these women there were problems with loneliness and feelings of not being 'cared for' by other people. The loneliness and distress which the women felt in their lives resulted in 'comfort eating'. Here eating represented a way of 'caring for the self' when the women felt lonely, neglected or abandoned and hence were not being cared for by other people.

For other women eating also represented a means of containing the distress and conflict they were experiencing in their lives, where again the sense of loneliness and 'having no-one to talk to' resulted in eating being a primary means of coping. However the sense of release from emotional conflict or distress which eating was expected to bring about for the women was usually followed by feelings of guilt, weakness and failure. Here the women's concern with their body size combined with their other sources of unhappiness and distress so that food and eating were surrounded by feelings of confusion and conflict.

#### 4.4.1 Food and Pleasure: Eating as Rewarding the Self

In this section the control which the women attempted to exercise over their eating habits is explored in relation to the guilt and conflict which this created for women when they were not able to maintain this control. As will be discussed in the following sections the women broke their control of their eating when they were in a particular mood or when they experienced a particular emotional problem or conflict.

In the following quote from Alison the sense of 'forbiddenness' and guilt surrounding food are illustrated. At the same time as enjoying 'treat foods' Alison feels a sense of guilt and weakness that she cannot resist such foods. This relates to Alison's concern about her body size and the attempts she makes to control what she eats. She had recently lost two stone and was anxious not to regain this weight:

JILL                    So, say, what about if you really fancy a particular food - like chocolate or something - would you allow yourself to eat that?

ALISON                Well I never go out and buy it, because I never really have done, its only if it's already been here, I'd never go out and buy myself a Mars bar.

JILL                    Why is that?

ALISON                I don't know, I think because of the guilt that always was associated with it when I was younger and now I would just think it was, er, really extravagant.

JILL                    Mmm, in terms of money or in terms of - ?

ALISON                Yeah, in terms of money because until I went back to work this year we were on a very tight budget, so I mean, that would have been a real extravagance that anyway so - which was another reason why I stopped eating meat because of the finance as well - just to make it go round the children, well it was a lot cheaper if we, well my husband still eats meat, but he eats much less, erm, and I just never really liked meat anyway so it didn't bother me. But I don't know why, I wouldn't, I just wouldn't buy myself

chocolate. If somebody else bought it for me then alright. So if [name of husband] went out to the shop and bought something, two bars of chocolate, then I'd eat it but I wouldn't go out myself and buy it.

JILL                   And that's really is that that don't you think you deserve it?

ALISON                I don't, yeah, perhaps, or it's that it's totally unnecessary so I shouldn't really - that I can do without it I don't know, I don't think it's like a punishment, I don't see it as punishing myself but it just feels like it's an extravagance and pointless (Alison, M18, P7).

In this quote we see that eating foods which are regarded as 'treats' is defined as 'extravagant'. This extravagance relates to the money that such foods cost and the tight financial budget which Alison and her family are restricted to. Alison does not allow herself to eat foods which she regards as 'unnecessary' and which she does not 'need' in order to satisfy her physical hunger and nutritional requirements. Thus eating foods which are pleasing and comforting to the self are rejected because eating is only supposed to take place in relation to physical rather than emotional 'hungers'.

Despite the restrictions which Alison places on her eating habits, she does still 'reward' herself with food. Whilst this may not involve eating the 'forbidden' foods such as chocolate, the following quote illustrates that it still results in feelings of guilt and wickedness for Alison:

#### 4.4.2 Eating for Comfort: Loneliness and Caring for the Self

The following analysis explores the way in which the women 'comforted' themselves with food either when they felt they 'deserved a treat' or when they felt depressed or lonely. On one level comfort eating was used by the women as a way of giving themselves pleasure when financial constraints and child care responsibilities made it impossible for them to socialise with friends. On another level comfort eating involved combating loneliness in situations where a woman had experienced a breakdown of relationships or marriage. Here eating was about 'caring for the self' when there was no one to fulfill this role in the women's lives and when they spent much of their time caring for others.

The following quote from Alison illustrates the way in which food represented a comfort or a treat for the women. Here the pleasure which the women obtained from food is presented in relation to the lack of other sources of pleasure in Alison's life. This was a common situation for the women in this group who were constrained by financial and child care responsibilities:

- ALISON           Erm, and also, I do eat for comfort - as a treat
- JILL              Still?
- ALISON           Still I think yeah, I mean I find with having the children, and I was working as well, it's usually about eight or nine o'clock before I can sit down and relax properly during the day and that's when - I don't go out very much - so that's when a treat is something to eat (Yes, right) so that's sort of my weak point really (Alison, M18, P5).

In this quote we see how eating 'treat foods' is one of the only treats Alison has in her life. At the time of the interview, Alison had recently returned to part-time work after a five year break. She now combined work with bringing up her four children who were all born within this five year period. The combination of the large amounts of time and energy which this takes up and the financial restraints upon Alison means that she does not go out very often. Hence for Alison eating is one of her only rewards and only sources of pleasure. Here then eating is used as a way of making herself 'feel good'. In addition to this eating may also represent a way of 'caring for the self' in a situation where Alison spends much of her time working for the welfare of others.

The following quote from Carol illustrates the way in which the women also ate to comfort themselves when they were feeling unhappy:

- JILL              Erm so what about things like, do you ever feel guilty about the amount that you eat, or is there any sort of
- CAROL            Occasionally, if I've really splurged ( ) on odd days if I'm feeling a bit ( ) not very happy with myself ( ) I probably sit and eat more than I should do maybe, biscuits, sweet things ( ) that is one of the things that I find very difficult is to resist sweet things. You know I do realise that it could be wrong, could be bad for me because of the extra amounts of sugar. (Carol, M2, P7).

In this quote Carol discusses the way she attempts to control her intake of certain foods because she regards them as either unhealthy or fattening. Carol is unable to maintain this control when she feels unhappy and hence eats the foods which she defines as 'forbidden'. The normal 'resistance' which Carol would put up when she is 'tempted' to eat sweet foods is broken down when she feels unhappy.

In the next excerpt from Carol it can be seen that her eating for comfort relates to a period earlier in her life (age eighteen) when she moved away from home to work in London.

Here food created a sense of comfort for Carol in relation to the loneliness she felt at being away from home:

CAROL I must have been about 18 and I went to work in London - I had to live in a hotel, which sounds all very lovely but it wasn't it was horrible, and there I was 18 years old, I didn't know a soul, everybody who I worked with of course lived in the suburbs so come 5 o'clock they were away and I went back to the hotel. So my evenings revolved around the menu of the hotel (Right) so there I was having a huge breakfast first thing in the morning going on the tube from about three you know metres down the road, getting out of the tube another three meters, sitting in an office all day then having a sandwich or whatever at lunch time, walking these three metres out and in again and then having a huge dinner. (Carol, M2, P12).

She goes on to say:

CAROL I felt bad about being away from home and being lonely, and maybe like I did, not as a reward but it was a comfort to think, and it occupied the time (Right) because if you leave work and you say have well left at say 5 o'clock half past five by the time I got back in it was maybe six, you know what do you do between six and perhaps ten or eleven when you were ready to go to bed and you're on your own.

JILL Had you been away from home before.

CAROL No that was the first time.

JILL It must have been a bit of a shock.

CAROL It was a bit traumatic yes.

JILL Maybe food became

CAROL It was very much a comfort (Carol, M2, P16).

This quote illustrates the way in which eating represented an attempt by Carol to comfort herself when she was feeling lonely. Here food represented a way of giving herself pleasure when there were few other sources of pleasure in Carol's life. In addition to this it may have represented a form of caring for herself because there was no-one else to care for her. In a further quote from Carol we see how this caring for the self through food is repeated in Carol's current eating habits, where she 'treats herself' to food when she feels 'neglected' or that she is not being cared for:

JILL Do you think that you do reward yourself with food, do you eat special foods.

CAROL Occasionally, yes, particularly if its a weekend, the children's father visits them

maybe I think its every sixth weekend, 6 weeks in between each visit, and I think 'Ooh I'll have a treat' because its only me that'll have it so it may not be, not a cream cake or something particularly like that but maybe something from Marks and Spencers, you know one of their ready meals to buy for me, just one person, is within my financial limitation, but if I have got to buy three portions of it you know I wouldn't be able to afford it. So yes I would say that I do give myself certain rewards like that.

JILL Kind of like doing something special for yourself

CAROL Yes (Carol, M2, P9).

She goes on to say:

CAROL In a way there is conflict between myself and my ex-husband although not outwardly, I think 'Well they're having a good time out with him so I'll do something for me, I wouldn't say that it was jealousy really but its just ( )

JILL That you feel a bit left out.

CAROL Yes, that nobody comes and takes me out sort of thing you know (Carol, M2, P10).

In these quotes food represents a 'treat' for Carol in terms of something which is 'extra-special' for the self. In the first quote, this 'treat food' represents a treat which is just for Carol and not for her two children. This food is not something which can be afforded for all the family, it is something out of the ordinary routine and hence it has a special value for Carol. This may be about meeting her own needs in isolation from those of the family when much of Carol's life is spent looking after her children.

In the second excerpt Carol explains that eating 'treat foods' also takes place when she feels that she is not being 'treated' by others. Thus in the line 'nobody comes to take me out' she refers to the fact that she feels she must love herself through food because she feels nobody else is going to love her. In addition to this Carol's eating relates to the underlying conflict between herself and her husband with eating representing a way to cope with that conflict.

The theme of eating in response to loneliness and emotional distress is also illustrated in the interview with Jean. As discussed in section 4.1.1, Jean was one of the women in the group who defined themselves as fat and for whom their size resulted in feelings of rejection and judgement by others. This resulted in Jean's desire to lose weight so as not to feel so exposed and self conscious. In the following quote, Jean directly relates her

changes in size and weight to the emotional problems she has experienced over her adult life and the effect which these problems have on her eating habits:

- JILL                   Is there any kind of conflict about it [eating] that you don't think you should eat but you do and do you know what I mean or is it quite a normal, straightforward thing?
- JEAN                   It's a conflict every minute of the day, as you were saying earlier, if I've got any problems it goes straight in my mouth and it's been like that for a long time, ever since I had my oldest son when I was sixteen. I was living on social security, my problems started then and I gradually, gradually went up. I lost four and a half stone and I met my second husband then so I've been divorced twice and I felt great about myself I went and started going out again and I had my hair done and I felt I'd got loads and loads of confidence but with being content again I started eating and my ex-husband was blinded at [name of workplace] and from then on my problems started again. I don't - I get very possessive with my male you know males and he was doing these courses and I couldn't bear to be away from him and my reward was eating and gradually I went up again and again and again.
- JILL                   Right, so there's quite a lot of different reasons then maybe for why you do eat do you think?
- JEAN                   Yes, well I think it's all tied up to one thing, problems and loneliness.
- JILL                   Why do you think eating helps that, I mean does it
- JEAN                   At the time it feels, makes me feel a little bit better but then I start feeling guilty, then I feel guilty about it because I actually go to WeightWatchers at the moment. Last year I lost five stone but I stopped going and I've gone back again this year and up to now I've lost three stone again but it's still a problem if I've got anything niggling at me I eat (Jean, M9, P8).

In this quote Jean discusses the way in which her eating and weight have changed in relation to her different experiences in life. The process of eating and weight gain followed by dieting and weight loss is clearly linked in this passage to Jean's relationships with men and the way she has been treated in these relationships. Thus when Jean feels lonely and that her relationships with her partner is threatened she is no longer to stick to her diet but eats to comfort or 'reward' herself. Unfortunately this results in great feelings of guilt for Jean because of her concern about her body size. Thus we see the complicated nature of eating for Jean which arises because of the conflict



between meeting emotional needs through food and the subsequent effect of such eating on her weight and hence her feelings about her self.

The above quote from Jean again illustrates the way in which eating represents a way of meeting women's needs for love and care from other people. Like Carol, Jean 'comfort eats' when she feels that she has been left or abandoned by others and when there is therefore no source of love or comfort in her life. Jean's desire to lose weight was discussed in section 4.1.1 where weight loss was about being accepted by others so as to avoid their ridicule and criticism. However Jean's attempts at losing weight are made difficult by the fact that her only way of coping with the rejection of others is through eating the foods which cause her to gain weight. Thus Jean is caught in a vicious circle around the need for the love and acceptance of others.

In the following quote from Jean we again see that eating represents a form of comforting the self after being rejected by others. Here this rejection involves job discrimination:

JEAN                    I've been like this for a long time and I recognise the signs, I mean some people might say 'Oh you're just being paranoid about it' but I'm not, I know I'm not, I know as soon as I go in that I haven't got the job and I've even been given a job and then been phoned up the next day and told they're sorry but they've made a mistake, the job, you know, they've decided to give the job to somebody else.

JILL                     And how does that, does that make you feel angry?

JEAN                    That makes me feel angry and upset, I mean I must admit the other week when I came back from the interview I had a pudding, I came back here and I had a sweet with custard on, punishing myself again.

JILL                     What do you mean, punishing yourself, do you mean because you're putting weight on or

JEAN                    Well I know I weren't supposed to have it you see but I was upset and I needed that sweetness to try and well it's something that felt good isn't it but then I thought 'You're stupid Jean because you've just you've probably spoilt your diet for this week, you've dieted all week and then you've probably gone and spoilt it all' and I'd only lost three-quarters of a pound that week so (Jean, M9, P6).

Thus in this case Jean feels that she has not been fairly considered in her application for a job because she has been negatively judged in relation to her size. Again we see the sense of rejection women feel if they do not match up to the thin ideal of female beauty (see section 4.1.1). In response to this rejection Jean breaks her diet and eats in order to make

herself feel better. Here then food is 'something that feels good' when Jean has experienced conflict or 'something that feels bad' in her life.

Jean's use of the word 'punishment' to describe eating illustrates the extreme sense of guilt and 'badness' which Jean felt about eating. Thus whilst food is experienced as 'good' because it meets her need to feel cared for in the presence of the rejection of others, it is also experienced as 'bad' because it represents weight gain and breaking the control which Jean is so desperate to maintain over her eating habits.

#### 4.4.3 Forcing down Feelings: Eating and Containment

In the above section eating was a source of comfort for women in that it provided a way of caring for the self when one felt unhappy or lonely. In the following section the loneliness theme is continued. Here however food is constructed as a way of 'forcing down feelings' or of containing feelings when the women had no-one to talk to about their feelings. Thus rather than making the women feel better it was a way of coping with the distress that they felt in their lives.

In the interview with Gail eating was again associated with loneliness and conflict in relationships. At the time of the interview Gail was experiencing a number of difficulties in her life which related to the breakdown of her relationship with her husband and the loss of her job and income which came from the failure of their family business. After separating from her husband, Gail moved back to Sheffield with her two sons (aged eleven and eight) in order to be near her family. She was attempting to study on an access course at the F.E college as well as work as a volunteer at a solicitor's office before beginning training as a legal executive. Trying to cope with all these different areas of her life created unhappiness and distress for Gail so that food was used as a source of comfort and pleasure in her life:

GAIL                    Since things, you know, since my life's changed I've noticed that even more. I get upset and I turn to food - plus the fact that I don't go out or do anything anymore because I'm on my own and I've got the children and to me that's the only pleasure I've got now - to eat - and I feel really good because I've done it.

JILL                    Why do you think that we eat then, that people eat, what's the expectation of it?

GAIL                    I don't know I don't think - when I do it - when I actually - I sometimes eat and I don't even know I've done it. I think it's - I think sometimes you think you'll get comfort from it and you don't, there's just no way you get comfort from eating, it just makes you feel worse. I've gone on binges you know after - and I don't know I've done it and I think what

have I done and I could see this happened and its really upset me.

JILL                    Yeah.

GAIL                    It's sort of my ex-husband getting in contact with me and being awkward and funny, and I put the 'phone down and walk in the kitchen and start eating. (Gail, M11, P6).

At the beginning of the quote Gail refers to the pleasure and comfort she gets from eating. Food is presented as something which makes her feel better when she feels upset. Because of the financial and family restraints upon Gail, food is one of the only things in her life which brings her pleasure. In the second part of the quote, Gail describes the way in which she eats when she is upset about her relationship with her ex-husband. Here she attempts to take away the feeling of being upset by using food to soothe and comfort herself. At the same time however, Gail asserts that food does not bring about these feelings. As in the interview with Jean, the guilt which surrounds eating in relation to its effects on Gail's body size means that food is not a comfort or a pleasure. Thus whilst Gail initially thinks that food will 'make her feel better', after eating she realises that it does not meet this requirement and actually makes her feel worse.

In the next quote from Gail we again see the association between eating and loneliness. Here however eating is not presented as a pleasure but as a way of containing her feelings because she has no-one else to talk to in order to 'let these feelings out':

GAIL                    I think you know if you've got a stable relationship you avoid situations like that you don't get as upset and uptight because you've got somebody. Instead of walking into the fridge I could have turned round and said to somebody 'I'm upset and I don't know what to do', but when you've got no-one to talk to really about it - there isn't anybody there I mean, you can't do that to an 11 year old can you? I can't lay that on them. You've got to try and hide it - you've got to try and cover that sort of thing up 'cos you don't want them upset as well (Gail, M11, P21).

In this quote eating is presented as a substitute for talking. Gail has no-one to discuss her feelings about her husband with and she feels her only alternative is to 'walk into the fridge'. In this sense then eating is about 'containment' or forcing down problems. Gail cannot get rid of her upset and hurt feelings towards her husband and hence she attempts to contain them within herself by eating. This is a point made extremely clearly in the interview carried out with Mary as illustrated in the following quote:

JILL                    Do you think that erm, you eat differently depending on the sort of mood that you're in?

Like, say, as I said before, what are the situations that affect how that happens?

MARY Well if I feel really anxious and depressed then I eat I eat an awful lot I sort of feel very desperate about food and I've got to have something to eat - and it's got to be something nice as well! Sort of tasty or sweet or things like that.

JILL Right, why do you think it's such a desperate sort of thing?

MARY Er, just trying to squash down all those feelings 'cos I've no outlet for them. I've no, erm, I used to do a lot of counselling and I haven't got a counsellor at the moment so I'm stuck with all these feelings which I'm very conscious of, but I'm just squashing down (Oh right) at one time I used to drink an awful lot, and smoke - and I've given up the drinking and the smoking I'm just about stopping almost, er, but I'm still left with eating (Mary, M13, P3).

Mary goes on to say:

MARY It's very difficult, yes, if you're under stress, I mean, I think, although that works for me, you know, like, 'cos er, about ten years ago er, I just didn't realise how much abuse had gone on in the house, at home and as a child, but I mean, after I'd had my son I had er, a breakdown really and I started counselling and I started to remember all these things that had happened - and all the abuse and er, I started to eat a lot as well, and er, about four years ago I had a really intense time of remembering some quite horrendous things and er, I just ate and ate and ate, you know, because I just couldn't contain all this stuff that was just coming out, you know, devastating and that really did help to squash down the feelings which I don't like doing, you know, it's not very healthy and you make yourself ill eventually (Mary, M13, P18).

Thus whilst Mary and Gail have very different conflicts in their lives both attempt to cope with these conflicts by eating to contain these feelings. For both women this relates to the absence of 'confidantes' in their lives who as well as allowing Gail and Mary to talk about their feelings would provide them with the love and concern they need.

#### 4.4.4 Summary

In summary, this section of the analysis illustrates the emotional meanings surrounding food and eating for this age group of women. These meanings have been discussed in relation to the women's experiences of loneliness and of not being cared for by others. These feelings were particularly prevalent for those who were no longer married or in

relationships where the combination of financial constraints and the responsibilities of child care resulted in comfort eating. Here eating represented a source of pleasure for the women, and was actually one of their only means of 'making themselves feel better' or 'cheering themselves up'. In addition eating represented a way of 'caring for the self' when the women felt lonely, neglected or abandoned and hence were not being cared for by other people. For other women eating also represented a means of containing the distress and conflict they were experiencing in their lives, where again the sense of loneliness and 'having no-one to talk to' resulted in eating being a primary means of coping.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter has explored the meanings surrounding body size and food for a group of women aged between thirty one and forty five who had not previously been diagnosed as having an eating disorder. This section of the chapter aims to summarise the main findings of the thematic analysis of the study, relating the findings back to the relevant literature and outlining the points to be discussed in comparison to the other studies in Chapter Nine.

Body size and food had a diversity of meanings for this age group of women. Thus some women wanted to lose weight, others minimised the importance of body size in their lives and identities, and others were in-between these two groups. The diversity in the women's accounts can be related to the role which body size was felt to play in women's sense of themselves and in their relationships with others. For some women body size was intimately related to sense of self, so that losing weight was constructed as making women feel better about themselves. For other women a concern with body size was constructed as a preoccupation with the self, which represented selfishness and a neglect of the family. Finally, for a third group of women, a concern with body size was seen as attempting to please other people rather than the self. These women therefore rejected the importance of body size in their lives. The meanings of body size and food were therefore related to the way in which the women conceptualised a concern with body size in relation to their own needs and desires and those of other people.

The different conceptualisations of body size concerns can be related to the women's construction of their experiences in relation to different discourses surrounding the relationships they were involved in. These discourses firstly involved those surrounding women's sexual relationships, where sexual attractiveness was defined in relation to the thin ideal discourse. Secondly, there were discourses surrounding the 'good wife and mother' who was conceptualised as putting the needs of her family before those of her

self. Thirdly, there was an alternative feminist discourse which rejected these other discourses. The women's experiences can thus be seen to be interpreted by them in relation to different discourses surrounding relationships and the women's reflection upon the meanings of these discourses in their lives.

### 5.1 Body Size and the Self: Pleasing Others or Taking Control?

For the women who wanted to become or remain thin, there was a strong link between body size and the women's feelings about themselves (see sections 4.1.4 and 4.1.5, above). These women felt that changing one's body size would bring about a change in how they felt about themselves in terms of 'feeling better about the self' or 'feeling more comfortable with the self'. Here, the women's self concept was intimately related to their self concept, so that becoming thinner was felt to result in being a 'better person' and feeling fat resulted in the woman feeling bad about herself as a person. Here body size was seen as an important part of women's identity in that it was considered to determine 'who they were' as individuals. Such a conceptualisation can be seen to be related to the social discourses surrounding the female body which define it as women's most important asset and which value women in terms of their physical appearance (Wolf, 1990; Ussher, 1989, see Chapter Two, section 4.2).

On this level, wanting to be thin was about meeting the needs of the self in that losing weight was presented as something the women themselves wanted. As in Study One (Chapter Six), the women essentially wanted to change 'themselves' through changing the size of their bodies. On another level, however, weight loss was about pleasing the others in the women's lives. This can be seen in the way thinness was associated with sexual attractiveness, where being thin was associated with 'catching' and 'keeping' a man. Here achieving thinness was about meeting women's perceptions and experiences of male preferences for thin bodies and hence was about meeting male needs as well as personal needs to be sexually desired and approved of by others.

This desire to lose weight in order to meet the approval of others was particularly salient in relation to the women in the sample who defined themselves as fat. These women had experienced large amounts of criticism from other people about their size, resulting in a sense of exposure, invasion and rejection. For these women losing weight was about the attempt to please other people through accepting their definitions of why 'fat is bad' and attempting to lose the weight which caused the women so much pain and rejection.

The fact that the women attempted to lose weight in order to gain the approval of others could be constructed as the passive acceptance of the opinions of others. In the women's accounts however losing weight was presented as an attempt to take control of the self and of one's life. This can be seen in the way that the fat women talked about the way in

which losing weight gave them a sense of gaining control as this meant that people no longer made negative comments about their bodies. Here then losing weight is a way of taking control in order to protect the self. In addition the women wanted to lose weight because this gave them a sense of controlling their lives because of the association of thinness with success and the opportunity to escape the everyday constraints in their lives.

In this sense then, concern with body size can be constructed as being positive for women in that it represents a way of gaining control over their lives and a sense of freedom from their everyday realities. In addition, losing weight may represent an actual improvement in women's lives given that the women live in a social time period where physical appearance is important and where there is discrimination and prejudice against fat people. For these women, losing weight may actually bring about an improvement in their lives. However these positive aspects need to be considered in relation to the fact that weight loss for the women was not generally effective in the long term, so that the women were involved in a constant struggle with their bodies. Thus the freedom and control associated with weight loss were only fleetingly experienced as within reach, only to be replaced by the lack of freedom and control associated with weight gain. In addition, because the women defined themselves solely in relation to their size and appearance, the struggle with body size results in a great amount of stress being placed upon a woman's sense of herself. It prevents women from valuing other parts of their identities which are subsumed under the emphasis placed on body size and the idea that 'once I'll lose weight I'll be a better person'. These issues are discussed in Chapter Nine (section 5).

### 5.2 Sexual and Caring Relationships: Weight Control as Selfishness

Other women in the group asserted that they were no longer as concerned about their body size as they been earlier in their lives. Concern with body size was again related to 'pleasing the self' but this concern was conceptualised as selfishness (see section 4.1.2 above). Here the meanings of body size were constructed in relation to discourses surrounding the wife and mother role. These discourses define the 'good mother' as putting the needs of her family before those of herself. In relation to this discourse, the women felt that they should not spend as much of their time being concerned about their sexual attractiveness as they had done in earlier life because of their responsibilities as mothers.

On another level, these women continued to be concerned about their body size because their sexual attractiveness were still important to them. The meanings of body size were constructed in relation to social discourses surrounding women's ageing, which define women's beauty in terms of thinness and youth and which present thinner, younger and

'more attractive' women as threats to women's sexual relationship (see Chapter Five). Here then, the women attempted to balance their roles as sexual beings and as wives and mothers and hence attempted to combine the demands on them to be sexually attractive with the demands to care for the needs of others as part of the wife and mother role.

### 5.3 Asserting the Self: Weight Control as Control by Others

In contrast to the women discussed above, the sample also included women who asserted that they were not concerned about their size and that their sense of self was not primarily related to their size. For these women there was a rejection of the emphasis placed on their body size by other people (particularly by men) and a claiming of their personal rights to decide what size they wanted to be and what size was attractive for them. There was also a rejection of the way the women felt they were valued by others in terms of their physical appearance (which included their body size), asserting that other parts of their identities were more important and that 'its what's inside that counts'.

For these women, the meanings of body size were related to the needs and rights of the self, which were regarded as more important than those of other people. The 'please the self' discourse can be related to feminist discourses. Thus the rejection of external pressure from either the media or from other people, and the challenging of the primacy of women's body size and physical appearance in the way women are judged and valued, can be seen to form part of a wider feminist discourse rejecting the way in which patriarchal society sexualises and commodifies women's bodies (see Chapter Two).

The women's use of a feminist discourse can be related to two issues. Firstly the women's use of a 'please the self' discourse can be related to these women's experiences of relationships, particularly their sexual relationships with men. The majority of the women who used the 'please the self' discourse had fundamentally changed the way they felt about relationships so that they rejected the inequality and oppression involved in heterosexual relationships. In fact the majority of the women using the discourse were no longer in relationships or had rejected previous relationships because of their experiences of male violence or male infidelity. This can be seen in the fact that the majority of the women who used this discourse were recruited from the college of further education who had a particularly high rate of divorce and separation (see section 2.3 above).

Here, then, the women's different experiences of relationships had resulted in a reflection upon the social discourses surrounding these relationships. This had led to a rejection of these discourses and the construction of body size in relation to a feminist discourse. This can be interpreted in terms of the way women use social discourses on the basis of the meaning these discourses have for them, where these meanings relate to women's biographical experiences. This is in opposition to the perspective of discourse analysis



which defines the use of discourses as bearing no relation to actual experiences or psychological processes (see Chapter Four). These theoretical points will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine.

In addition to this, the women's use of a feminist discourse can also be related to their experiences of college, where they had come into contact with feminist ideas. For many of the women 'going back to college' had only occurred after struggles around relationships had taken place, so that college *per se* had not resulted in the use of a feminist discourse. This has been illustrated in extracts from the interview with Karina, who came to college after rejecting the prospect of a life of housework and childrearing (see section 4.2 above). However, the women also asserted that coming to college had brought them into closer contact with feminist ideas, with the college environment allowing the women to explore the concept of being valued for their brains rather than the way they looked. These ideas were particularly explored in the women's studies course which the majority of the women attended. College thus helped the women to build new definitions about who they were and how their experiences fitted in with those of other women.

Whilst many of the women in the college sample rejected the thin ideal of beauty and the importance of their body size, other women in the college sample were not as clear in their use of this discourse. Thus there were women in the college sample who had experienced the same 'exposure' to feminist discourse and who had also the breakdown of relationships who continued to regard their physical appearance as an important part of their identity and who wanted to lose weight. Thus both Rachel and Suzanne (see section 3.1.1) were studying at the college but were ambivalent about their body size and whether they wanted to lose weight or not. Whilst these women continued to regard fatness as a negative state and wanted to lose weight, they were also beginning to question the importance of body size in their lives and the pressure which they constantly experienced from others. Here then there was an overlap with the women using a discourse which valued the thin ideal and a discourse which questioned it.

One difference between Rachel and Suzanne and the other women is their actual body size and the way the women had been treated because of their size. The women who rejected the importance of body size most whole-heartedly were thinner than Rachel and Suzanne. It is therefore likely that they will have received less pressure from others about their size and that they have not experienced the sense of being constantly exposed to the critical gaze of others as revealed in Rachel and Suzanne's accounts (see section 3.1.1). Whilst all women are under pressure about their size because of the extreme thinness of the current ideal of female beauty, it seems that this pressure is experienced as much more intense for fat women. As we have seen in section 3.1.3, fat women also experience

pressure about their health so that their are advised to lose weight both so that they become more attractive and so that are more healthy.

The combination of these different pressures (which for Suzanne and Rachel have been experienced for many years) means that there is more at stake for fat women to give up their dreams of the thin ideal. Rejecting the pressure from others and the idea that attractiveness is important means possibly harming one's health as well as potentially missing out on sexual attention from men. Whilst extreme thinness is presented as the media ideal of beauty, women who are 'medium sized' may stand more of a chance with men than fat women. In addition whilst fat women can give up the idea of thinness themselves, this does not mean that they will no longer experience prejudice and rejection by others. This means fat women must be extremely strong in order to take the feminist stance taken up by other, thinner, women.

A final factor to be discussed is the issue of ethnicity on the meanings of body size. All the women in the sample were white with the exception of Karina. An interesting point to raise here is that whilst Karina could be defined as bigger than many of the women in the sample, she was extremely forceful in her use of the feminist discourse and her rejection of the importance placed on her body size (see section 3.2.1 above). This raises questions about the role of colour and ethnicity in the meanings of body size. In comparison to Rachel and Suzanne, discussed above, Karina constructed a number of positive meanings for fatness, including the association of fatness with strength and the assertion that her fatness could be sexually attractive because she 'had all the curves in the right places'. It is possible that these positive meanings of body size may be associated with Karina's ethnicity in relation to research which suggests that non-white cultures may be more accepting of larger female bodies (Allan, Mayo and Michel, 1993; Bucker and Cash, 1992). Unfortunately the low proportion of non-white volunteers in the thesis as a whole (with Karina representing the only non-white woman in the pilot study and the three main studies) means that the relationship between ethnicity and the meanings of body size cannot be more fully explicated.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the diversity of meanings surrounding body size and food for the women in the thirty to forty five age group was related to the role which body size was felt to play in women's sense of themselves and in their relationships with others. The different conceptualisations of body size concerns can be related to the women's construction of

their experiences in relation to different discourses surrounding the relationships they were involved in. These discourses firstly involved those surrounding women's sexual relationships, where sexual attractiveness was defined in relation to the thin ideal discourse. Women using this discourse constructed body size as intimately related to sense of self, so that losing weight was constructed as making women feel better about themselves rather than pleasing the other people in their lives. Secondly, there were discourses surrounding the 'good wife and mother' who was conceptualised as putting the needs of her family before those of her self. Here a concern with body size was constructed as a preoccupation with the self, which represented selfishness and a neglect of the family. Thirdly, there was an alternative feminist discourse which conceptualised concerns with body size as attempts to please other people rather than the self. These women therefore rejected the importance of body size in their lives.

The meanings of body size and food for the women were therefore constructed in relation to the discourses surrounding the different relationships in which they were involved. The use of these discourses related to the women's biographical experiences of relationships and to the women's reflection upon the meanings of these discourses in relation to their lives.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **STUDY THREE**

#### **THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES: AGEING, HEALTH AND THE FAMILY**

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

This chapter explores the meanings surrounding food and body size for women in their sixties and seventies in relation to the age and cohort factors influencing these meanings. This involves relating these meanings to the women's sense of themselves and their experiences of their relationships with others, as well as exploring these meanings in relation to the social and historical discourses surrounding body size and food. The study thus investigates the relationship between the meanings of body size and food and the women's experiences of living in a society which defines older women in terms of asexuality, loss and decline. This firstly involves an exploration of older women's feelings about their sexual attractiveness and the importance of sexual attractiveness to the women's sense of self and relationships with others. Secondly, it involves an exploration of the women's role in providing food for their families. In terms of cohort factors there is an exploration of the influence of the specific social, cultural and historical time period in which the older women were born and through which they lived their lives.

The chapter begins with a discussion of previous research on older women, relating the neglect of older women's lives to the combination of ageist and sexist stereotypes which surround this age group of women. The potential issues of age and cohort for this age group of women are explored below to provide some background for the study and to outline research questions. 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 (Chapter Eight).

## 2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### 2.1 Setting the Research in Context: Previous Research on Older Women

As discussed in Chapter Five, life span research has traditionally failed to explore the experiences of women across the life span. This research has focused on all-male samples, producing male norms which do not reflect female experience, or has viewed the female life span in terms of a reproductive family model of female identity which ignores other areas of women's experiences (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Unger and Crawford, 1992; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Gergen, 1990; Allatt et al., 1987; Barnett and Baruch, 1978). This bias in the life span literature as a whole is particularly relevant to the study of older women, because whilst there are far more women in the older age group than men (Stuart-Hamilton, 1994; Arber and Ginn, 1991), there has been little psychological and sociological interest in the lives of older women (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Nicolson, 1993c; Arber and Ginn, 1991). This can be seen in the literature on women's relationship to body size and food which, until very recently, has focused on the experiences of those in adolescence or young and middle adulthood (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Rodin, Silberstein and Striegel-Moore, 1984).

The majority of research which does investigate women's experiences in later life portrays the older woman in terms of unhappiness, loss and decline. This can be seen in the emphasis on research on the menopause, which explores the effects of the 'loss' of reproductive capacity on women's psychological well-being, or research on the 'empty nest', which explores the effect of the 'loss' of children in women's lives as their children grow up and leave the family home (Gergen, 1990; Itzin, 1986, 1984; Barnett and Baruch, 1978). Both these research areas can be seen to focus on reproduction and child care as part of the traditional conceptualisation of women's lives in reproductive terms. Having said this, a small number of authors can be seen to take a more positive view of older women's lives. An example can be found in Neugarten's research on changes in women's roles within marriage in later life (e.g. Neugarten and Gutmann, 1968), which indicates that women grow more assertive and dominant within marriage as they age. Unfortunately, these authors continue to remain the minority.

The emphasis on reproductive events in psychological and sociological research can be linked to the influence of negative cultural attitudes towards older women (Itzin, 1986, 1984). Whilst negative ageist stereotypes relate to both older men and older women (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1990), it is suggested that ageism is more pronounced in relation to women, so that there is a 'double standard of ageing' (Itzin, 1986, 1984; Sontag, 1972). It is argued that the double standard of ageing relates to the interconnectedness of ageist stereotypes with sexist stereotypes. In her discussion

of the combination of ageist and sexist stereotypes in media representations of women, Itzin (1986, 1984) notes how all sex role stereotypes of women are inseparable from age stereotypes. Hence in jokes, for example, women are represented as the 'silly old moo - the missus' (the nagging middle aged wife), the mother-in-law (the older woman), the scatterbrain (stupid young woman) or the dumb blonde (young sex object). Whilst all of these stereotypes about women are negative, older women have to cope with the 'double jeopardy' (Itzin, 1984) of the fact that they are stigmatised because they are both 'women' and 'old'.

Popular representations of older women portray them in two ways (Gannon, 1994). Firstly, they are represented in terms of the 'nurturing grandmother', who achieves fulfillment through caring for her family, particularly her grandchildren. This representation relates to the empty nest, which defines older women as experiencing a sense of loss when her children leave the family home which can only be removed by the arrival of grandchildren. Much of this love is expressed through the provision of food for the family, as will be discussed below.

Alternatively, older women are portrayed in terms of obscenity, ugliness and wickedness in representations of 'old crones', 'evil stepmothers' and 'wicked witches' (Itzin, 1984). These representations have been traced back through the witch hunts of medieval Europe and colonial America to myths of goddesses in ancient civilisations (Robbins-Dexter, 1990; Miles, 1989; Graves, 1960). Here older women were feared and hence denigrated for their rampant lust and sexuality which was thought to bring about the dissipation of male energy (see Chapter Five).

Having outlined cultural attitudes towards older women and the way in which these stereotypes can be linked to previous research on older women, there is a need to consider the way in which these stereotypes relate to the meanings of food and body size in older women's lives in order to outline the research questions of the study.

## **2.2 Research Questions of the Study**

The overall research aim of the study is to explore the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women over sixty 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 these research questions are thus shared with Studies One and Two in order for cross sectional and cross generational comparisons to be made.

### 2.2.1 The Meanings of Body Size: Sexuality, Sexual Attractiveness and Ageing

This study aims to explore the meanings of body size in older women's lives. There is thus an exploration of women's experiences of being a particular size in terms of what the woman's body means to her in the context of her own life and how this influences her sense of self. There is also an examination of the meanings of body size more generally in terms of what 'being fatter' or 'being thinner' represent for the women. This involves an exploration of the way in which the subjective meanings of body size and food relate to social discourses surrounding women, body size and food and how social discourses come to have individual meaning for women. This involves both an examination of current social discourses, to investigate how these discourses are used by women of different ages, as well as an examination of the effects of changing social discourses in an examination of cohort factors.

In this study, there is a particular emphasis on the meanings of body size in relation to social discourses surrounding ageing, female sexuality and sexual attractiveness. There is an exploration of the women's feelings about their sexual attractiveness and the importance of sexual attractiveness to the women's sense of self and her relationships with others. As discussed in Chapter Five, social discourses surrounding ageing define older women in terms of sexual invisibility, so that older women are defined as asexual (Gannon, 1994; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Gergen, 1990; Itzin, 1986, 1984). This assumption of asexuality refers both to older women's sexual attractiveness as well as to their interest in sexual activity.

Older women are defined as uninterested in sex because of the way in which female sexuality is defined primarily in reproductive terms. This means that once women pass the menopause they are regarded as sexually defunct and hence sexually ineligible (Ussher, 1989). This is compounded by the fact that the ideal of female beauty is defined in terms of youth, so that any signs of physical ageing in the form of wrinkles, grey hair, weight gain or 'sagging' of the body is regarded as sexually unattractive (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Gerike, 1990; Sontag, 1972).

In the light of these cultural discourses, this study aims to explore the way in which such discourses are used by women in their accounts of their feelings about their body size. Do older women continue to be concerned about their sexual attractiveness? How do these feelings relate to social discourses defining older women as unattractive and asexual? Does moving into old age involve a continued concern with appearance and body size or does it represent a time when women are no longer concerned about such issues?

In relation to sexuality and sexual attractiveness this study also explores the role of older women's body size in their relationships with their husbands or partners. Study One (Chapter Six) explored body size and food in relation to initial experiences of sexual relationships whilst Study Two (Chapter Seven) explored body size and food in terms of the experience of being in a longer term relationship (although many of these relationships had now ended). In contrast to these studies, Study Three explores the meaning of body size and sexual attractiveness in relation to a potential forty or fifty years of marriage. How do women experience these relationships in later life and how do the changes in these relationships across the life span influence women's feelings about their body size and sexual attractiveness? Alternatively, given the fact that women have a longer life span than men and that women are therefore likely to be widowed as they move into old age (Jerrome, 1993), what is the effect of losing one's husband on women's feelings about their sexuality and the meanings of body size and food?

### 2.2.2 Ageing, Health, Food and Body Size

A second issue to be explored in this study is the influence of physical ageing on the women's feelings about food and body size. Firstly, the research aims to explore how women's experiences of their bodies are shaped by the actual physical changes associated with ageing. Ageing is associated with weight gain, so that women can gain an average of ten pounds per decade across the life span (Andres, 1989), with an increase in body fat and decrease in metabolic rate (Krause and Mahan, 1984). This study aims to explore how does this potential weight gain, together with the stereotypical picture of the 'fat old woman', contribute to the meanings of body size for older women.

Secondly, the study aims to explore the relationship between the social discourses surrounding the physical effects of ageing and women's feelings about their bodies. Older people are traditionally stereotyped as being less healthy and less physically active than younger people as part of a stereotype which defines old age as a time of physical decline and deterioration (Siddell, 1993; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1990; Matthews, 1979). These issues need to be combined with the current cultural emphasis on health and fitness (Mitchell, 1987, see Chapter Two) and the way in which this relates to definitions of a thin and young ideal of female beauty. How do these issues contribute to the meanings of body size and food in old age?

### 2.2.3 Family Relationships, Food and Body Size

Research on women's relationship to body size and food has traditionally focused on the experiences of young women (see Chapter Five). This research has emphasised the role of body size in women's relationship to food, relating women's desire to become thinner to the control, denial and restraint surrounding food. Women who have families are likely



to experience food in different ways to younger women because of the role which food plays within women's sense of self and their relationships to their husbands and children. The emphasis on young women therefore denies the deeper complexity of women's relationship to body size and food, particularly in relation to the associations between food, nurturance and love and the way in which the meanings of food change across the life span. This moves the analysis of the meanings of food from a single focus on the influence of women's feelings about their body size to a focus which includes the meaning of food within the family and the role which food plays within family relationships.

In this study, as in Study Two, the meanings of food are explored in relation to the women's experiences of providing food for their families. Feeding one's husband and children is a fundamental part of women's roles as wives and mothers (DeVault, 1991, 1987; Charles and Kerr, 1988, 1987; Kerr and Charles, 1986; Murcott, 1983, 1982), it is a primary way of expressing love and care for one's husband and children (DeVault, 1987). At the same time, food continues to be presented to women as something which they themselves must seek to avoid in order to escape weight gain (Orbach, 1988; Charles and Kerr, 1988). Thus whilst women are expected to provide food for others and this food can provide them with a source of love and nurturance, women themselves are taught that food should not meet these needs for them (Orbach, 1988). This relates to the way in which women must put the needs of others before those of the self as part of their role as wives and mothers (Orbach, 1993).

As discussed in Chapter Five, there has been little research on the role of feeding the family in women's lives or of how providing food for others influences both how women feel about food and how they feel about themselves. Research on the sociology of food in the family has focused on women in young to mid-adulthood (DeVault, 1991, 1987; Charles and Kerr, 1988, 1987; Kerr and Charles, 1986; Murcott, 1983, 1982), so that there has been little research exploring the role of feeding in the older women's relationships with their husbands and children and the ways in which feeding others affects how the older women feel about themselves. Cultural stereotypes present older women as finding much fulfilment in the feeding role, as seen in the stereotype of the 'nurturing granny' who is represented as baking cakes for visiting relatives and handing out sweets to their grandchildren (Gannon, 1994). In addition research on food within the family has offered little individual analysis of how women's role as the feeder of others contributes to how women feel about themselves and how women subsequently feel about food in relation to themselves and their families.

In the light of this research, a further research aim of this study is to explore how the meanings of food for older women are influenced by their experiences of feeding their families as part of their role as wives and mothers. Do the older women find fulfilment through feeding others as the stereotype suggests, or is this role unsatisfactory to the women? How does feeding the family contribute to women's sense of identity as a wife and mother and how have these feelings changed over the duration of the life span?

#### 2.2.4 Cohort Factors: Historical Beauty Ideals and the Influence of Feminism

A further issue to be considered in this study involves the influence of the cohort factors on the meanings surrounding body size and food. The women interviewed for this study were born in the 1920s and 1930s and hence had experienced a different social and cultural environment than the women interviewed in the other studies. On one level an analysis of this must involve a consideration of the fact that because ideals of female beauty are socially and historically constructed (see Chapter Two), women of different cohorts will have experienced different social discourses surrounding body size and food. For instance, the thin ideal of body size originating in the 1920s 'flapper girl' was replaced by bigger ideals until its re-emergence in the 1960s (Bennett and Gurin, 1982). Over the last three decades since the 1960s the beauty ideals presented to women via the media have become increasingly thinner (Wiseman et al., 1992; Morris, Cooper and Cooper, 1989; Silverstein et al., 1986; Garner et al., 1980). This means that the subjective meanings of body size and food, which are theorised as being constructed through a process of interaction and active reflection upon social discourses, may be different for different cohorts of women. There is therefore a need to explore the way in which this socio-cultural environment has influenced the meanings surrounding body size and food for older women.

Research on body size dissatisfaction, as reviewed in Chapters Two and Five, has produced some preliminary findings relating to the influence of cohort factors on older women's feelings about body size. Studies of body image in older people have found that gender differences in body size dissatisfaction persist across the life span, so that women continue to be more concerned and less satisfied with their bodies than men (Mindham, 1994; Lamb et al., 1993; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990). There is some evidence however that perceptions of what constitutes an ideal body size is larger for older women than for their younger counterparts (Mindham, 1994; Lamb et al., 1993). This raises the question of whether such differences are due to an age effect, where the body ideals which women compare themselves to change over the life span. Here the weight gain associated with ageing may result in bigger beauty ideals for older women. Alternatively such changes may be due to a cohort difference, so that the women's ideal corresponds to an ideal experienced in their youth or an earlier part of their lives.

A second cohort change which needs to be considered in this study centres around changes in cultural definitions of the female role throughout these women's lives. The women in the study grew up during the Second World War, with some being involved in war work. The return to domesticity in the 1950s was followed by the growth of the women's movement in the 1960s with its challenge to women's narrow role of sexuality, reproduction and domesticity. For the women in this study, the second wave of feminism was experienced in their thirties and forties, when the women were already settled with children and a husband and had been given little opportunity to develop the skills necessary for a career outside the home. The study therefore explores the women's experiences of the feminist movement at different points in their lives and the way in which this influences the meanings surrounding food and body size for this group of women.

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

#### **3.1 Sample Criteria**

##### (i) Age range: Sixty and over

The first sample criteria for this study was that the women be over the age of sixty. The age limit of sixty was set because this is the age of retirement for women in Britain and hence serves as a marker for the beginning of old age.

##### (ii) Acknowledging Diversity

As in the other studies of the thesis, this study aimed to explore the diversity of women's life experiences rather than defining them in terms of their position in the family life span (Allatt et al., 1987; Murphy, 1987). In order to obtain this diversity an attempt was made to recruit women who were married, divorced, single and widowed as well as women who did and did not have children.

##### (iii) Clinical Status

As discussed in Chapter Two, research on women, body size and food has focused on the investigation of women from eating disordered populations. A major aim of this thesis is to explore the meanings of body size and food for women who were not diagnosed as having an eating disorder, as part of a perspective which focuses on the social construction of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies rather than on individual deficiency or disorder. As a result of this aim a sample criteria of this study was that the women participating in the study should not be clinically defined as having an eating disorder.

### **3.2 Recruitment Process**

Recruitment of the sample was arranged as part of a project carried out in the psychology department investigating the effects of ageing on memory. Participants in the memory study had been recruited through social and educational groups run by organisations such as Help the Aged and the University of the Third Age. As a result of this project I was able to negotiate access to a substantial data base of individuals who met the age requirements of the study.

Recruitment began with the identification of women in the data base who met the sampling requirements. These women were telephoned by the worker on the memory project who described the research and asked if they would be willing to talk to me further about taking part. It was felt that being approached by someone familiar would make the women feel more comfortable about participation than if they were telephoned by a stranger. The women were told that I was a postgraduate researcher interested in exploring how women of different ages felt about body size and weight and how this affected their eating habits. It was explained that most psychological research had been carried out on young women and that I was therefore particularly interested in looking at these issues from the point of view of women in later life.

All but one of the women telephoned at the first stage of recruitment agreed to take part. These women were then telephoned again in order to make an appointment for an interview. At this point, I provided the women with details about the practicalities of the research process. The women were informed that the research would involve interviewing the women either in the psychology department or in their own home, that the interviews would last between one and one-and-a-half hours and that they would be audio-taped with the women's permission. The women were then assured that the interviews would be both confidential and anonymous. After being given the information the women were asked whether they were still willing to take part. If they agreed then a mutual time and location was arranged for the interview to take place.

### **3.3 Sample Characteristics**

All of the women whom I telephoned agreed to take part and were then interviewed for the study (N=12). The women were aged between 63 and 75 years of age, with an average age of 69 years. The majority of the sample can therefore be defined as members of the 'young-old' group which includes individuals between 65 and 75 who are relatively active and independent. In comparison, member of the 'old-old' group are defined as being over the age of 75 and as physically inactive or dependent on the help and support of others (Stuart-Hamilton, 1994).

In relation to these definitions the women in the sample were all mobile and physically active and lived independently in their own homes. They were involved in a wide range of educational, recreational and physical activities, many of which were organised by the organisations from which the women were recruited. This study does not therefore look at body size and food amongst those older women who were not physically active or who lived less independent lives and it is likely that, for these women, the meaning of food and body size in their lives had a range of different meanings to those explored in this study. This point will be returned to later (section 5).

All of the women had been married at some point in their lives, although five were now widowed. Two of the women had been divorced and were now living with their second husbands. All of the women who were widowed now lived alone. The women who were married lived with their husbands, with one woman also sharing her home with her grown-up son. The majority of the women (n=11) had children, and eight of these women also had one or more grandchildren.

The majority of the women had been born in the Sheffield area and had lived in the same area all their lives. All the women in the sample were now retired, although one continued to be involved in part-time work with her husband. In earlier life the women had been employed in a number of jobs, with the majority being involved in part-time work which they had arranged around the care of their children (n=8). These jobs included work as cleaners, shop assistants, catering. A smaller number had continued to work full time for most of their lives, usually because they had been widowed or divorced (n=4) and the money was needed to support their families. These women worked as secretaries, typists and nursery nurses, with one also working in the steel industry. The women's husbands were generally skilled and semi skilled workers involving work in the steel industry, the railway, plumbing and painting and decorating (n=9). The decline of the steel industry in the area meant that many of the women's husbands had been made redundant and hence had taken early retirement. There was also a small proportion of middle class women, all of whose husbands had worked as engineers (n=3).

### **3.4 Design**

The design of the interviews was similar to that carried out in Studies One and Two. Thus the interview was based around an interview guide which listed possible areas of discussion (see Appendix Two) but allowed maximum flexibility and which enabled participants to explore areas of experience they saw as relevant to the discussion.

The interview guide for the older women included the same general areas of discussion as the guides for Studies One and Two. However, specific areas were again included which were relevant to the women's age and position in the life span. Thus the questions about the women's family focused upon her family since her marriage, with questions relating to the role of food within this family and the women's experiences of providing food for husband and children. Similarly, the questions about the woman's feelings about their bodies involved her current feelings as well as the way her feelings had changed throughout the life span, with reference being made to her feelings as a young woman before marriage, after marriage and following childbirth.

As in the other studies, the interview guide was developed and changed across the course of interviewing. 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 would emerge which might not have been previously considered. The themes would then be 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.

### **3.5 Procedure**

#### **3.5.1 Methodology of the Interview Process**

The interviews for the study were carried out in the psychology department or in the women's own homes, depending on which was the most convenient for the participants. The interviews carried out in the department took place in a small interview room with easy chairs which was situated along a quiet corridor away from interruptions or distractions. The interviews carried out in the women's homes took place in their living rooms. When the women's husbands were at home they excused themselves and stayed in another part of the house whilst the interview took place.

The interviews began with a preamble where the design and research questions of the study were described to the women. Thus the participant was told that I was researching women's feelings about their body size and their eating habits. They were also told that this would involve discussing the woman's relationships with her husband, children, friends and family of origin in order to discuss their role in the woman's feelings. I also gave the participant my name, details of my status as a postgraduate research student and,

if the interview was not carried out in the psychology department, information about where I was studying.

Following this the women were 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 for the participant's consent to audio tape the interview with the participant again being assured that the interviews would be confidential and anonymous. This was followed by providing the women with the interview guide for the study (see Appendix II) which the participants were asked to read before the interview began. 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. This was combined with the information that the interview would not necessarily stick to the order presented in the guide but that questions would be asked in whatever order they unfolded in the 'flow' of the interview. After the participant had read through the guide the tape recorder was switched on and the interview began.

Once again the interview can again be divided into three main stages which again 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 between myself and the older woman. This firstly involved asking the woman for details about her current situation, such as her age, marital status, and whether she had contact with children or grandchildren as well as any other relatives. Secondly, the women were asked to give details from earlier life such as her birthplace, parents' occupations, number of brothers and sisters, age when married, and the occupation of herself and her husband (see Appendix II). This was to encourage the women to give a short account of their personal history which, as well as establishing connection with the women, provided background details necessary for other parts of the interview. As I carried out the interviews I realised that this section of the interview had to be limited to asking a few main questions. The women all had extremely interesting life stories which added to their accounts of body size and food, but it was found that telling these accounts involved a large amount of time which often dominated the whole of the interview.

#### Main Interview Stage

The main part of the interview involved the discussion of the areas on the interview guide. This began with a discussion of the older women's personal eating habits, such as

'What foods do you enjoy?' and a discussion of foods which the women felt they should and shouldn't eat. This led onto questions about the women's role in feeding other people, with questions about whether the women ever had disagreements with their families about what should be eaten. In contrast to the interviews with the young women it was found that questions about personal eating habits established rapport more easily than beginning with questions about the family. This could have been related to the women's feelings that their families were a personal part of their lives which they felt more comfortable in talking about later in the interview.

#### '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 which either hadn't been covered in the interview or which added to previous areas of discussion. It was at this point in the interview that many of the women revealed areas of their lives which had not been discussed in other parts of the interview. Thus the older women talked about their relationships with their husbands which, whilst not relating specifically to food and body size, provided revealing information which added to the richness and complexity of the women's accounts. Allowing the women time at the end of the interview to reflect upon what had been discussed thus provided them with the opportunity to talk about more sensitive issues.

At the end of each interview the tape recorder was switched off. I then thanked the women for taking part and answered any questions about myself or the research which they asked. 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 and 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 as well. 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 carried out for this study were carried out before those for Study One or Two and hence my skill at interviewing was not yet as fully developed as it was in the later interviews. In fact I found these interviews the hardest to carry out from all those involved in the thesis. In part this was due to my comparative lack of skill at interviewing in terms of my lack of familiarity with the questions I wanted to explore and the methods of eliciting information and self-reflection from participants. On another level the difficulties experienced in these interviews related to my feelings about my 'expert status'



in relation to the older women. Interviewing the older women seemed to cast me in a granddaughter role to the women (I was 23 when the interviews were carried out). This was because of the way that the women compared me to their own grandchildren, either in terms of my size and my feelings about my size which they compared to those of their granddaughters' or in relation to my education and qualifications, which they again compared to their grandchildren. Whilst I did not resent this in any way I found it difficult to feel confident in these interviews where I felt like a 'granddaughter' rather than a psychologist (see Chapter Nine, section 4.2 for a further exploration of these issues).

On another level I often felt uneasy or unconfident about the actual questions I was asking the women in the interviews. I felt that they might not understand the questions or that they might not be relevant to their own understandings of body size or of their lives more generally. Looking back upon these feelings it can be seen that these doubts relate to my own preconceptions and stereotypes about older women, considering them to be uninterested in body size and sexuality issues because of their age. In actual fact the older women responded well to the questions and the interviews flowed well.

Unlike the women participating in Studies One and Two, the women in Study Three were not generally upset or distressed about the issues raised in the interviews. This relates to the fact that most of the women interviewed for the study had relatively straightforward attitudes towards food and body size which did not seem to cause them distress or conflict (see the thematic analysis of the interviews (section 4) for a discussion of these issues in relation to the research findings). One exception to this was an interview carried out with a woman who seemed uncomfortable in the interview and who gave quite short answers to the questions I asked her. It transpired later that this woman was upset because her son had been taken into hospital the previous day following a car accident.

### 3.5.3 Method of Analysis

#### Transcription

Analysis began immediately after the interviewing stage with the taking 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. The transcribing was shared between myself and two secretaries. In these cases all identifiers were removed to preserve the anonymity of the participants. 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. The theoretical issues behind this method have been discussed 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. A labelling process now took place so that each passage was labelled with an identifier of the form 'O1, P33'. This label consisted of an identifier for each woman which took the form of the letter 'O' (for 'older') which distinguished between the different age groups of women interviewed in the main study, 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.

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 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 put together to create a fuller picture of the contradictions and links for the sample as a whole.

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

The analysis of the interviews from this study is split into three sections. The first section explores the meanings of body size for the older women. This involves an analysis of the decreasing importance which the women placed on their bodies in later life. Thus whilst the women continued to feel that they should lose weight in order to increase their attractiveness and physical health, they felt that they were not as concerned about these issues as they been earlier in their lives. This greater acceptance of their body size was related to the women's awareness of growing older. Their rejection of the emphasis placed on their appearance was constructed in relation to discourses surrounding the physical and relational effects of ageing.

The second section of the analysis explores the meanings surrounding eating for the older women, focusing on the way in which the women attempted to control their eating habits. Whilst the older women were now more accepting of their body size, they saw their eating habits as in need of some form of control for both health reasons and in order to control their weight. This section involves a discussion of the women's control of their food intake which involved a belief in 'sensible eating' and 'eating a little bit of everything in moderation'. This forms part of the women's rejection of the need to control their eating habits 'at their time of life', as well as their more general rejection of the extreme diets in which some women are involved. In addition there is a discussion of the guilt and anxiety surrounding the women's failure to control their eating habits because of the implications for the women's sense of self-control and will-power.

The third section of the analysis explores the meanings of food in relation to the women's experiences of providing food for their families. This analysis illustrates that the subjective meanings of food for the older women were not solely related to the women's desire to lose weight through the restriction of their food intake. Instead the women's feelings about food were also related to their experiences of providing food for others as part of the wife and mother role. In these roles food was about caring and nurturing the family, so that there was an emphasis on providing healthy and nutritious food in the form of 'proper' home cooked meals. The women's experiences of providing food for the family changed over the course of the life span and was therefore related to the

women's sense of themselves and their relationships with their husbands and grown-up children. In later life providing food for the family is related to a loss of roles and the women's attempts to gain power in the face of the threatened dependency and powerlessness of old age.

#### **4.1 The Meanings of Body Size: Ageing, Acceptance and the Life Span**

This section explores the meanings of body size for the older women. The women asserted that their bodies were of decreasing importance to them in later life. Thus whilst almost all the women in the sample felt that they were too fat and that they should lose weight to 'improve' their attractiveness and physical health, they were more accepting of their bodies than they been earlier in their lives.

The first section of the analysis discusses the way in which the women's acceptance of their bodies related to their beliefs in the inevitability of weight gain in later life. The women used biological discourses to explain the fact that their bodies were bigger than in earlier life to reject the need to diet and worry about one's weight.

The second section of the analysis discusses the relationship between the women's acceptance of their size and changes in the women's feelings about their relationships with others. Body size and physical appearance were conceptualised as 'young women's issues' because of changes in the women's feelings about their relationships with their husbands and with other women. These changes had resulted in a decreased concern with one's attractiveness to other people and consequently in a rejection of the need to deny oneself the foods which one desired.

##### **4.1.1 Body Size and Physical Ageing: Resignation, Rejection and Acceptance**

The first section of the analysis explores the way in which the women's acceptance of their bodies was related to their use of biological discourses to explain the current size of their bodies. Weight gain was seen as an inevitable consequence of growing older either as a result of biological changes in the body or due to reproductive events in the women's lives. The ageing discourse allowed the women to be more accepting of their body size in later life, so that they asserted that their bodies 'weren't bad for their age'. This resulted in the assertion that there was no need to attempt to lose weight 'at their time of life'.

The following quotes from Anne illustrate the sense of acceptance surrounding the older women's feelings about their bodies in later life. Whilst Anne was not happy with the size of her body and would have liked to be thinner, she now said her size 'no longer bothered her'. On one level, Anne's acceptance of her size relates to the fact that she is

unable to lose weight despite trying many different diets. This has resulted in Anne deciding that she would no longer attempt to lose weight. On another level Anne's acceptance of her size relates to her feelings about her age and her expectations of weight gain in old age. Thus Anne asserts that she 'hasn't done badly all these years'. Here then we see how an ageing discourse is used to enable the women to reject the importance of body size in their lives.

In the first quote from Anne there is a discussion of her current feelings about her body size:

- JILL                    Are you happy now with what you weigh?
- ANNE                    No I'm not (laughs) no I'm not happy with it but I'm afraid I've got to the stage where there's nothing else I can do about it really I can't lose weight I can't I've tried all sorts of things ( ) because I think I eat a fairly regular diet erm I don't over indulge but I think its bone weight
- JILL                    Right you mean that you mean that you think you should actually weigh
- ANNE                    I think I think it is today erm it could be possibly that I'm carrying more fluid that's the only conclusion I've come to because I've tried dieting because with my doctors help I've tried tablets to try and get the weight down erm as soon as I've come of the tablets I've gone back again so the its just a waste of time having them (Anne, 01, p11).

In this quote Anne explains that she is not happy with her current size or weight. However she adds that despite this unhappiness she is no longer prepared to attempt to reduce her weight. Through her experiences of dieting she has now accepted that she is unable to lose weight and hence she is more accepting about the size of her body. In the latter part of the quote Anne explains her current size in terms of biological factors such as 'carrying too much fluid'. Here she uses a discourse which relates her size to the effects of physical ageing. This forms part of the way in which Anne's acceptance of her size was constructed in terms of 'growing older', so that at this stage in her life she removed herself from concern about her size. This is elaborated on in the following quote where Anne again rejects dieting as a solution to losing weight and uses further biological and ageing discourses to explain this rejection:

- JILL                    Have you tried, have you been on diets as well?
- ANNE                    I've tried diets but I found that the diets that the diet sheets that they've given me are things that more or less I don't eat anyway

- JILL Right so things like so what were they telling you to cut down on sweet things?
- ANNE On sweet things and fatty things and I don't eat them anyway, so I thought 'Well what am I going to eat?' you know sort of thing. So erm I've come to the conclusion that it more or less was its either to do with the fluid with the fluid that I sort of carry and the bone weight with having the arthritis and the osteoporosis and everything else I mean I think its all the bone bone structure and its ( ) 'cos I am big boned so its that that's weighing 'cos I've not really got what you can call a lot of flesh on my body (laughs) I mean I can go like that (pinches flesh) and I've got a bit of a tyre there but not very much but I mean I can feel my hip bones
- JILL I don't know if I can
- ANNE I can feel my bones there so I mean I haven't got a lot of it and I can feel its bruised as well but I mean you can tell from my hands actually they're swollen now at the moment but that's arthritis and things but then show me but then the skin is there there's not a lot of flabby fat on it you know sort of thing they're pretty supple (Anne, 01, P12).

At the start of this quote Anne again discusses her experiences of dieting which have failed to bring about weight loss. Here Anne rejects the rules involved in dieting asserting that if she followed all the rules of the diet she would be unable to eat anything at all. This relates to the older women's more general rejection of the rules involved in health education messages surrounding food (see section 4.2.x). Here there is a rebellion against the strictness of these rules and an assertion that people should be able to eat what they want 'at their time of life'. There is a rebellion against the pressures surrounding food with this rebellion being constructed in relation to the ageing process.

A further theme in the above quote relates to Anne's biological and ageing explanations for her size. She asserts that she is bigger than she wants to be but that this is due to biological reasons. Anne therefore uses a ageing discourse to explain her size in terms of fluid retention, arthritis and osteoporosis. Here there is a sense that the body is deteriorating and that this has caused Anne to weigh much more than earlier in her life. Again growing older is seen as inevitably bringing about weight gain. Here then the fact that Anne's body is changing as she grows older is constructed as a further reason for Anne's rejection of the need to lose weight.

Also seen in the above quote is a possible attempt to avoid the negative judgements involved in being defined as overweight by other people. Thus Anne explains her weight in terms of being 'big boned' rather than actually being 'fat' which is defined in terms of being 'fleshy'. This may represent an attempt to avoid the associations of fleshiness with unattractiveness or unhealthiness. Anne also presents herself as being 'naturally' big because her size and weight is a result of her bone structure. Being 'naturally' big may be more acceptable than being 'unnaturally' big which may be the result of over-eating and a lack of exercise. This may represent an attempt to construct the self as healthy whilst still rejecting the need to lose weight through dieting.

In a final quote from Anne, weight gain is again constructed as an inevitable part of the ageing process. Here Anne states that she accepts her size because she expected to gain weight as she grew older and hence she hasn't 'done badly all these years':

JILL                    So was it [being unhappy about body size] like was it the fact that you couldn't that you couldn't that you felt unhealthy being a certain this weight that you've put on or was it appearance?

ANNE                    I feel ( ) not appearance wise because I can still get size 16s on so no I mean it varies in clothing anyway I mean I'm between a 16 and 18 somethings I can get 16s in and somethings like I'm 18s but

JILL                    And you can get those in the shops [Yes you can get them in the shops] can't you its not a difficult size to get

ANNE                    No its not a difficult size really not really I mean there's just one just one way or the other as I say I've been a size 16 for all the years I can think of so and I was never I mean 14s I used to get at one time but I mean that was when I was very young but I mean as you get older that little bit older you sort of erm I mean 16s and 18s I don't think I've done badly all those years

JILL                    Yeah do you think you expect to get bigger anyway as you get older? Do you think you expect do you know what I mean?

ANNE                    Yeah I think you do because erm in lots of respects you do because you're probably sitting about a bit more (Right) Especially round your hips and things but I don't do a lot of sitting around (Anne, O1, P13).

This quote illustrates the sense of acceptance which Anne feels about her size. This acceptance is constructed in terms of the inevitability of weight gain in later life. Thus

Anne feels that because women tend to put weight on as they age, she herself 'hasn't done badly' in not putting on too much weight over the course of her life.

In the latter part of the quote Anne relates weight gain in later life to an activity discourse so that older people are constructed as less active than younger people. Here Anne uses a popular discourse associating older people with a lack of activity (see section 2 above). Whilst Anne applies this discourse to herself as seen in the phrase 'You're probably sitting around a bit more' she also attempts to distance herself from this discourse as seen in the line 'But I don't do a lot of sitting around'. Here Anne asserts that she herself is quite active, which may be an attempt to distance herself from the discourse which associates old age with degeneration and decline.

The interview with Marion also illustrates the women's relaxed attitude towards their size. In the following quote Marion, like Anne, explains that she is not happy with her body and that she does want to lose weight. However, she is also accepting of the size of her body because of her current age and the expectation that ageing brings weight gain:

- JILL                    So we've talked a bit about your weight and whether you're happy with it or not and you've said that not really
- MARION                I'm not happy I'm not happy with it
- JILL                    Right okay and is that why, you know, what are the reasons behind that, that you're not happy, why would you like to be smaller than you are
- MARION                Oh I'd like to be slimmer, yeah, I'd like to be slimmer. Well, clothes, you can get clothes fitting better and that you know and besides health-wise it's supposed to be better for you isn't it you know (Marion, 07, P16).

In this quote then Marion explains that she does want to lose weight. She is unhappy with the current size of her body because she feels being slimmer would be better for both her health and her appearance. However, the next quote illustrates Marion's relaxed attitude towards these issues because of her expectations of the ageing process. The fact that Marion is growing older enables her to reject the pressures surrounding body size and to be more relaxed about the fact that she may be defined as overweight by both herself and others. Like Anne, Marion uses a 'deterioration' discourse to explain why she is bigger than in her earlier life:

- MARION                Yes during the day I didn't - I didn't eat in-between meals like a lot do, I just ate a lot at meals, you know, I didn't eat in between meals but and perhaps my metabolism perhaps



that doesn't work as efficiently now I'm older  
as what it did when I was younger

JILL Right, I see

MARION No as they say some people burn it off quicker  
than other don't they, you know

JILL Yes that's right yes

MARION I wish I did (laughs)

In this quote there is the theme of the efficiency of the body in relation to the ageing process. Thus Marion experiences her body as not 'working as well' as it did when she was younger. This represents a stereotype of older people who are portrayed in terms of deterioration and degeneration (see section 2 above). This stereotype could be constructed as negative because of the assumptions it creates about older people in terms of their social uselessness and rolelessness. Here the discourse is used by Marion in what may be a helpful or positive way as it provides her with the opportunity to reject the pressures surrounding body size and hence to become more accepting of her body.

Many of the women also used a reproductive discourse in their accounts of the effects of ageing on their bodies. This included the effects of the menopause and pregnancy on women's bodies which were again used as part of the women's acceptance of their bodies. This is illustrated in the following quote from Grace, who explains the permanent effect which giving birth had on her body. As with Anne and Marion, Grace is concerned about her body size and the effects which eating fattening foods may have on this. However, again she is accepting about her size which is seen as a consequence of the ageing process:

GRACE It bothers me when I go to bed, I'm lying in  
bed and I think 'Oh dear that was silly I  
didn't ought to have been eating all those  
different things', you know, but when I'm doing  
it it doesn't bother me but I feel a bit guilty  
afterwards.

JILL Is that kind of because you think you'll put  
weight on?

GRACE That's right, yes, you feel that you feel a bit  
conscious that you are putting a bit of weight  
on. I used to be really slim but I've never  
been really slim since I had children, I put  
weight on after I had my first child and it's  
never gone off since (Grace, 011, P).

At the beginning of this quote Grace discusses the guilt she feels when she eats certain foods which she feels should be 'forbidden' to her because they result in weight gain (see

section 4.2.1 below, for a further discussion of this issue). However, whilst Grace may feel guilty several hours after eating forbidden foods, this guilt is not present whilst she is eating the foods which she enjoys. Again we see a more relaxed attitude towards eating and diet. Later in the quote this relaxed attitude is again related to a biological discourse which is represented here by Grace's reproductive explanation for the fact that she is larger than she would like to be. She relates her size to the effects of pregnancy and childbirth. This reproductive discourse allows Grace to be more relaxed about the guilt she feels about putting weight on. Her weight gain is presented as an inevitable part of being a woman.

In the following quote from Cissie, the menopause is presented as bringing about a number of changes in a woman's body, particularly the weight gain which occurs in old age. Here Cissie feels that she may be bigger than she would like to be but she accept this as a natural expectation of growing older:

- JILL                    Do you ever feel self-conscious about your shape?
- CISSIE                 No not really no when I buy a dress and that sort of thing I say 'Oh look at my stomach' and they say 'Well it's not so bad' (laughs) you see they say 'What do you expect?' you see
- JILL                    Why because you would expect to be bigger because
- CISSIE                 Well when you're getting older you put more weight on round here don't you because your body functions all change don't they, you've finished with your periods and everything and naturally there's changes in your body yes (Cissie, 010, P12)

In this excerpt Cissie brings in the idea of the inevitability of the body changing with age, particularly in relation to weight gain. Cissie relates this to ideas about the menopause which she sees as bringing about these bodily changes. This may allow her to be more accepting of her body because its new shape is 'natural'. In the above quote Cissie also brings in the opinions of other people to support her acceptance of her body size. This is also seen in the next quote from Cissie where medical opinion is discussed:

- CISSIE                 When I've been measured and weighed at the doctor's, a nurse does it you know, and you have to do periodically when you get to about seventy and then I say 'Don't tell me' when I get on the scales, 'Don't tell me' and she says 'Well you're all right for your age what're you worrying about', your age and your size, so I don't worry then (Cissie, 09, P13)

Here then it can be seen that Cissie is able to feel reasonably happy with her size because of the fact that she has been told her size is acceptable by a medical source. Cissie's belief that ageing brings about weight gain is legitimised by the nurse's opinions that she is 'alright for her age' and hence Cissie is able to feel less concerned about her size. This quote illustrates the way in which body size was strongly associated with health for the older women, so that Cissie cites a medical source about the acceptability of her weight rather than a source which could comment on her physical appearance.

#### 4.1.2 Body Size and Relationships across the Life Span

This section of the analysis discusses the way in which the women's acceptance of their bodies was related to changes in the women's relationships with others. The women's greater acceptance of their bodies firstly related to changes in the women's feelings about their relationships with their husbands. The women recalled a period earlier in their lives when their feelings about their body size were closely related to their desire for their husbands' approval as part of the emphasis the women placed on their sexuality and sexual attractiveness. In later life, however, sexuality was not such an important issue so that the women's concerns about their body size were no longer closely related to their husbands' opinions. The women therefore ignored the comments their husbands made about their size, asserting that 'at their time of life' they were less concerned with 'pleasing' their husbands in this way.

In addition to this, the women in the sample asserted that body size had been an important issue earlier in their lives when they had been in close contact with other women, such as in the work situation. Here the women felt there was a sense of competition between the women, so that they attempted to lose weight in order to be as attractive as their co-workers.

The first quote from Margaret illustrates the women's rejection of the importance of their body size in relation to their relationships with their husbands. Here Margaret's husband was still concerned about his wife's body size and appearance so that he continued to make comments about it. However Margaret brushes off these comments with the assertion that she is not prepared to diet to lose weight:

- JILL                    Have you ever felt pressured by people to be different?
- MARGARET            Slim? Er my hubby says I'm fat sometimes but er I just say hard lines you know or something like that and I normally say 'Oh I'm a bit overweight'

JILL                   Right

MARGARET            But I know there's nothing I can do about it really not I say I'm not going to start taking any slimming foods or anything like that (Margaret, 02, P )

Here then Margaret is not greatly concerned about her husband's comments. Whilst she is aware of her husband's opinions about her size Margaret is not prepared to allow these opinions to influence her behaviour. Whilst Margaret controls her food intake to a certain extent (as discussed in section 4.2.1 below) she will not alter her diet so as to incorporate slimming foods into it. On this level Margaret has accepted her weight in that she will not go to extreme lengths to alter it. She thus brushes off the remarks of her husband about her weight, minimising them with the phrase 'Oh I'm a *bit* overweight'.

Other women in the sample experienced more conflict in relation to their husband's comments about their size and rebelled more strongly against these comments. The following quote from Marion illustrates the way in which the women asserted that they were no longer prepared to be bullied about their body size. Marion relates this to changes in her forty-two year old marriage as well as to her belief that in old age women should no longer be concerned about body size and sexuality issues:

JILL                    So do you think it's quite important then to you - what your husband thinks about your weight?

MARION                Well it was then it was then ( ) it's not so ( ) important now (laughs)

JILL                    Right so why was that I mean was it sort of important at that age that he thought you attractive

MARION                Yes the age I was yes, yes that age whereas when you get older you think 'Oh well' you're not so much bothered you know you know (Right) and as I say I think it's the way they tell you as well you see. Now, you know, he'll say too 'You're having too much there', you know, you see your attitudes alter when you've been married a long time you see in those days he was worried about me you know 'You ought to cut down' you see a different manner of speaking you know 'Look at all that stuff on your plate it's no wonder you're fat' that's what he'll say you see and that'll put my back up you know and 'Blow you I'll eat what I like', you know, after forty-two years of marriage you see things alter a lot (Marion, 07, P21).

In this quote we see the pressure that Marion is under from her husband to lose weight. It seems that this pressure has always been part of her relationship with her husband but that Marion is no longer prepared to accept this pressure. This seems to be related to the declining emphasis which Marion places on her body in her relationship with her husband. She is no longer as concerned about what her husband thinks about her size. On another level there have been changes in Marion's relationship with her husband so that the pressure she now receives from him is experienced as much less caring and more abusive. Thus rather than telling Marion to eat less in a caring way, as a result of being concerned about her health for instance, he is now much more negative in terms of 'name calling' and insults. Whilst Marion may have been prepared to put up with this pressure in the past, she is no longer prepared to accept it. Here then she is asserting that she will do as she likes and eat what she likes, in a rebellion against her husband's control. This rebellion is also seen in the following quote:

JILL           What sort of things does your husband say then?

MARION       Oh well 'You didn't ought to eat as much as that, you ought to cut that out, it's not good for you', you know, things like that

JILL           Right and what do you think when he says that?

MARION       (pause) Bollocks (laughs)

JILL           (laughs) So you don't take any notice then

MARION       Not really no I don't really in fact actually in some ways it does the reverse I think I'm going to eat more now if he was encouraging saying 'Wouldn't it be better like if you know you tried to cut down on that?' he's sort of aggressive when he tells me and that puts my back up a bit more

JILL           So you're defiant

MARION       I'm going to do yes I'm going to do what I want, I'm eating what I want to eat you know (Marion, 07, P8)

Here then Marion is rejecting the idea that she should control the size of her body in response to the negative comments of her husband. Whilst she may want to lose weight, this is more for herself than because she thinks it will please her husband. Thus Marion's concerns about her body do not seem to be related to a concern about her sexual attractiveness. Whilst she tried to lose weight in the past in order to gain her husband's desire and approval, this is no longer an issue for her at this part of her life.

Marion's rebellion against her husband is added to by her use of an ageing discourse in which she asserts that she should no longer have to be concerned about her size, through the denial of food, at her 'time of life'. This is shown in the following quote:

- JILL                    Do you ever feel guilty then about what you eat  
do you ever sort of think
- MARION                I can't say I feel guilty no not when you get  
sixty-eight I can't say I do really no no I  
feel guilty I don't I feel not guilty so much  
as wishing I was less weight but I don't feel  
guilty about being overweight although I know I  
should lose weight for health's sake but no  
it's
- JILL                    So once you've eaten something and you think do  
you think I shouldn't have eaten that or
- MARION                Once or twice yes if I've had a lot too much  
like at supper time mainly if I've had two  
pieces of malt loaf and a fruit cake and I  
think oh oh I'll have a wafer I think I  
shouldn't have had that wafer (laughs) I try  
and limit to just I should limit it to two two  
malt loafs but I don't () (Marion, 07, P7).

In this quote then we see that Marion uses an ageing discourse to assert that she is not concerned about her appearance at this point in her life. She is determined to enjoy food which gives her great amounts of pleasure, rather than deny herself food either for the sake of her appearance or her health. Thus Marion's rejection of her husband's pressure on her to lose weight forms part of a wider issue in her life about the important issues for Marion at this point in her life.

In addition to the decreasing importance of the women's appearance in their relationships with their husbands, there were changes in other relationships in their lives. Here the women asserted that being with other women when they were younger, such as in the work place, resulted in feelings of competitiveness in relation to body size. This is illustrated in a further quote from Marion:

- JILL                    Does it does it annoy you then when people say  
that [that she is overweight] or does it upset  
you?
- MARION                No I can't say it does really no 'cos they  
don't it's not very often said, you know, it's  
just somebody who hasn't seen me for some time  
like, you know, but people I know like you know  
my friend Edith and Lizzie and that they don't  
comment on it 'cos Edith's a bit overweight  
herself Lizzie's thin course you're not seeing  
Lizzie like she's thin I mean she doesn't  
comment on it 'cos she's I suppose it's 'cos

we're used to seeing us you know as we are you know but no it didn't really bother me I think it would do if I was young

JILL Do you oh right that's interesting why?

MARION It would do if I was young but you see when you get older you think 'Oh blow it' you know 'I am what I am' you know I think if I was young you see it would, well, I mean you see it did when I was at work at the Town Hall when I saw the others were thin you know I didn't want to be fat you know (Marion, O7, P15).

In this quote Marion again asserts that she is no longer concerned about her body size and that being old provides her with an opportunity to escape from the pressure she felt she was under at a younger age to lose weight. Thus she again asserts that growing older has enabled her to say 'blow it' and accept her body regardless of its size. At the end of the quote Marion gives another reason why she did not have this attitude when she was younger. Here the presence of other women in her life, through working with them in the Town Hall, meant that Marion strived to be thin because she was in competition with the other women.

This competitiveness is also illustrated in the following excerpt from Ruth. Ruth had been widowed sixteen years age, was now retired and lived on her own. Here the absence of other people to compare herself against resulted in a lack of interest about her body size and appearance compared to her earlier life:

JILL Has it got worse [lack of interest in her size] since you gave up work then?

RUTH Oh yes it's not being with people

JILL Oh right being on your own

RUTH I think being at work with other people and then of course I suppose you do strive to keep up with the gang don't you

JILL Yes definitely

RUTH You know I mean simple as it seems when you live on your own you think 'Well there's nobody here to see me what does it matter?'

JILL Yes right

RUTH Until you come to be asked to go somewhere and you put your thing on that you're going to wear and 'Oh my God it doesn't fit' and then you think 'Why did I do it?' (Ruth, O5, P28).

Here then we see that the competitiveness which Ruth used to feel about her body size is no longer present in her life. The fact that there is no one left to 'look at' Ruth, means that she does not care about her appearance as much as she did earlier in her life. This means that the effort involved in controlling her eating habits and maintaining her weight is no longer worth the effort which she previously exerted. On another level, Ruth also rebelled against the need to deny herself food in order to be slim. Like Marion, she constructs this in relation to her age so that she feels she should not have to be concerned about her eating habits 'at her time of life':

JILL            I mean do you ever feel greedy do you think that it's wrong to be greedy or does it not matter

RUTH            Well it just depends how I'm feeling because sometimes I know it's wrong to be greedy and then I think 'Oh well what the heck! Now you're seventy why not enjoy what you've got while you've got it?' I mean I don't eat many sweet things but there are certain things that really appeal to me like you know such as I went out and we had a raspberry tart and I love raspberries and of course I had to have two pieces with cream on, didn't I, where one would have been quite sufficient but it was so enjoyable I had to have another piece (Ruth, P15)

Thus again there is a sense that old age represents a chance for women to enjoy food away from the constraints of having to lose weight to please others or in competition with others. There is a rebellion against the denial which surrounds food and an assertion that old age should represent a period of relaxation, acceptance and freedom whilst the women 'had the chance'.

#### 4.1.3 Summary

In summary, the older women felt that they were less concerned about their body size than they had been earlier in life. For many of the women, old age represented a time of relaxation, acceptance and freedom in relation to the body and eating. Thus whilst they felt that their bodies were fatter than they 'should' be because of the associations of fatness with unattractiveness and health, they asserted that they were now more accepting of their bodies. This acceptance was related to the women's expectations about the physical effects of ageing. As weight gain was seen as an inevitable and expected part of the ageing process, the women were able to relax their control of their eating habits and their sense of anxiety and concern about the size of their bodies. In addition, the women's acceptance of their bodies was related to their decreased concern with looking attractive for the other people in their lives. Growing older resulted in a decreased concern with the opinions of the women's husbands and hence the women's concerns with being sexually attractive to men.



The women's use of ageing discourses illustrates the way in which the older women were concerned with the relationship between age and ill health. At this point in their lives the women experienced their bodies in terms of deterioration and decline, so that the issue of the sexual attractiveness of the body appeared to be of secondary importance to the health issues associated with thinness and fatness. This concern with health resulted in a combination of the women's anxiety about their weight, which was perceived as a health risk, with the women's determination to enjoy the latter part of their lives through allowing themselves to eat the foods which brought them pleasure. These points are further discussed in the following section.

#### **4.2 The Meanings of Eating: Control, Guilt and Moderation**

In this section the meanings of eating are explored. As discussed in the above section the older women were now more accepting of their body size, asserting that they were not as concerned about their bodies as they had been in earlier life. Despite this acceptance, all the women in the study saw their eating habits as in need of some form of control for both health reasons and in order to control their weight. For some women this control was seen as relatively unproblematic, taking place on an everyday basis and causing few conflicts for the women. For others, however, there was a struggle around food and eating so that the women's failure to restrict their food intake resulted in feelings of guilt and self-blame. The analysis is therefore split into two parts.

Firstly, there is an exploration of the struggles many of the women were involved in around the control of food. This struggle was expressed through the women's use of a 'battle' metaphor, which described food as an enemy to be resisted and fought against. 'Winning' or 'losing' this battle was seen to be dependent on the women's will-power, which many of the women felt that they did not possess. This failure to control their eating resulted in food being surrounded by self-blame, anxiety and guilt. At the same time the women felt a sense of defiance at the need to follow strict rules around food, so they occasionally rebelled against these rules. This again led to feelings of guilt and weakness.

Secondly, the analysis explores the distinctions which the women made between their own control of their food intake and what they defined as 'dieting' behaviour. Food control was seen as an everyday occurrence which was carried out in order to control the desire for fattening and unhealthy foods. The everyday control, monitoring and vigilance which surrounded food for the women was defined as 'cutting down' or 'being careful' but was not regarded as dieting.

This distinction related firstly to the older women's belief in 'sensible eating' or 'eating in moderation', where the women asserted that one should eat a sensible diet which was not too unhealthy but which allowed certain 'forbidden' foods to be eaten in moderation. This belief in moderation was in turn related to the women's rejection of health education messages, where the women asserted that 'they had got through life so far without eating healthily' and that 'at their time of life why bother about eating healthily'. On another level, the women's advocating of 'eating in moderation' related to their rejection of contemporary media pressures on young women to be thin and the way in which dieting was conceptualised as resulting in eating disorders.

#### 4.2.1 The Struggle for Control Over Food: Achievement, Will-power and Success.

For some of the women in the study, food and eating were surrounded by a struggle for the control of food. These women were involved in attempts to lose weight through only eating what was necessary and through avoiding extra or fattening foods. The struggle over food was expressed through the women's use of a 'battle' metaphor, which cast food as the women's enemy which had to be resisted and fought against. The outcome of this battle was seen to be dependent on the women's will power which many of the women felt that they did not possess. Thus many of the women felt that they were unable to control their eating as effectively as they would like, which resulted in a discourse of self blame, anxiety and guilt.

Running through the interviews with the older women was a discourse of need which was related to the control the women attempted to exercise over their eating habits. The need discourse was another rule which the women applied to their eating habits and stated that one should not eat more than 'was needed' or 'was necessary'. This was clearly related to discourses of greed, so that eating more than was necessary was regarded as greedy and over indulgent. The women often explained their body size in terms of this discourse, reasoning that one reason they might be 'overweight' was because they ate more than was necessary.

The women's attempts to control their food intake and the guilt surrounding food is illustrated in the following quote from Ruth:

JILL                    Do you ever sort of think you'd better not eat things because they're not good for you do you know what I mean like sweet things or?

RUTH                    I don't like sweets but crisps and nuts I do and that's another thing that I very often do sometimes I buy a big bag of crisps and I'll have a bag each day and then I think 'No, I shouldn't do that' and so I don't for a while

- JILL           Why's that? Because you think its not good for your health?
- RUTH           Because I know that I'm putting on weight (Right, yes) and nuts I do enjoy nuts now I don't eat them to excess I mean I used to do but I don't any more
- JILL           Do you ever feel guilty when you've eaten something?
- RUTH           Oh yes definitely when I've had crisps 'cos I think 'Why did you eat those? You didn't really need them you just wanted them' you see, 'You don't really need things but you just want'
- JILL           What do you mean you didn't need them because
- RUTH           I wasn't hungry I just fancied them (Right) so then I feel guilty because I know I shouldn't have had them
- JILL           Right so you think you should just eat what you need to keep going sort of thing
- RUTH           Yes just eat your meals in moderation (Ruth, 05, P14)

In this quote Ruth explains that she attempts to control what she eats in order to prevent herself from gaining weight. Unfortunately the particular foods which she most enjoys are those which are defined as forbidden to her. These foods are forbidden because they are 'unnecessary' foods, they are foods which are eaten in-between meals and which do not represent part of a 'proper' meal. Here Ruth asserts that one should only eat what is 'needed' to satisfy physical hunger. Eating more than this, such as when one simply 'fancies' food, for instance, is classified as over-indulgence and results in feelings of guilt for Ruth. This relates closely to the discourse of need used by the women in the pilot study and the young women in Study One.

In the following excerpt from Margaret there is again a discussion of the control of food in order to lose weight. In this quote it can be seen that a discourse of need is used as a justification for eating forbidden foods:

- JILL           So you said that you sometimes do diet though didn't you
- MARGARET     A little bit yes for a few days but then I forget about it
- JILL           So what does that involve ?
- MARGARET     It means cutting down on food the amount

- JILL                   Just the amount not - do you change the type of food that you might eat
- MARGARET           No no I just er I just cut it down instead of I know I can lose weight then
- JILL                   Right but do you put it back on
- MARGARET           Yes cos I start eating again after a few days I forget about it if I have one slice of bread instead of two or even one and a half instead of two and I do that for a fortnight and I only have a small portion of porridge instead of a bloody, big bowl full and er my weight will go so I know its over-eating but I feel that I need it sometimes
- JILL                   Mmm right
- MARGARET           But I don't have sugar (Margaret, P21)

This quote illustrates the way that Margaret feels she has to justify the foods that she eats as well as to present herself as not greedy. Thus Margaret justifies the fact that she sometimes eats 'more than she should' with the explanation that she feels that her body 'needs' this food. This food is needed because she feels faint and sugar will make her feel better. The guilt Margaret feels about this is shown again at the end of the quote where she asserts that she doesn't eat much sugar. This is to assert that whilst she may sometimes 'break the rules' which control her eating, this is not a regular occurrence and does not involve large amounts of 'forbidden foods'.

The quote from Margaret also illustrates the way in which the women in the study minimised the control of their eating habits so that they did not define them as dieting but as 'eating sensibly' or 'cutting down'. Here Margaret defines her attempts to control her eating habits as minimal in terms of dieting 'a little bit, for a few days' and as sensible because it involves eating in moderation rather than over-eating a 'bloody great bowl full' of porridge. This differentiation between dieting and 'cutting down' was a common distinction made by the women and will be returned to in the next section (section 4.2.2).

Some women in the sample asserted that food did not cause such conflicts or feelings of guilt and failure. This can be seen in the following quote from Evelyn, who despite asserting that she does not feel any particular guilt about eating forbidden foods, continues to control what she eats in the same way as the women discussed above:

- JILL                   Do you ever feel like kind of a bit deprived because you've got to sort of watch what you're eating does it ever make you think

- EVELYN            Yes I think, I mean, 'cos I could live without  
- I live without sweets or toffees but I do  
like chocolate and I would you know I do think  
I would eat more chocolates if it if you didn't  
put on weight I'm sure I would 'cos I'm very  
partial to chocolate
- JILL                Do you ever feel like guilty if you eat  
something that you think you're not supposed  
to?
- EVELYN            I don't think I feel guilty, I think, I know I  
should no I don't feel guilty but I feel it  
wasn't a good idea but I love it (laughs) you  
know like those lovely bags of little Mars and  
things you know that you can get now I mean I  
think they're perfect you have a bite-size  
Whisker is it or whitest
- JILL                Wispa?
- EVELYN            Wispa, Whisker's the cat food isn't it
- JILL                (Laughs) Bite-sized bars
- EVELYN            Wispa oh I think they're great(Right) but we  
don't eat a lot of chocolate (Evelyn, 08, P9)

In this quote we see that Evelyn does not feel guilty about eating certain foods even though she regards certain foods as 'forbidden' in the same way as the women discussed above. It is interesting that Evelyn states that she 'should' feel guilty about the fact that she eats chocolate but that nevertheless she does not. Here, then, Evelyn is referring to some value system which judges certain foods as 'good' and some as 'bad' and that one may be regarded as 'bad' if one eats bad foods, resulting in guilt feelings. This relates to the medical / health discourse surrounding food and eating which the women were keenly aware of.

A further point to make about this quote is that despite not feeling guilty about eating certain foods, Evelyn talks about eating extremely small portions of a 'forbidden' food. Thus she refers to the fact that she likes 'bite sized' chocolate bars. Thus whilst Evelyn eats chocolate without feeling guilt there is still some control of this eating. Eating bite-sized bars may be a way of avoiding the guilt associated with eating such foods, because it avoids connotations of greed and indulgence which are associated with such foods.

The sense of guilt and shame surrounding food for the women is further illustrated in a further quote from Margaret. Here the idea of a 'battle' metaphor is introduced, where the denial of one's urges for particular 'forbidden' foods is constructed in terms of an individual's lack of strength, courage and will-power:

- JILL                    So is there any foods that you don't let yourself eat, do you know what I mean?
- MARGARET            No, no, I'm a coward I think I'm a er I do er try to put a stop on myself from eating chocolate
- JILL                    Right
- MARGARET            But if anybody gave me any I can't get it into my mouth quick enough, no, its true that, its true
- JILL                    Has that always been like that then?
- MARGARET            No no ( ) funny isn't it I can't gobble it down quick enough I'm ashamed of myself really but luckily with being still fairly active I suppose I burn it off (Yeah) but I do eat a I do have a healthy diet really you know (Right) I have plenty of fibre and porridge and that (Margaret, 02, P6)

At the beginning of this quote Margaret describes the sense of guilt she feels because she does not make much attempt to restrict the foods that she eats so that she generally eats 'what she likes'. Hence she acknowledges that she feels she should avoid certain foods and thus control her eating habits, but admits that she fails to do this. Margaret uses the word 'coward' here to describe the fact that she does not control her food intake. This suggests that failing to avoid eating certain foods involves a lack of strength on Margaret's part, so that she doesn't have the courage to make changes in her diet. Here then we see the use of a battle discourse which was used by many of the older women, indicating the women's feelings of success or, more frequently, failure at their ability to maintain control over their eating habits.

Later in the quote Margaret discusses the control she attempts to maintain over the amount of chocolate that she eats. Chocolate is something which Margaret particularly enjoys but which she feels isn't good for her health or her body size. She therefore attempts to restrict the amount that she eats. This quote illustrates the sense of shame Margaret feels about her behaviour in relation to chocolate, which is described here in terms of being 'out-of-control' of her desire to eat as much chocolate as she can, as quickly as she can. This is seen in the use of the term 'gobble' to describe the behaviour of 'stuffing down' chocolate.

In the last part of the quote from Margaret there is again a reference to exercise and activity levels. Here Margaret asserts that because she is fairly active it is not necessary for her to assert rigorous control over what she eats, so that activity is presented as 'working off' the calories from eating 'forbidden' foods. Finally there is again the

assertion that despite the fact that she does eat the forbidden food of chocolate she nevertheless eats a healthy diet. This assertion of 'I am healthy really' was used by many of the women after they admitted that they did eat certain 'forbidden' foods.

At the same time as attempting to control their food intake and feeling guilty about their failure to consistently deny themselves certain foods, the women also felt a sense of rebellion and defiance against food control. This is shown in another quote from Margaret, who again expresses guilt at her lack of control in relation to chocolate but at the same time feels angry that she should have to deny herself food she enjoys:

MARGARET

My husband buys me a block sometimes and I do one or two little jobs for my neighbour and er she'll give me a block of chocolate and I'll say to her 'You don't have to you know' but she 'I don't expect it'. 'Oh' she says 'I do, I want you to have it'. Before I've got it home I've broken it up and had some - shocking isn't it that? I'm really a chocoholic but I know I don't have a lot. I used to buy Thorntons' chocolates at one time, I don't have them - I tell people not to buy them now. I used to buy a quarter of Thorntons' and before I had the change given me I would have eaten half of them and its shocking and I know I did and I think 'Oh to hell I don't care' and then I'd try and be strict with myself and hold onto the other four till I got home. It's terrible, terrible (Margaret, O2, P16)

This quote illustrates the internal dialogue which went on around food control for the older women. Margaret oscillates between caring about what she eats and wanting to control her eating and rebelling against this control and wanting to eat whatever she wants. The fact that Margaret attempts to deny herself the very food which she particularly enjoys means that she is unable to maintain the control she attempts to exert over this food. The control becomes intolerable to her and she rebels against it. She therefore asserts that she no longer cares about the rules she has set herself or the fact that she has to deny herself these foods in order to lose weight.

This quote again shows the way in which Margaret presents herself as being 'out-of-control' of food. This can be seen in the way she talks about being a 'chocoholic' and the way she cannot resist the temptation of chocolate, which is presented as 'shocking' and 'terrible'. At the same time Margaret asserts that she is in control of her 'urges' to eat chocolate as seen in the line 'I'm really a chocoholic but I know I don't have a lot'. Thus again Margaret 'confesses' her guilty secret about food at the same time as asserting that she is 'not that naughty' in the same way as she asserted that she 'was healthy really'.

The defiance which Margaret discusses in the above quote can be related to the defiance reported in section 4.1.3, where Ruth and Marion asserted that they did not think they should have to be as rigorous in the control of their eating 'at their time of life'. In the quote from Margaret we see that this defiance may be an everyday part of controlling one's eating as a reaction against the strict control over those foods which are particularly pleasurable for women. In old age, however, this defiance is added to by the women's feelings that being at the latter end of one's life should represent a relaxation of the efforts involved in food control.

In the above quotes from Margaret the battle metaphor was used to describe the strength involved in resisting certain foods. The fact that the women using this discourse were not able to maintain this level of resistance resulted in feelings of weakness and failure. Here the fact that the women could not control their food intake was related to the women's personal lack of will-power in that they did not have the strength to avoid fattening or unhealthy foods for a long period of time. Food control was therefore presented in terms of self-achievement and in terms of a battle at which one either succeeds or fails. In the next quote from Ruth we see an example of this as she describes a period earlier in her life where she lost weight but then regained it as she lost control of her food intake:

RUTH                    I felt quite good about it [her weight loss] until my friends used to say to me 'Oh, it doesn't look like you. Oh, you do look poorly' and I ignored that but then gradually I don't know you get fed up of eating the same sort of things and you think 'oh well it won't hurt I'll just have this' and 'I'll just have that' and it just creeps on you and that's it

JILL                    So did you put all the weight back on again?

RUTH                    Not all of it no, no not all of it it's just that as I say the past couple of years it's just jumped on because I think lack of activity and besides that I think as you get older you don't seem to have the same willpower. I mean ten years ago if I decided to do a thing something it didn't matter what it was I would do it no matter what how I felt how tired I felt, you know, how it put me out I would do it. But now if I make my mind up to do a thing I might set off and then I think 'well what does it matter', you know, it's just motivation as I say it's just I don't know just lacks will-power and getting older I think (Ruth, 05, P29).

In this quote it is interesting that Ruth reached a point earlier in her life where she was regarded as too thin by other people. Here thinness was associated with unhealthiness and being unwell. This contrasts with contemporary social discourses which define



extreme thinness as being attractive and indicating health and fitness (see Chapter Two). Later on in the quote Ruth describes the way in which initially breaking one's diet through eating only small amounts of extra food eventually leads to a total breaking of the diet so that one eats 'normally' again and one eventually regains the weight that was lost. Like Margaret, Ruth again uses a achievement and battle metaphor to describe this process. Firstly, she uses the phrase 'it won't hurt', which implies that eating can be harmful because of its perceived effect on body size. Here weight gain is perceived as dangerous and causing self injury. There is also an ambush metaphor, as shown in the phrase describing weight in terms of 'it just creeps on you' and 'its just jumped on'. This describes weight as an insidious evil to be guarded against but which can not always be controlled.

Also in the quote from Ruth is a discourse of will-power and motivation, so that Ruth feels she has less will-power than she had earlier in her life. Here Ruth explains her lack of will power in terms of an ageing discourse and a 'change in life events' discourse. Thus the fact that Ruth no longer has the necessary motivation to lose weight is explained in terms of the fact that Ruth is 'getting older', which results in her feeling 'so what?' about carrying out her resolutions to do certain activities. This relates to excerpts from the interview with Ruth discussed in section 4.1.3 above, where weight gain in later life was related to ageing as well as to changes in relationships and life style. Here however Ruth does not appear to feel defiant about not controlling her eating habits, but feels a sense of failure and weakness that she can no longer find the strength within her to resist and deny foods which she likes to eat.

Fundamentally, the women's use of battle discourse to describe attempts to lose weight involved a sense of responsibility and self-blame. The fact that weight loss is within one's own control, if one can only resist the temptation of food through applying strong enough will-power, means that not losing weight or regaining weight were placed totally within the woman's sphere of responsibility. This resulted in the feelings of guilt seen in the quotes from Ruth and Margaret. The final quote in this section illustrates the way in which food control and weight loss were surrounded by responsibility and self-blame. Here Emily can be seen to judge herself extremely harshly for her failure to 'resist' food, despite the fact that other factors are involved other than her own lack of will-power and strength:

JILL

Well we've talked a bit about this already in that you've said that you think sometimes think about your weight how happy are you with your sort of body does it worry you a lot or?

- EMILY I'm not happy with it but I haven't got a very strong will-power (Right) for slimming you know I'm afraid when I see I think possibly Janet [name of daughter] comes to her dinner and so sometimes tea-times sometimes lunch-time, you know, and so I put some a big meal on for her so I eat it as well you know
- JILL Yes right so is it that you'd like to change your shape but it doesn't happen
- EMILY Will-power purely and simply will-power (Emily, 06, P9)

In this quote Emily places all the blame on her self for her failure to lose weight through controlling her food intake. This blame exists despite the fact that there a number of other factors involved in the fact that she eats forbidden foods. This quote illustrates the way in which the women's eating habits were not determined solely in relation to the women's own tastes or preferences but were also dependent upon the fact that the women prepared food for their families. Here the needs of Emily's daughter are met before those of Emily, as she prepares a big meal for her despite the fact that she herself would prefer not to eat such a big meal. Here Emily's desire to provide her daughter with a hearty meal overcomes her desire to control her food intake. However, rather than taking this factor into account she describes herself as lacking in will power, placing the blame solely on herself rather than on the fact that food has a complex role within the family and within mother child relationships. This relationship between the woman's personal eating preferences and those of her family is a major theme of this study and will be discussed in more depth in section 4.3.

#### 4.2.2 Dieting Versus 'Cutting Down': Everyday Eating Control

This section of the analysis explores the distinctions which the women made between their own control of their food intake and what they defined as 'dieting' behaviour. The control of food intake was regarded as an everyday occurrence by the women, it was something which everybody did and which was necessary in order to control one's desires for fattening and unhealthy foods. The everyday control, monitoring and vigilance which surrounded food for the women was defined as 'cutting down' or 'being careful' rather than as dieting. This distinction related firstly to the older women's belief in 'sensible eating' or 'eating in moderation', where the women asserted that one should eat a sensible diet which was not too unhealthy but which allowed certain 'forbidden' foods to be eaten in moderation. This related to the women's rejection of contemporary media pressures on young women to be thin and the way in which dieting could result in eating disorders. Secondly, the belief in eating in moderation was related to the women's rejection of health education messages, where the women asserted that 'they had got

through life so far without eating healthily' and that 'at their time of life why bother about eating healthily'.

The everyday nature of food control is first illustrated with some excerpts from the interview with Kathleen. In the first quote Kathleen presents herself as being very relaxed about food, eating 'what she fancies' rather than setting limits on what she eats. However in other parts of the interview it can be seen that Kathleen was involved in a constant monitoring of what she ate in order to ensure she was eating healthily. The everyday nature of this control meant that the women did not always consider it as a form of food control.:

- JILL                    Do you ever like think there is something that you'd really like to eat but you don't let yourself for various, you know what I mean, you think 'I shouldn't eat that' or erm
- KATHLEEN            Erm no I don't think so I don't think I've any likes or dislikes in as much as I think one should if you feel er you see something nice and you think oh dear at the moment I mean once you salmon or something like that you (Right) you splurge
- JILL                    Yes, yes
- KATHLEEN            I do if I think so and so I think oh go on
- JILL                    When might you do that though that's what I'm trying to get at like you know when do you the fancy takes you or is it I mean you probably haven't stopped to analyse it
- KATHLEEN            No I haven't stopped to analyse that really I think it's just when the fancy takes me or if I see something that er shall we say tickles your taste buds (Kathleen, 04, P5).

In this quote Kathleen describes the fact that she often 'indulges' herself by eating certain foods that particularly appeal to her rather than denying herself the pleasure of these foods. This 'a little of what you fancy' discourse will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.3 in relation to the women's use of a moderation discourse. This quote is presented here however because it provides a stark contrast to the following quote from Kathleen which illustrates that, in actual fact, she keeps a strict control on her appetite and her eating habits:

- JILL                    What about your appetite has that changed?
- KATHLEEN            Er no oh no my appetite could be quite voracious if I let it but you know, I mean I deliberately don't I mean er sometimes I think 'Ooh yes that was nice I should really have

done a bit more of that' well, no, you've had sufficient especially if you're not but I'm active you see I mean if you're inactive now that's where the danger lies (Kathleen , 04, P15)

In this quote Kathleen talks about the necessity of food control in terms of keeping her 'voracious' appetite 'in check'. Kathleen's use of the term 'voracious' suggests her appetite could easily become 'out of control' if she is not constantly vigilant about her eating habits. Thus there is a sense of the way in which Kathleen monitors what she eats in order to assess whether she is eating the 'correct' amount or not. This quote also involves the use of an activity discourse where activity is presented as an essential part of what one should and shouldn't eat and which suggests that Kathleen's control of her eating is necessary to control her weight. Here, because she is active, she does not have to control her eating as tightly as less active individuals. This activity discourse was used frequently in the interview with Kathleen, where it appeared to be related to her feelings about ageing and later life. Here she taps into a social discourse which defines older people as inactive so that they are portrayed as staying in the home rather than 'getting out and about'. Kathleen appeared to be anxious to separate herself from this discourse with her assertions about her high activity levels in comparison to her less active friends and neighbours. This may relate to her fears of being labelled as 'old' or to her fears about the disease and decline associated with old age.

A further quote from Kathleen illustrates the way in which the women differentiated between their own control of food and the behaviour they defined as 'dieting'. Whilst many of the women talked about controlling their weight by keeping a check on their food intake, few of the women regarded this control as dieting. Instead they referred to it in terms of cutting down or 'being careful' about what they ate:

JILL                    Have you ever been on a diet what you would call a diet?

KATHLEEN            No I mean controlling what you eat is what you do normally I mean I don't believe in - I am not a diet person

JILL                    No but you think that you do control it in

KATHLEEN            I control what I eat and certainly since I had my heart attack I mean I am careful

JILL                    Right sort of aware of it

KATHLEEN            I am careful I am aware of things because I have had as I say as [name of doctor] says you've had your warning (Right) er just be careful er so therefore you are careful to an

extent but not not too over the top over the  
hill type of extent (Kathleen, 04, P24)

Here Kathleen states that the type of food control that she uses is a 'normal' occurrence, it is accepted unquestioningly as the 'right thing to do'. This complies with the quote from Kathleen above where she talks about her 'voracious' appetite which she has to control in order to be 'sensible'. There is a process of normalisation here as Kathleen implies that not only does she control her food in this way but so does everybody else. In comparison to this, dieting is described as far more extreme and 'over the top' implying that they are obsessive activities. There is a balancing here between the 'right' amount of control and too much control involved in dieting.

In the next excerpts from Evelyn we again see this differentiation between dieting and the everyday control of food. Here, however, the control which Evelyn (and her husband) are involved in appears to be more rigid than the control discussed in the quote from Kathleen above. In the first excerpt Evelyn defines what she regards as a diet through describing the characteristics of the only 'proper' diet she has ever been on:

- JILL                    So have you ever dieted then at all?
- EVELYN                Not really, well, that's not true I did once because after I had Sarah [name of daughter] then I had to have like a repair operation and I had to sit around a lot and I put on a lot of weight and after that that was when I went back to work I did start having these Limmits do they still have them about Limmits?
- JILL                    Are they like biscuits
- EVELYN                Yes
- JILL                    Yes I don't know but I've heard of them
- EVELYN                So I did that because I think I went up to a size twenty which was horrific and then I did and I lost it all anyway when I went back to work so but that's the only thing I've ever done (Evelyn, 08, P18)

Here then a diet is defined as an extremely strict 'food regime' which in this case involves eating special 'slimming foods' rather than eating the same food as normal but cutting down on these. Evelyn goes on to compare her current eating habits which she describes as 'calorie counting' with this diet in her earlier life:

- EVELYN                And the weight came off but I've never done other than like I go along with Brian when we're having a calorie counting, a few weeks and things like that but I wouldn't say

- JILL                    You don't count that as a diet then?
- EVELYN                No no
- JILL                    Why?
- EVELYN                Well I suppose it is a diet in a way isn't it but it's not I've never done a diet where you cut out you know certain foods I do count my calories but () that cuts out chocolate and things like that
- JILL                    Right so what do you mean you try and be on a certain amount of calories a day?
- EVELYN                A thousand calories (Evelyn, 08, P18)

Here then Evelyn describes a diet as an activity where one cuts out certain foods. She contradicts this by saying that whilst she is not on a diet herself she does cut out chocolate, suggesting that chocolate is seen as something to be cut out in any person's eating because of its taboo nature. Evelyn follows this with another distinction between diets and 'calorie counting' which again links to control as in the interview with Kathleen:

- EVELYN                Well I think a diet to me is one of these that you see in a magazine and it's what 'Seven Day Diet' or whatever title you like to call it and you eat exactly what it says on those pages, nothing more nothing less whereas when you're counting your calories if you want to have half a bar of chocolate well that's hard luck that's half your thousand calories
- JILL                    I see right so it's (.) being on a diet is being restricted to certain types of food.
- EVELYN                Well to me it is I don't I'm not sure whether that's the right idea (Evelyn, 08, P19)

Thus a diet is inherently rigid and inflexible, implying too much control is involved. Here the emphasis may be upon personal control as opposed to externally defined control in terms of magazine diets with menus to be followed. In 'calorie counting' the individual had some flexibility and personal control over what she eats and is not dictated to by the rules of the diet.

The defining of diets in terms of eating special slimming foods is also shown in a quote from Margaret when she was asked how pressured she felt about her weight:

- JILL                    Right right have you ever felt pressured by people to be different?

- MARGARET      Slim? Er my hubby says I'm fat sometimes but er I just say hard lines you know or something like that and I normally say "Oh I'm a bit overweight"
- JILL             Right
- MARGARET      But I know there's nothing I can do about it really not I say I'm not going to start taking any slimming foods or anything like that (Margaret, 02, P )

In this quote Margaret is drawing a line over which she will not cross in her efforts to be slimmer. Whilst Margaret controls her food intake to a certain extent (as discussed in section 4.2.1 above) she will not alter her diet so as to incorporate slimming foods into it. On this level Margaret has accepted her weight in that she will not go to extreme lengths to alter it. She thus brushes off the remarks of her husband about her weight minimising them with the phrase 'Oh I'm a *bit* overweight'.

#### 4.2.3 Dieting as Disorder: Eating Sensibly and in Moderation

Much of the women's distinctions between dieting and cutting down were related to their attitudes towards what they saw as a current cultural emphasis on dieting which was seen as particularly salient for young women. The women asserted that they themselves did not diet because this was associated with eating badly and eating too little. Thus the women referred to young women whom they saw as being so much influenced by media pressure to be slim that they starved themselves. This distinction related firstly to the older women's belief in 'sensible eating' or 'eating in moderation' where the women asserted that one should eat a sensible diet which was not too unhealthy but which allowed certain 'forbidden' foods to be eaten in moderation.

This concern about the emphasis on dieting for young women is illustrated in the following excerpts from Cissie. In the first excerpt Cissie explains that whilst she too cuts down on her food intake in order to lose weight she again differentiates between 'cutting down' and dieting. Her attempts to cut down her food intake are presented as unproblematic and minimal, so that she does not 'worry' about eating:

- JILL             Have you ever been on a diet, what you would call a diet?
- CISSIE          No
- JILL             No, you just - so what you said about cutting down
- CISSIE          Yes, now when we've been on holiday this time I shall think about cutting down my portions a little bit, not a lot

- JILL Right when you get back?
- CISSIE Yes, because I think you tend to overeat when you're on holiday
- JILL Why do you think that is?
- CISSIE Well you're with other people who're eating as well you see and you're chatting away and you don't realise how much you're eating I think, don't you?
- JILL I see yes because your attention's not on it it's on people
- CISSIE But apart from that I don't worry about what I eat (Cissie, 09, P18)

In this quote, Cissie asserts that when she does put weight on, such as when she is on holiday, she attempts to reduce this weight through cutting down. Again this is not regarded as being on a diet. Cissie explains this differentiation more clearly in the following passage:

- JILL No right so you wouldn't call cutting down you wouldn't call that a diet then?
- CISSIE No I don't think so 'cos I don't cut it down an awful lot to want to starve myself because I think that's when the trouble starts, that's the trouble with the young people they overdo it and it gets on their mind then (Cissie, 09, P18)

Here, Cissie makes a distinction between 'proper dieting' and her own behaviour because dieting is regarded as a much more extreme form of food control. She feels that 'proper dieting' should be avoided because it can lead to an 'obsession' with the control of food, where one hardly eats any food at all and hence 'starves' oneself. Here a reference is made to young people, who are defined as being overly concerned with their weight and food control. There is also a reference to eating disorders here, where 'overdoing' dieting leads to food control being too much on their 'minds'.

In a further quote from Cissie, diets are again disparaged for the fact that they involve the use of slimming products which are not 'proper food'. Here diets are presented as unhealthy because they do not include the nutrients necessary for health. In addition the media is presented as the cause of women's preoccupation with their body size and food control:

- CISSIE I do I think it's television because they get all these lovely models and they're as thin as



a lath you see and well they want to be the same well I think that's a lot of the trouble and all those slimming foods they advertise

JILL Yes there's been an awful lot on recently with it being the New Year after Christmas all the

CISSIE Yes I would never dream of having those things, never dream of it because I think you do need certain food for certain things because you need the iron and the calcium and the proteins, you do need those and I don't see how you can get it out of a tumbler full of stuff you're eating chemicals aren't you love? Well I think so that's my opinion (Cissie, 09, P19).

In this quote we see the way Cissie sees dieting as somehow unnatural involving slimming foods which are not 'proper food'. Here food is regarded not as something to control, restrict and deny but as something which is necessary for survival and a healthy life. This is also seen in the following quote from Anne who advocates 'sensible eating' for women rather than dieting :

ANNE I think there is a lot of emphasis on making women slim keeping them slim to a degree where it can cause them not to be eating at all, yeah, I do think that because I do think that because er you see in the papers and that every day I mean these diets 'Go on this diet, go on that diet' to keep slim. I don't think its necessary for that, I mean, I think if you eat sensibly and keep at an average weight if you look at your bone structure of your body and and your height and your bone structure and then decide from that how much you need to eat from that and how your body's going to take your food and I think that's that's the main thing if your stomach can eat a big meal have a big meal and if your stomach can't take that well that's it (Anne, 01, P16)

In this quote Anne, like Cissie, argues for 'natural' weight control. Here she asserts that women should not diet but should 'listen to their body' in deciding what to eat. Thus one should eat according to how hungry one feels as determined by the stomach and whether it can 'take' a big or small meal. In addition what one eats should be based on the actual size of one's body, determined by bone structure and height. Here, then, there is an acceptance of different body size and the fact that people of different sizes need to eat different amounts of food. This is a shift away from the idea that one should attempt to deny one's urges for food in order to lose weight and a move towards eating in accordance with one's body and one's body size.

The acceptance of certain body sizes, other than extreme thinness is also discussed in the following quote from Betty. Here there is an assertion that being 'slightly overweight' is not wrong and that it is better to be overweight than to worry a great deal about one's size and one's eating habits:

BETTY            So you've got to think well, you know, moderation in all things and people that drive themselves crazy erm you know slimming is it worth it, you know, if you're just a weenie bit over frankly I don't think its worth it I don't honestly. I mean what do you call yourself do you I mean would you say

JILL             (inaudible)

BETTY            I mean would you like to no

JILL             I used to worry about it I don't now

BETTY            I shouldn't think not no you're the type that would look awful ever so thin you know like a

JILL             Yeah I've always been like this my mum is as well you know I'm just rounded

BETTY            That's right I mean you look at those models that are wafer thin I mean they've like these salt cellars here they're old they look old they wrinkle more (Betty, 03, P24)

Here then Betty uses the phrase 'people drive themselves crazy slimming' in a discourse which again seems to be about the dangers of eating disorders. She brings in a moderation discourse which sums up the older women's attitudes towards dieting and weight loss. Thus one should not worry about one's weight too much, especially if one is only a 'weenie bit over'. Betty is not rejecting the beauty ideal here, however, since whilst she rejects thinness as a goal she explains this in terms of its unattractiveness. Here this unattractiveness is explained in terms of an age discourse which defines thinness as unattractive because it involves women in looking old which is automatically taken to mean unattractive.

It is also interesting that in this quote Betty refers to my size in order to make her point about young women and the fact that they should not worry so much about their body size. This forms part of the way in which the older women reacted to both my size and my age which, as discussed in section 3.5.2, involved the women in relating to me as a grand-daughter. This point is returned to in Chapter Nine.

#### 4.2.4 'A Little Bit of What You Fancy:' Health and Food in Later life

A second reason why the women in the sample differentiated between dieting and 'cutting down' relates to the women's attitudes towards health and food in later life. Thus whilst sensible and moderate eating was advised for younger women to avoid against obsession with food control, the women also asserted that in old age one was allowed to eat forbidden foods 'in moderation'. This was related to the women's rejection of health education messages, where the women asserted that 'they had got through life so far without eating healthily' and that 'at their time of life why bother about eating healthily'.

In the first quote from Cissie we see the relaxed attitude she has towards eating, so that she allows herself to eat foods which she knows are defined as bad for one's health:

- JILL                    So are there any foods that you sort of think to yourself I shouldn't eat that because - for various reasons?
- CÍSSIE                 Well I do but I eat it (laughs) I like thick butter on my toast I shouldn't have it but I like it so I eat it. I think well at my time of life why worry? (laughs). I've got through it all this time eating butter (Cissie, 09, P8).

At the start of this quote Cissie acknowledges that there are food rules surrounding certain foods which state that one should not eat such foods. Here she is referring to health education messages relating to the health risks of saturated fats such as those found in butter. Whilst Cissie is aware of these rules she ignores them and eats as much butter as she likes. She legitimises this through the use of an age discourse which works on two levels. On one level, she asserts that she is old and hence is coming toward the end of her life. This means she may as well enjoy food now in the time she has left. On another level, Cissie questions the wisdom of health education messages. She asserts that she has eaten butter all her life and yet she is healthy and still alive. She perceives this as providing evidence for the fact that butter is not necessarily bad for you.

There is also a discussion of health and food in the following quote from Nancy. In this passage there is again a sense of scepticism at the messages which dictate what one should and should not eat in a discourse used by many of the older women:

- NANCY                 They're always saying about these er chips aren't good for you, its not me that says it, its all these things but I have them anyway so because I like them, not a lot, only once a week but I enjoy those better than potatoes you see. Oh, I only probably have them once a week twice a week now. I'll be having some today when I get back, but I've been doing them in the microwave because when I have been shopping Fridays and Tuesdays when I get back its easier

but they don't taste as nice, so I want to start frying with that crisp and dry oil very nice. Ooh I had some yesterday at my Aunts and I said 'Oh these are lovely Aunt ( ) Auntie', so I asked her what she cooked them in, because she used to cook them in beef dripping, which they say is the best thing. But erm I'm not one that thinks about health things but I think you have got to be a bit sensible, after all the statistics have shown what can happen with heart attacks. My father was got a bad heart and Aunts and that, but I am not one that worries about it because I think if your time's come its come. But I think you have got to be a little bit sensible, but to be honest I just eat more or less what I want

JILL Right aha

NANCY Yeah I don't think I shouldn't have this I mean all this scare about beef, you know, well I loved beef at that time, I had it, but I know several of my friends, Mary who comes here she, they haven't had beef because of the scare, and eggs I still have them, because I think you end up eating nothing by the time you've done (Nancy, O12, P9).

In this quote Nancy again talks about the need to be sensible about food and to eat 'a little bit of everything in moderation'. Thus she acknowledges that there are health risks involved in eating particular foods and that one should change one's eating habits to a certain extent in order to avoid these risks. At the same time however she is fatalistic about her health as seen in the line 'I'm not one that worries about it because I think if your time's come it's come'. Here, like Cissie, Nancy feels that at this stage in her life one should not worry about healthy eating because one is at the latter end of one's life and one is going to die at some time anyway. Towards the end of the quote Nancy also asserts that, according to contemporary health education messages, there are too many forbidden foods. This can be seen in the line 'you end up eating nothing by the time you've done'. Here, there is again a belief in the pleasure and enjoyment which food brings so that the women are not prepared to deny themselves certain foods in the interest of their health.

#### 4.2.5 Summary

In summary, the older women were involved in the control of their eating habits so that they denied themselves foods which they regarded as fattening or unhealthy. For some women, food control was a source of conflict and struggle. Weight and food control was regarded as a battle which they wanted to win or succeed at but which they often failed to achieve. Here the women felt a great sense of guilt at their own weakness and lack of

will-power. At the same time, however, there was a sense of rebellion as the women found the control of their food intolerable and restrictive.

For all the women in the sample, food control was regarded as 'cutting down' rather than as dieting and hence represented an everyday, 'normal' occurrence. This distinction related to the older women's awareness of the way in which women become preoccupied with their size, with this preoccupation being related to media pressure upon women to become slim. The women regarded the dieting involved in this preoccupation as too extreme and as causing great unhappiness for women. They therefore recommended that individuals should eat sensibly and in moderation, allowing oneself to eat some fattening foods and ensuring that proper food was eaten rather than 'unnatural' diet-food substitutes. In addition the women thought that eating in moderation was particularly permissible in later life, when health issues were not as important and when old age was conceptualised as a time to enjoy the pleasures and rewards of food.

#### **4.3 Feeding the Family: The Role of Food in the Wife and Mother Role**

This section of the analysis explores the meanings of food for the older women in relation to their experiences of providing food for their families. This analysis illustrates that the subjective meanings of food for the older women were not solely related to the women's desire to lose weight through the restriction of their food intake. Instead the women's feelings about food were also related to their experiences of providing food for others as part of the wife and mother role. In these roles, food was about caring and nurturing the family, so that there was an emphasis on providing healthy and nutritious food in the form of 'proper' home cooked meals.

The analysis which follows explores the way in which the women's experiences of providing food for the family changed over the course of the life span and the way in which this was related to the women's sense of themselves and their relationships with their husbands and grown-up children. It highlights the psychological issues facing the women in later life which relate to a loss of roles and attempts to gain power in the face of the threatened dependency and powerlessness of old age.

The analysis of the women's experiences of feeding their families is split into four main parts. Firstly, there is a discussion of the women's experiences of feeding their children. The women had found fulfilment in the feeding part of the mothering role and looked back on this period of their lives with feelings of nostalgia. Despite the fact that providing food for their children had involved the women in a great deal of self sacrifice and personal deprivation, the women experienced a sense of loss in no longer having children

to feed and care for. This was experienced as a loss of their identities as 'mothers' which also removed their sense of power and worth.

The second section of the analysis explores the women's involvement in a series of generational feeding relationships where the feeding of husbands and sons is passed down the generations. After their sons had left the family home the women's role as the feeder of their sons had been taken over by their sons' wives or partners. This caused feelings of conflict for their women in relation to their daughters-in-law. This conflict is discussed in relation to the women's own experiences of the daughter-in-law role earlier in their lives. The women's role as wives had involved them in feeding their husbands and hence replacing their husbands' mothers in terms of the feeding role. The women had been aware of the difficulties which this potentially caused for their husbands' mothers as seen in their attempts never to criticise or reject the food which their mothers-in-law provided. As the women grew older and watched their children grow up, they too experienced the loss of their role as the feeder of their sons to their daughters-in-law.

The third section of the analysis deals with the women's current experiences of feeding their husbands. As with the feeding of their children, the women continued to meet the needs of other family members before those of themselves, so that their husbands' food tastes and preferences were put before those of the women. In this case, however, the experience of feeding others did not provide the women with a positive sense of fulfilment or achievement. Dissatisfaction with the feeding role related to the fact that the women were no longer in control of the feeding process, resulting in a loss of power as well as a loss of role. This removal of power caused conflict for some of the women, who rebelled against their husbands' food preferences and asserted the importance of their own. Alternatively, the woman regained the power they had had when feeding their children through reclaiming the mother role in relation to their husbands. Here the women continued to prioritise their husbands' preferences over their own but regained control through the context of caring for their husbands' health through their diet. This once again placed the women in a position of 'mother knows best', which thus restored the power balance.

The fourth section of the analysis investigates the women's experiences of food in their relationships with their daughters. The sense of a loss of power in relation to feeding their children was compounded by the fact that the mothering role was often taken on by the women's own grown-up daughters, who attempted to offer advice on their mothers' eating habits. In this relationship the older women experienced a reversal of the role they had had in earlier life, so that their daughters were involved in attempts to 'mother' their mothers. This process caused conflict as the older woman again experienced the power

involved in the feeding relationship being taken away from her. It produced feelings of dependency in the old women as part of the powerlessness of old age.

#### 4.3.1 Feeding the Children and the Mother Role: Fulfillment, Power and Loss

This section explores the women's experiences of feeding their children and the meaning which this had for the women. The older women regarded the feeding of their children as a positive experience, so that it was remembered as one of the happiest periods of the women's lives. Feeding one's children was an important part of being a mother, with the nurturance and care involved in providing healthy and nutritious food providing the women with the sense of being powerful and important figures within the family.

The fact that the women no longer had their children to feed and nurture meant that the women felt a great sense of loss in later life. This sense of loss was compounded by the fact that the women did not experience the same sense of fulfilment and power from feeding their husbands as they had received from feeding their children. The feeding which the women were now involved in was therefore regarded as second rate and less fulfilling. For the women who were widowed there was the complaint that living alone meant that they no longer had anybody 'to cook for', so that cooking had lost its pleasure for them.

The first quote illustrates the pleasure which Margaret experienced in providing food for her children. Here an explicit statement is made about how feeding children is part of women's identities as mothers:

JILL	Were family mealtimes a big occasion?
MARGARET	Always, yes, I loved it watching my family all sit round eating
JILL	Right and why did you
MARGARET	I felt a mother (Right) and especially at Christmas when they were all there they'd come from different parts of the country or whatever oh I loved it thirteen, fourteen of us I think, lovely thrilled to bits
JILL	Right
MARGARET	Course that's all gone now its not the same (Margaret, 02, P12)

In this quote Margaret describes the pleasure she felt in providing food for her children, both when they lived at home and when they returned home on special occasions. Here the experience of having her family all gathered around the family table provides Margaret

with a great sense of pride and achievement. At the same time, however, the above quote illustrates the sense of loss that Margaret now feels in relation to feeding her children. This experience no longer takes place and is a part of Margaret's life which is over and gone forever. Margaret's children now have families of their own and only visit her infrequently. Thus just as Margaret's role of being a mother has been lost so has her role of feeding her children, who are now involved in the feeding of their own families.

In addition to talking about the pleasure they derived from feeding their children, the older women also derived a sense of power from this role. The women's status as mothers gave them the power to decide the rules surrounding food and eating, which their children were expected to follow. These rules were designed to ensure that the women's children had a healthy diet and that their children were 'fed properly'. This is shown in the following passage from Anne who brings in the idea of 'healthy food' as well as 'proper meals':

JILL                    Did you used to have a big family meal time every day, did you all eat together?

ANNE                    Yes we did actually, yes, because we were always erm the children had their meals at school they had school meals - dinners - because they it was too far to come home for dinner most of the time erm because it meant walking to fetch them and walking them back again and when they were sort of old enough to stay for school dinners they stayed for school dinners. But I always made sure that at teatime erm John came home for tea and erm there was always a cooked meal they always had a cooked meal and we all sat down at the table to eat it you know sort of you all had to sit at the table and eat it and they couldn't go out until they'd finished their meal and that was it and it was a very strict routine

JILL                    Why did you think that was important?

ANNE                    I used to think I used to say well it was better for them to sit down and enjoy the meal sit down and eat their meal rather than because I mean I know there's a lot do it today is they just sit and er walking around with food in their hands and I mean I don't think that's

JILL                    Its not good for their digestion?

ANNE                    Its not good for their digestion and I don't think there's any of them apart from my husband that suffer from indigestion, digestive problems you know 'cos none of them you know they all can eat anything. I mean I that shows their upbringing you know, I mean that's the way I was always taught and I thought I'd put it through the children as well. I mean they



always had good wholesome food and it was always home cooked as well I was always there to cook it for them and so they'd all have a good meal I mean they'd perhaps come home at teatime and say I'm hungry and they'd have perhaps a slice of bread and jam or something like that or a piece of cake you know but they always sat down and (Anne, O1, P10)

In this passage, Anne is asserting that she fed her children properly. At the start of the quote she states that her children ate their midday meal at school. She is anxious to point out that this was a necessity and that her children could not return home for their meal because of the distance between home and school. This anxiety relates to Anne's need to present herself as a 'good mother', who provided her children with good food and hence who cared for her children adequately and effectively. Thus here a school meal is presented as 'second best' to a meal at home, so Anne also points out that her children were always given a 'proper meal' in the evening. Here a 'proper meal' is defined as hot or cooked food, which is eaten by all the family at once around the dining table. Here a reference is made to contemporary children who are perceived as not eating properly.

Later in the quote Anne expresses her belief that she managed to bring up her children properly and that she therefore did her 'job' as a mother properly. She refers again to the fact that she always provided her children with wholesome, home-cooked food and that she was 'always there to cook it for them'. Thus she was a good mother who was in control of her children and who ensured that her children were properly cared for.

The sense of power in this quote comes from the fact that Anne was wholly in control of her children's eating habits and that this power was legitimated by the fact that Anne is a mother and that 'mother knows best'. As we shall see in section 4.3.2, Anne no longer felt that she had any power over the food that she provided as she now cooks according to her husband's preferences, over which she has no control or power.

Despite the fact that the women did feel a sense of power from feeding their children, this power was a self-sacrificing power which involved the women in putting their own needs behind those of their children. This self-sacrifice often took place in times of economic hardship when there was not enough food for the whole of the family. This is seen in the following quote from Betty, who brought up her four young children on her own after her first husband left her:

BETTY

At one period in my thirties when things were very difficult and you know money and everything when they were very small and I was really very - eight and half stone which was er

JILL                    Was that cos you were kind of did you kind of give them the food?

BETTY                   Yes I think it was a lot of it yes I had to go to the doctors and he said 'When was the last time you had a good meal?', I said 'I cook every day', he says 'Yes, I know you do, but when did you have it?' so you know when we were very short and I have let them have food but er well I mean that was only a period you know and erm so I've never had any problems about putting weight on never (Betty, 03, P16).

In this quote then we see that Betty often went without food herself in order to feed her children properly. This quote has a sense of pride in it, which centres around the fact that Betty was such a 'good mother' that she was prepared to give up everything for her children, including her own health. There is also a sense of being 'told off' by the doctor which emphasises the extreme risk Betty was taking with her own health in order to provide for her children. It is also interesting that Betty goes to see her doctor in order to be told that she should eat more. Here, in order for the extreme self-sacrifice of motherhood to be stopped, there has to be legitimisation from her doctor, who tells her that she should start to eat so that her health does not completely deteriorate.

On a less extreme level, putting the needs of others before those of the self was also seen in the interview with Marion. Here, as in the interview with Emily described in section 4.2.1, Marion cooks food for her grown-up child which she herself does not want to eat. Here Marion is trying to 'feed her son up' (despite the fact that he is now in his thirties) because he is extremely thin:

MARION                I'm overweight I know I can get my weight down if I cut out things like cakes and pastries and sponge puddings and custard and if I don't have suppers my weight will go down but I - like my son's so thin you see my eldest son he's so thin that I make these things that can put weight on and he doesn't put weight on

JILL                    but you do

MARION                but I do I do (Marion, 07, P7).

Thus here Marion's own food needs are over-ridden by her need to feed her son as part of her role as a mother. It is more important to Marion to ensure that her son is healthy than it is for her to avoid fattening foods and lose weight. This takes place despite the fact that Marion believes she should lose weight for the good of her own health. Here the needs of her family come before those of herself.

As the women had derived such a sense of power and fulfillment from feeding their children, they had experienced a great sense of loss when their children had grown up and left the family home. For some of the women this was described in terms of a sense of warm memories of pleasant times in the women's lives which were now over. This can be seen in the interview with Grace who was now widowed:

- JILL                    So mealtimes sound as if they were quite sociable then, quite sort of
- GRACE                    Oh yes, yes we never knew how many we were catering for you know they'd just wander in and say 'Can so-and-so stop for tea?' and things like that.
- JILL                    Didn't that bother you that they'd done that?
- GRACE                    Not at all no, oh no no we'd always people here it was lovely really when the children were young, particularly when they were teenagers because they used to go to evening classes and they'd probably bring someone from work, you know, so that they could go to the evening class, have a meal here and go to the evening class and they all used to bring their friends and it was a lovely time really, you look back on it with great nostalgia (Grace, O11, P7)

This passage illustrates the sense of pleasure which Grace derived from nurturing her children and their friends. It shows the way in which the women regarded food as a warm pleasure in life, as something to be enjoyed and valued as well as being something which provides people with warm memories. This provides a contrast to the worry and guilt which surrounded food for the women in relation to their weight or their health (section 4.2.1 above). At the same time this quote also illustrates the sense of loss which the women experienced in relation to food and eating. For Grace this sense of loss is heightened by the fact that she is now a widow living alone and hence does not have a husband or children to feed.

The sense of pride at providing food for others is also shown in the following quote from Kathleen. Here, as with Grace, there is recollection of a time in the women's lives when they were valued for their cooking skills, which provided the women with a sense of importance and self-worth:

- KATHLEEN                Gradually as they got older, I don't know, I seemed to attract - I used to say to some of 'em 'Haven't you got homes of your own?' They used to come 'Oh that smells lovely, can we have some?' and I used to have instead of three I used to have about half a dozen around you

know I mean we used to have an enlarged family so to speak

JILL Did you?

KATHLEEN Well of course that changes, as the children grew up I mean went away, two of them went away to college and the other one was left well he had the normal eating doings and then er but when they came home from college I mean it was additions again 'Oh I'm bringing so and so home with me' (Right) and 'Can we have a curry, Mum?' and all this, that, and the other I mean you know that sort of thing, I mean, which is normal in any family (Kathleen, O4, P15).

This quote is clearly about Kathleen's pride in the food that she gave to her children as they grew up, as well as to the numerous friends which they brought to the family home. She clearly enjoyed the idea of being a good cook and that her children were keen to bring their friends home to sample her cooking. The feeling of pride which Kathleen feels here is also shown by Kathleen's last statement where she says that such complimenting of a mothers cooking is 'normal in any family'. This suggests Kathleen feels that she has been boasting in the interview to make a point about her abilities and so she attempts to reduce this by a process of normalisation.

Grace also recounts her children's appreciation of her cooking with a story about her son's nostalgia about the food he was given in his childhood:

JILL Are you the one that decided what you were going to eat or was it like your husband said can we have this tonight or was it always you that sort of planned it?

GRACE Yes I think it was mainly me that they seemed quite happy with what I gave them you know (laughs) they still talk about things now that, my son he used to work one night a week, I can't remember, I don't know whether it was Friday, they had a late night and he still says that he can still remember coming home and having hash and pancakes and things like that because we probably had it during the day and I knew that it was something which was quickly warmed up again for him and he was always starving when he came in and he used to say 'Oh Mum I can still remember those lovely Friday nights coming home and having baked me a lovely meat and potato pie', or hash or something you know, 'Oh I did used to enjoy it' (Grace, O11, P12).

In this quote we see the care which Grace put into feeding her son in terms of thinking about his routine and what he would need when he came home from work. The fact that

her son actually remembers the food that she gave him provides her with a sense that the effort she put into caring for her children was worth it. This story is essentially about two things: firstly that she provided for her children in a satisfactory way and that she was therefore a good mother and secondly that she was loved and appreciated by her children.

As will be discussed in more depth in the section 4.3.3 below, the sense of loss which the women experienced when their children left home was combined with a sense that the role of feeding one's husband was not as fulfilling as feeding one's children. There was therefore a sense that a life with one's husband did not compensate for the loss of one's children. This is shown in the quote from Betty, who talks about the sadness she felt when her children first left home:

JILL                    So since your children left home have you eaten  
do you think what you've eaten has changed?

BETTY                    Oh no, now when the last one - when [name of  
son] was the last one to go and he went in the  
army oh it was and after ( ) we still had the  
other family come at nights sometimes cos  
they'd all left home by that time you know they  
were either at University or college or  
something one my daughter was married you know  
but erm I still cooked the same amounts and oh  
it was wasted and oh it took oh it took me ages  
to get used to it (Right) after all those years  
of having to cook great big amounts and now  
there's only two of us you know er I just  
couldn't get used to it oh I hated it (Betty,  
O3, P9)

Here then Betty expresses the sense of loss she felt when her children had all left home so that she no longer had to feed them. This clearly represented a great change in Betty's life so that as she moved from being a 'wife and mother' to being a 'wife' only, the loss of her children was not compensated for by her relationship with her husband. The fact that this change of role is discussed in terms of food provision illustrates the importance of feeding or nurturing in the mother role and in the older women's more general sense of identity.

This comparison of life now to life when the woman's children were at home was also used by Marion who clearly misses the time she spent bringing them up:

JILL                    So have you gradually put weight on over the  
years then is that

MARION                    Oh yes yes over the years since I was since my  
fifties since I've been in my late fifties I  
think I started putting weight on back again  
and until then I could keep it down to about

eleven stone you know which I looked alright at eleven stone with being fairly tall but yes since in the late fifties when I started putting it on

JILL Mm and why do you think that was then?

MARION Overeating I suppose again you know I used to be careful more careful what I ate when I was that bit younger I didn't eat so much sweet stuff

JILL Right, so why was it when you got to that age that you started to eat more then do you think?

MARION Perhaps boredom I don't know I perhaps got a bit bored I don't know

JILL Had your children grown up by then?

MARION Yes oh yes they'd grown up by then so I perhaps got a bit bored when you've got children to look after and run around after I think that keeps your weight down (Marion, 07, P14)

Here then we see the life style change which occurs for women in middle life and its effects on women's feelings about body size and food. For Marion the growing up of her children resulted in feelings of boredom which means that she no longer has as much 'will-power' to control her food intake. Her increased body size is also linked to less activity with the loss of having children to look after.

In the final quote in this section, we again see the way in which the loss of children is not compensated for by the women's relationships with their husbands. This lack of compensation is made more explicit here and relates to the lack of fulfilment which Anne's receives from feeding her husband, who has much more conservative tastes than those of Anne herself or those of her children:

ANNE I always used to make my own jam

JILL Did you?

ANNE I still do, well it's only these last few years that I've stopped making things, I mean I used to make all my own bread and I made all their wedding cakes and everything they all had their own home made wedding cake and whenever, I've done buffets and things like that I've done

JILL Do you enjoy cooking then?

ANNE Yes I do, yes I loved it yeah

JILL Right but you don't do that much now?

ANNE                    No, because I mean there's only the two of us and I mean there's not much fun in doing it really just for two not the same when er not when it's just plain you know when you're just doing plain food all the time if there was something some initiative to do it you know doing something different you know (Anne, 01, P7).

At the start of the quote Anne again refers to the feeding of her children and the way in which this is associated with her feelings that she was a good mother. Also in this quote is an illustration of the way in which food provides a marker for the transition between the family home and the outside world which is entered after marriage. Here Anne asserts that she gave her children a good 'send-off' symbolising their life-transitions through the provision of sumptuous and luxurious foods.

Later in the quote Anne discusses the fact that she no longer receives the same amount of pleasure from cooking because of the fact that there are only 'the two of us'. The fact that feeding others is no longer a pleasure is summed up in Anne's answer of 'Yes I do yes I loved it yeah' to my question about her enjoyment of cooking. Anne's change of tense in her statement makes it clear that cooking is no longer enjoyable for her. For Anne the dissatisfaction with cooking at this stage of her life comes from the fact that she now has to cook the plain foods her husband prefers rather than the more exciting foods which she and her children preferred. The sense of loss that she feels from the loss of her children centres around the fact that she has lost an activity which used to provide her with a sense of creativity and achievement, such as that involved in the making of complicated wedding cakes and buffets. Thus she continues to put the needs of others before her own, but the sense of power and fulfilment which this used to give her is no longer there.

#### 4.3.2 Feeding and Power in the Mother and Daughter-in-Law Relationship

In addition to feeling a sense of loss in relation to their children leaving the family home, the women experienced the power they had in feeding their children being taken over by another woman. From this analysis it can be seen that the women were involved in a series of generational relationships, where the sense of identity the women experienced from feeding husbands and sons was passed down the generations. Thus in relation to their sons the women experienced their role as the feeder of their sons as being taken away by the women their sons married. Earlier in their lives the women themselves had been involved in this daughter-in-law role. Their role as wives had involved them in feeding their husbands and hence replacing their husbands' mothers in terms of the feeding role. The women had been aware of the difficulties which this potentially caused for their husbands' mothers as seen in their attempts never to criticise or reject the food

which their mothers-in-law provided. As the women grew older and watched their children grow up, they too experienced the loss of their role as the feeder of their sons to their daughters-in-law.

The following quote from Ruth illustrates the importance of feeding in the women's relationships with their husbands. Ruth was a widow at the time of the interview and so here talks about a period earlier in her life, when feeding her husband symbolised her new status as a wife and which therefore provided her with a sense of pride and achievement. At the same time she was aware of the problems this caused for her husband's mother, who had lost her role as the feeder of her son:

RUTH                    I always remember when I came back out of the hospital and - with [name of daughter], my first child - and his mother had been keeping an eye on him and giving him his dinner because she lived next- door-but-one to us and he says 'Oh I am glad you've come home' and I said 'Why what's the matter?' and he says 'Oh I don't like my mother's gravy any more', I says 'Well don't for heaven's sake tell her, you've had it all these years' and he said 'Yes, I know, but I like yours better.' Mind you he used to have gravy with everything (Ruth, 05, P21).

This quote illustrates the sense of pride which Ruth obtained from feeding her husband and the way in which her husband's appreciation of the food she gave him represented her 'arrival' as a wife. The phrase 'I always remember' suggests that Ruth may have told this story before and that it is something she likes to remember. The point of retelling the story seems to be to make reference explicitly to the fact that Ruth's cooking was preferred to her mother-in-law's. Ruth felt that she had 'arrived' in her proper place as a wife, her identity was confirmed because she had managed to replace the importance of her husband's mother. Here the feeding or mothering of the man has been passed down the generations from mother to wife who continues his mother's role for the remainder of the man's life. The fact that this praising of Ruth's cooking took place after the highly significant event of childbirth underlines the importance placed on feeding in the marital relationship as well as the way in which the wife is valued by the husband.

The above quote also illustrates Ruth's awareness of the conflict which she may have caused her mother-in-law in relation to this handing down of the feeding role. Thus she urged her husband not to tell his mother that he now prefers Ruth's cooking. Ruth was aware that this may result in her mother-in-law feeling hurt and rejected by her son. The fact that he now rejected her cooking symbolised the rejection of her role as his mother.



A further dimension to this mother and daughter-in-law conflict comes from Marion who recalls a period at the start of her marriage when she and her husband lived with her husband's mother. As in the quote from Ruth, Marion shows her awareness of the importance of feeding others in women's lives and the conflict which can appear between mothers and daughters-in-law around food:

MARION            I wasn't a lot overweight when I was at home it was after I got married when I put more weight on like you know especially the first six months living at my mother-in-law's, oh the food she put out like, and of course when you're at your mother-in-law's you know she'll say 'Have some more' and you don't like to say no so 'Oh yes' you have some more you know cos the first, I was eleven stone nine when I got married and I went up to thirteen stone in six months at my mother-in-law's so yes that was with eating (Marion, 07, P18)

In this excerpt Marion recognises the precariousness and delicacy of a woman's relationship with her mother-in-law, particularly in the area of food in the mother's home. This home is the place where Marion's mother-in-law has some power. Refusing her food has great significance as it may imply that she is also rejecting the woman herself. This shows the implications of feeding others for some women.

For other women there was criticism of their mother-in-law's cooking, particularly if the women's husbands did not always eat what the women wanted them to (see section 4.3.3 below). This can be seen in the next quote from Margaret as she describes one reason for her husband's refusal to eat the 'healthy foods' she herself favours:

MARGARET        You know he was really, he really used to get me down. He would only have cod you know and things like that you know and I've always been really adventurous in food always and er

JILL                Yeah and he wouldn't have any of it

MARGARET        No, no pork pie stuff like that, well I like a bit of pork pie within reason, about once a month or once every 6 weeks but there's such a lot of lovely things isn't there you know

JILL                I know it's a waste isn't it?

MARGARET        Absolutely I mean avocado you can get them quite cheap just now er and I'll wait and wait and wait until its just right before I eat it, I won't eat it till its ready same with melon you know till its really ripe and then I add er you know what have you and then I'll buy a pound and a half of grapes and things like that I don't mean I'll eat them all at once but I'll

have for my breakfast and such like and he won't you know no no I do wish he would he'd be better for it wouldn't he? ( ) Well as you say he was brought up on baked beans and soup and stuff like that, well my mother used to cook (Margaret, 02, P9)

Here then Margaret favours her own mother (and hence herself) over her husband's mother whom she regards as failing to feed her husband properly.

In later life, the women themselves experienced what their mothers-in-law had experienced before them. Again there was a feeling that power was being removed from them in relation to the feeding role, in the flip side of the relationship which the women had experienced with their mothers-in-law earlier in their lives. Thus the older woman experienced what her mother-in-law experienced a generation earlier. This can be seen in the following quote from Anne where we gain an insight into the feelings she has towards her son's wife:

JILL                   Right do your family come (.) to stay?

ANNE                   No not really erm

JILL                   Do you go to them more than they come to you ?

ANNE                   Yes

JILL                   So they'd be the ones doing the cooking?

ANNE                   Yes that's right yes well erm (.) cos er John doesn't actually get on well with - he gets on with my eldest daughter but with my eldest son he doesn't so I go on my own you know and at the moment we er we don't go down to my younger daughters because er its such a distance you know its such a distance to go so we don't go very often. I mean we go over to my younger son's sometimes you know and usually they erm she puts on a buffet you know sort of sandwiches and things so I mean its sort of you help your self sort of you know er (Anne, 01, P8)

In this quote we see the sense of loss which Anne feels at no longer seeing a lot of her children. The main point to be raised from the passage is the way in which Anne implies that she does not approve of the 'catering' her daughter-in-law provides when she visits her and her son. Thus there is the implication that she does not cook 'properly' because she provides a buffet rather than a 'proper' meal which would probably involve a cooked, sit down meal. However it seems that Anne cannot do anything about this. She does not think her son is being 'fed' as well as she fed him, but the power she once had to nurture her son has now been passed on to her daughter-in-law.

### 4.3.3 Cooking for One's Husband: A Renegotiation of Power Relationships

The following analysis explores the women's experiences of feeding their husbands after their children had left the family home and hence discusses the women's current feelings about providing food for others. As with the feeding of their children, the women continued to meet the needs of others before those of themselves, so that their husbands' food tastes were put before those of the women themselves. For some of the women involved in feeding their husbands in later life there was much more of a struggle over the provision of food for their husbands. In comparison to feeding their children however, the women had much less power and control over what they cooked for their husbands. This lack of power resulted in a feeling of dissatisfaction with the feeding role rather than a sense of fulfilment or achievement.

In response to this removal of power, many of the women rebelled against their husbands' food preferences and asserted the importance of their own. Alternatively the woman regained the power they had had when feeding their children through reclaiming the mother role in relation to their husbands. Here the women continued to prioritise their husbands' preferences over their own, but they regained control through the context of caring for their husbands' health through their diet. This once again placed the women in a position of 'mother knows best' which thus restored the power balance.

In the following quote from Anne we see the way in which the women prioritised the needs of their husbands, so that the couple ate according to the man's preferences which subsumed those of the woman:

- JILL                   What about your husband then does he eat the same, does he like the same as you?
- ANNE                   Well no, because he he's very much a plain eater, he doesn't like to go away from the plain vegetables and meat and veg and that kind of thing. He prefers cold meat rather than hot meat
- JILL                   Oh that's unusual
- ANNE                   Yes he doesn't like a lot of hot meat (Right) he finds it gives him indigestion
- JILL                   So is it like roast meat that's cold
- ANNE                   That's cold, yes, if I was cooking a roast for say Sunday I would have to cook it Saturday and serve it cold Sunday (Right really? oh) He'd have it on his plate at the side, he never, he likes Yorkshire pudding and gravy and things like that you know but he'd have to have his meat cold on a plate on the side

- JILL                   And what about you then, do you have it hot or cold?
- ANNE                   No I like it hot I like my meat hot but I'll put up with it when these days we neither of us eat very much meat really, there's very little meat, in fact I think its more chicken and erm chicken and fish (Anne, O1, P4)

This quote illustrates the detailed preferences that Anne's husband has in terms of what foods he likes to eat and how he likes them to be served. Despite the fact that Anne does not share these preferences, she prepares the food exactly in accordance with her husband's wishes. Anne's use of the phrase 'I'll put up with it' suggests that she is not very happy about this but that she is unable to change this part of her life. Earlier in the analysis (section 4.3.1 above) it was demonstrated that Anne no longer finds cooking fulfilling because cooking for 'just the two of us' is boring and unadventurous. When Anne's children were at home, Anne's cooking skills were challenged much more in being asked to provide the more adventurous food which she herself prefers. Thus when her children were at home she could take care of some of her own needs. At this point in her life, however, Anne is resigned to the prioritisation of her husband's needs and the sacrifice of her own.

The fact that Anne's needs are only met in relation to her children is also illustrated in the following quote, where Anne describes a visit to see her son, who is from her marriage with her first husband:

- ANNE                   Its when I go away that, its when I go up to my son's then they make a fuss of me and I have different things, salmon steaks and things like that or trout now that's a thing he will eat a trout he'll eat some trout occasionally if I get one of those so he will eat that so I mean that's nice and he doesn't mind salmon actually he doesn't mind salmon and erm and I think we're getting we seem to be getting inclining a bit more towards the vegetarian side I think you know just the fish and the chicken you know that sort of thing we seem to be eating more that type of thing (Anne, O1, P5)

In this quote then Anne describes the way in which her needs are only met when she is not with her husband but with her son and her daughter-in-law. It can also be seen that Anne regards eating what she likes to eat as a luxury, representing being made a 'fuss of', and a break from the everyday routine of cooking for her husband. Anne feels guilty about the enjoyment she gets out of these visits to her son's home and immediately follows this statement with a return to talking about her husband, with the assertion

seeming to be that he's 'not that bad'. She concedes that he does eat some food that she likes but follows this with 'so that's nice' showing feelings of appreciation and loyalty.

For Margaret a similar situation had arisen in relation to her and her husband's food preferences, although with a different resolution. Margaret greatly enjoyed cooking, having been employed as a cook before she retired. This meant that she had clear ideas about what she wanted to eat based on her personal likes and dislikes and the ideas about health and nutrition which she had gained from her job. Margaret was concerned about her husband's health because of the fact that he had been diagnosed as having diabetes mellitus. She had therefore attempted to introduce her husband to the healthy foods she preferred but had had little success. Her husband continued to favour the foods he liked before his diagnosis. This is shown in the following quote where Margaret, like Anne, talks with great relish about certain foods and criticises her husband for his refusal to try such foods:

MARGARET            But he won't have lovely things like rice you know and he can have rice I mean its delicious I mean I did something the other day and it was and it smelt lovely. I did the vegetables and some rice in very little water a lot of veg, different kinds of vegetables, different kinds of vegetables all sorts and I put this cod er haddock on the top and put a lid on and a few mixed herbs and a little drop of lemon juice and that and then after a half an hour the smell the aroma

JILL                    Like a risotto

MARGARET            It was, the aroma was absolutely lovely there was no fat in it whatsoever and it really filled me up. Now he wouldn't have that (Margaret, 02, P9)

Like Anne, Margaret describes her husband as liking plain food and as being stuck in a rut which differs from the adventurousness which many of the women felt towards food:

MARGARET            He'd have er well we used to cook well when I used to cook a lot more before he knew he had diabetes he used to have he used to like meat and potato pie, steak, roast beef, fried fish and chips back to meat and potato pie or steak pie

JILL                    Really like a routine like that?

MARGARET            Oh shocking and I'm a cook

JILL                    Oh you poor thing

MARGARET            You know he was really he really used to get me down he would only have cod you know and things like that you know and I've always been really adventurous in food always and er (Margaret, O2, P9)

The outcome of Margaret and her husband not having the same tastes was somewhat different to that between Anne and her husband, as can be seen in the next quote:

JILL                    So does he - do you cook two separate meals then

MARGARET            Yeah we do, we've got a microwave now and er

JILL                    Do you does he do it or do you do it?

MARGARET            He does his own sometimes. We have er we have one between us, we have a meal when I do it a couple of times a week but you see I'm out a lot so er and I'm not interested in watching television. So er he gets his little pies or his jacket potatoes, I've got him onto that at least (Margaret, O2, P8)

Thus Margaret does not sacrifice her own food preferences in the way that Anne does, so she and her husband now eat separately at least some of the time. However, Margaret continues to be responsible for providing her husband with easy alternatives which he can do himself, so the responsibility for food provision continues to rest with her.

One way in which the older women regained power in their relationships with their husbands was through the role of caring for their husbands' health. This allowed the women to 'mother' their husbands through food in a similar way to the mothering of their children. Thus, because many of the women's husbands were suffering from health problems the women were able to control their husbands' eating under the guise of taking care of their husbands' health. This mothering is shown in the interview with Cissie who, unlike Anne and Margaret, did not experience conflict with her husband over food provision but appeared to be in control of the feeding of her husband:

JILL                    Right so do you tend to like the same things, have you got the same tastes?

CISSIE                 Yes, yes apart from he's not keen on such things as carrots and sprouts only a few, he says 'only a few, that's enough, that's enough'.

JILL                    Would you still have them then even though

CISSIE                 Oh yes because I tell him I say well you know carrots are very good for you, it stops cataract (laughs) and greens are good for your

system so he's got to have a few, but he does eat them.

JILL Have you ever had any disagreements about food?

CISSIE No, no. He's not a great lover of cold meats you know he likes stews the best (Cissie, 09, P8).

Thus in this quote Cissie is firmly in charge of the feeding of her husband because of her greater knowledge of health and healthy foods. Thus whilst Cissie's husband does not like vegetables he is instructed to eat them by his wife and does 'eat a few'. Here Cissie again finds fulfillment from the feeding role because she is in control of it in the form of 'mother knows best'.

#### 4.3.4 Food in the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Dependency and Loss of Role

In the above section the women's feelings of a loss of power in the feeding relationship were discussed. This loss of power related to the women's loss of their role as mothers and the control which this gave them over the feeding process. The sense of a loss of power in relation to feeding others was compounded by the women's relationships with their daughters. In this relationship the older women experienced a reversal of the role they had had in earlier life, so that their daughters were involved in attempts to 'mother' the older women. Here the older woman became a child and the daughter became the adult.

In the following quote from Ruth it can be seen that this reversal of the mother-daughter relationship took place in relation to health, with the daughter asserting greater knowledge of healthy eating than her mother because of her training as a nurse:

RUTH But you see when she lived at home we very very seldom had chips at our house she didn't like them and if I mean sometimes I didn't see her because she'd be working different turns but if she came in she'd say what have you cooked chips for if I'd made myself some and not her she used to look at me so accusingly I felt guilty so I stopped doing it

JILL Why?

RUTH 'You don't need them Mother' (Oh I see) 'They're bad for your cholesterol, when you've had a stroke don't come running to me'

JILL Oh I see

RUTH (Laughs) Oh yes that's another point of contention (Right) I like salt on my food and well I probably shouldn't have salt on my food and she'd say 'Yes you'll have a stroke that'll do it all that salt you've been eating you

don't need salt on your food' and then I'll think 'eeh god I'm seventy why shouldn't I enjoy it?'

JILL Right so she's worried about health a bit, health issues then isn't it?

RUTH She's worried about my health I think well I suppose if she's seen people suffering from these ill-effects like as she says 'It's self-inflicted injury Mother and you've got enough sense not to do it' but it's alright having sense and knowing what you should do but doing it is a completely different matter (Ruth, 05, P17)

In this quote Ruth's daughter is acting towards her mother in the same way as Ruth acted towards her children and husband in earlier life. This involves Ruth's daughter in attempting to take care of her mother's health through controlling her food intake. The issue of health seems to be particularly salient here because of Ruth's age and the association between old age and ill-health (see Chapter Five). Thus Ruth's daughter is concerned about her mother's health and so expresses this concern through comments about her mother's diet.

On the opposite side, Ruth feels angry about her daughter's attempts to assert power over her through controlling her eating habits. This anger relates firstly to the fact that Ruth has traditionally advised her daughter on health issues in her role as her mother. She experiences her daughter's concern about her weight as a removal of her power as she develops into old age. This quote may also be about Ruth's fear of dependency on her daughter as she grows older. Her attempts to resist her daughter's advice may represent an attempt to resist this dependency through asserting her personal autonomy in relation to food. Thus she asserts that she should be able to eat what she wants regardless of her daughter's warnings.

On another level the anger Ruth feels about her daughter may relate to the fact that she no longer wants to be concerned about what she eats at 'her time of life'. Thus the fact that she is old is used to assert that she should no longer have to worry about what she eats. This relates to the older women's arguments about moderation in eating, so that small amounts of unhealthy or 'forbidden' foods can be eaten in later life (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.4). Again there is the belief that once one has got to old age one should be allowed some leeway in one's eating habits, both because of the removal of pressure about body size and because of the fact that one should be allowed to eat what one enjoys in the latter stages of one's life.



As discussed in section 3.3, the women participating in the study could be defined as members of the 'young-old' group which includes individuals between 65 and 75 who are relatively active and independent. This group of women were mobile, physically active and lived independently. There was, as yet, little dependence on their relatives for care or support. However the above analysis illustrates that the women were beginning to be treated in this way and that the threat of this dependency was beginning to be an issue for them.

#### 4.3.5 Summary

In summary, the meanings of food for the older women were related to their experiences of providing food for their families as part of the wife and mother role. The women's feelings about providing food for others were related to the women's sense of themselves in terms of their relationships with their husbands and grown-up children. At this stage in their lives the women were experiencing a sense of loss in relation to the feeding role which related to the women's feelings about the loss of their children and hence their identities as mothers. In response to this loss of role some of the women experienced a sense of conflict with their husbands, which related to the women's attempts to regain power over the feeding process and regain a sense of their role as the feeder of others. The conflict arose over the women's husbands' refusal to eat in accordance with their wives' wishes. For other women the conflict was resolved through the 'mothering' of their husbands in terms of the provision of food based on the woman's knowledge of health and nutrition. Here the women regained a sense of identity as mothers which resolved their feelings of loss.

In addition to a loss of identity the women's feelings about the provision of food for others also revealed their fears about the dependency and powerlessness of old age. This dependency was experienced through the women's relationships with their daughters, where the women were 'mothered' by their daughters in relation to food. The women felt anger at this attempt to remove their roles as mothers, which also involved being cast in the role of the dependent child.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

This chapter has explored the meanings surrounding body size and food for a group of women in their sixties and seventies 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 in relation to the initial research aims of the study, relating the findings

back to the relevant literature and outlining the points to be discussed in comparison to the other studies in Chapter Nine.

The meanings of body size and food for the older women can be related to two main issues. Firstly, the meanings were related to the women's feelings about the ageing process, where the women constructed their experiences in relation to the social discourses surrounding ageing, health and sexuality. Secondly, the meanings were related to the women's relationships with others, particularly family relationships, and the women's sense of self within these relationships. Here the older women were involved in a growing sense of rolelessness and powerlessness, which can again be related to social discourses surrounding ageing in Western society.

### 5.1 Health and the Effects of Physical Ageing

One of the research aims of this study was to explore the effects of physical ageing in relation to women's feelings about body size and food. This involved an exploration of the way in which these effects were experienced in relation to social discourses which define old age as a time of weight gain and physical decline and deterioration. The findings of the research indicate that much of the women's feelings about their body size was related to their experiences of physical ageing and their interpretations of these experiences.

The women used a discourse of ageing to explain their acceptance of their bodies, which occurred despite the fact that they were bigger than they had been in earlier life. Here the women perceived old age as a time which naturally brings about changes in the body. Thus growing older was associated with the expectation of weight gain which was related to the reproductive events in women's lives or the fact that their bodies were becoming less efficient.

The women were also aware of the way in which older people are socially constructed as inactive and unhealthy and the way in which this is related to cultural discourses surrounding the 'social uselessness' of older people (see section 2). The women asserted that they themselves were healthy because of the fact that they ate healthily and took regular exercise. On one level, these assertions may relate to the cultural pressure on women to be fit, to take exercise and to lose weight (Mitchell, 1987; see Chapter Two). On another level, they may also relate to the older women's attempts to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes surrounding old age (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1990; Matthews, 1979). This demonstrates that the older women were aware of the fact that they were now defined by

society as 'old women', and their experiences were shaped by the way in which social and cultural discourses define older women in Western society.

### 5.2 Sexuality, Sexual Attractiveness and Ageing

A further research aim of the study was to explore the meanings of body size in relation to the women's feelings about their sexuality and sexual attractiveness in later life. This question emerged from the analysis of social discourses surrounding older women which define them in terms of asexuality and a lack of sexual attractiveness (Gannon, 1994; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett, 1990; Gerike, 1990; Gergen, 1990; Itzin, 1986, 1984; Sontag, 1972). An aim of the study was therefore to explore the way in which older women used these cultural discourses in their accounts of their feelings about their body size.

The older women's acceptance of their body size can be related to the discourses surrounding the sexuality of older women. Thus the older women were less concerned about their sexual attractiveness than they had been earlier in their lives. Sexual attractiveness had been important in the women's youth when there had been a concern with men's opinions of their body size and attractiveness. However, in later life the women felt that their physical appearance was no longer as important an issue in their relationships with their husbands. Whilst the women's husbands continued to pressurise their wives about being 'too fat', the women themselves rejected these opinions. Again this was related to an ageing discourse, where the women asserted that at this point in their lives they were no longer prepared to worry about their weight and that they wanted to be able to enjoy the food that they ate, rather than surrounding it with denial and restriction.

For the women interviewed for this study the discourse defining older women as asexual and sexually unattractive could be seen as providing the women with the opportunity to accept their bodies regardless of their size. Thus the expectation that the sexual aspects of women's relationships declined over the life span enabled the women to rebel against the pressure they had previously experienced about their size and appearance. They were able to dismiss their husbands' comments about their bodies and assert that they were no longer concerned about such issues.

### 5.3 The Control of Food: Age and Cohort Factors

Despite the fact that they had reached a stage of acceptance of their body size, the women participating in the study were all involved in the control of their food intake. This control was seen as necessary in relation to health as well as attractiveness. For some of the women in the group there was confusion about the control of food intake. On one level

these women rebelled against the need to control their eating habits, asserting that they should not have to deny themselves food 'at their time of life'. However the failure to control their food intake resulted in great feelings of guilt and anxiety because of its implications for the women's sense of self-control and will-power.

Whilst many of the women were involved in attempts to control their food intake, the women asserted that this did not involve going on diets. The women's rejection of diets related again to their acceptance of their bodies and their belief that they should not have to deny themselves food 'at their time of life'. This distinction related to the older women's belief in 'sensible eating' or 'eating in moderation', where the women asserted that one should eat a sensible diet which was not too unhealthy but which allowed certain 'forbidden' foods to be eaten in moderation.

The women's attitudes towards diets were also related to their perceptions of the growing emphasis on women to conform to a thin standard of beauty. The women felt that too much emphasis was placed on this issue and that it often resulted in distress and unhappiness for younger women. Again, concern with body size was constructed as a young women's issue.

The older women's attitudes towards the emphasis placed on body size for young women may relate to the influence of cohort factors on the women's feelings about body size. Whilst the women felt that they themselves were bigger than they 'should' be, they asserted that young women currently wanted to be 'too thin'. Thus the women asserted that it was better to be 'slightly overweight' than to be extremely thin. This relates to psychological research on older women's dissatisfaction with body size, which indicates that older women's perceptions of ideals of body size are larger than those of their younger counterparts (Mindham, 1994; Lamb et al., 1993). The findings of this study indicate that this may be the case, although, as discussed in Chapter Two, these ideals must still be conceptualised as subjective rather than as objectively definable.

The findings of the study indicate that women's feelings about their bodies may be due to both cohort effects and ageing effects. Thus the older women's greater acceptance of their bodies was related to the fact that they were growing older and to the women's expectations about the weight gain associated with old age. On another level, the women's feelings about contemporary young women's attempts to be extremely thin indicate that the women's feelings about their bodies may be related to the different body ideals which the older women had experienced throughout the course of their lives.

#### 5.4 Family Relationships, Food and Body Size

A final research aim of the study was to explore how the meanings of food for older women are influenced by their experiences of feeding their families as part of their role as wives and mothers. The findings of the study indicate that these experiences had a significant influence on the women's feelings about food and body size. The women's accounts of feeding their families reveal much about their relationships with others and the way in which these relationships contributed to the women's sense of identity.

The decreasing importance of body size in the older women's lives can be related to the changes in the women's family relationships across the life span and the role which food played in these relationships. The subjective meanings of food for the older women were not solely related to the women's desire to lose weight through the restriction of their food intake. Instead the women's feelings about food were also related to their experiences of providing food for others as part of the wife and mother role. In these roles food was about caring and nurturing the family.

The meanings of food provision for the women related to the women's relationships with the different members of their families and to the women's sense of identity within these relationships. In later life the women experienced a sense of loss in relation to their role as the carer and nurturer of their children. Whilst this feeding had generally involved the women in putting the needs of their children before those of themselves, it had also provided the women with a sense of fulfilment, power and identity. In response to this loss of role, some of the women experienced a sense of conflict with their husbands, which related to the women's attempts to regain power over the feeding process and regain a sense of identity as the feeder of others. For other women the conflict was resolved through the 'mothering' of their husbands in terms of the provision of food based on the woman's knowledge of health and nutrition. Here the women regained a sense of identities as mothers which resolved their feelings of loss.

In addition to a loss of identity, the women's feelings about the provision of food for others also revealed their fears about the dependency and powerlessness of old age. This dependency was experienced through the women's relationships with their daughters, where the women were 'mothered' by their daughters in relation to food. The women felt anger at this attempt to remove their roles as mothers which also involved being cast in the role of the dependent child.

As discussed in section 3.3, the women participating in the study could be defined as members of the 'young-old' group which includes individuals between sixty five and seventy five who are relatively active and independent. This group of women were mobile, physically active and lived independently. Whilst this study does not look at

women in the 'old-old' group, defined as being over the age of seventy five and as physically inactive or dependent on the help and support of others (Stuart-Hamilton, 1994), the findings of the study have implications for the meanings of body size and food for this group. The issues of dependency in relationships within the family are likely to have a significant impact on the meanings of food and body size for such women.

Whilst the women put the food needs of others before those of the self, the women themselves appeared to derive much pleasure from food. Thus the woman's experiences of providing food for other people had enabled them to value food for its positive aspects, such as providing a sense of enjoyment and pleasure for themselves and their families. Food was not simply related to its negative associations with weight gain and hence with denial and restriction (although this was an issue for the women). This valuing of food was also seen in the women's beliefs in moderation in terms of eating habits, so that they did not deprive themselves of the foods which they enjoyed. This was again related to ageing, with the women asserting that old age represented a time in their lives when they had decided to no longer be as concerned about the negative aspects of food and to focus on the more positive aspects in their latter years.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the meanings of food and body size for the older women were constructed in relation to the women's feelings about the ageing process and the changes and transitions which this process had brought about in the women's lives. Here the women constructed their experiences in relation to the social discourses surrounding ageing, health and sexuality. In addition, the meanings of body size and food were related to the women's relationships with others, particularly family relationships, and the women's sense of self within these relationships. Here the older women were involved in a growing sense of rolelessness and powerlessness, which can again be related to social discourses surrounding ageing in Western society.

## CHAPTER NINE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarises the research carried out for this thesis. It aims to discuss and compare the findings of the different studies of the research in order to develop a life span perspective to the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women. The thesis is evaluated in relation to previous research on body size and food and the contribution of the thesis to this research is considered. This involves a discussion of the theoretical and methodological orientation of the thesis in terms of the development of a qualitative feminist psychological perspective.

The first section of the chapter discusses the findings of the Pilot Study and Studies One, Two and Three. The main themes which emerged from the different studies are identified and compared to develop a life span perspective to women's relationship to body size and food. It is argued that the meanings surrounding body size and food across the life span are related to women's experiences of relationships, and the way in which they experience themselves within these relationships. In turn, the meanings surrounding these relationships can be related to the social discourses surrounding femininity and the female role across the life span. Women are conceptualised as experiencing these discourses through a process of interaction within their relationships. They can be seen to reflect upon discourses in relation to the meanings which they have in terms of individual biographical experiences. For many women this resulted in a resistance of powerful social discourses. The contradictions in women's accounts can be related to the power of certain social discourses as well as the failure of alternative discourses in fully accounting for women's experiences.

The second section of the chapter discusses the contribution of the thesis to research on women's relationship to body size and food. This firstly involves a consideration of the way in which the research has explored the meanings of body size and food for women in the general population, which represents a shift from the traditional emphasis upon eating disorders research. Secondly, there is a discussion of the contribution of the research to the development of a life span perspective to body size and food. Thirdly, the epistemological and methodological contributions of the research are discussed, in terms of a focus on women's experiences, on the exploration of subjective meanings, and on

the construction of these meanings in relation to a process of active reflection upon social discourses.

The third section of the chapter discusses the methodology employed in the research which was carried out from a critical realist perspective. The critical realist perspective involves defining individuals' accounts as representative of their experiences but where the research process is also defined as a subjective process. Thus the theory emerging from participants' accounts is constructed in relation to the researcher's subjectivity, and the interplay between the researcher's and participant's subjectivities. There is also a discussion of the research's attempts to minimise power asymmetries, as well as how these asymmetries can vary in terms of the relationship between researcher and participant. This involves a consideration of the role of age in the research process, drawing on the experiences obtained from interviewing women from the different age groups.

The final section of the chapter discusses the implications of the research on a broader level. This involves a consideration of the distress and conflict which can surround body size and food for women and the development of strategies to help reduce this distress. The findings of the study indicate that women become more positive about their bodies through the use of feminist discourses, which minimise the importance of body size in women's lives and identities. The applications of these findings to the development of distress-reducing strategies are considered.

## **2. SUBSTANTIVE FINDINGS OF THE THESIS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LIFE SPAN PERSPECTIVE TO WOMEN, BODY SIZE AND FOOD**

This section of the chapter discusses the findings of the Pilot Study and Studies One, Two and Three. The main themes which emerged from the different studies are identified and compared to develop an understanding of the meanings surrounding body size and food across the female life span.

The findings of the thesis demonstrate that there were a range of different meanings surrounding body size and food for women from the different age groups of the studies. The women varied in the amount of concern they felt about the size of their bodies and the importance which they felt it played in their sense of self and their relationships with others. This meant that food and eating were surrounded by different meanings, where for some women there was a general restriction of food intake in order to bring about



weight control, and for others there was less importance attached to the denial of physical and emotional needs for food.

The meanings of body size and food across the life span can be related to the different sexual and family relationships in which the women were involved at different stages of the life span 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. These social discourses can therefore be seen to shape the relationships in which women are involved, in accordance with the different expectations surrounding relationships at different stages of the life span. In addition, some women also constructed their experiences in relation to alternative discourses which rejected the traditional expectations of women's lives and relationships.

Social discourses surrounding femininity and the female role can be seen to be related to discourses surrounding female ageing (see Chapter Five). These discourses define women's lives in terms of a chronological series of roles which involve women in relationships with others. According to this chronology, women's lives are shaped around 'catching a man' in adolescence and early adulthood. This is followed by involvement in the wife and mother role, which is conceptualised as an important part of women's lives from early adulthood. In later life however women's lives are defined in terms of rolelessness as their children have grown-up and left the family home. All of these relationships can be conceptualised as meeting the needs and desires of others, either through conforming to the thin ideal of female beauty and sexuality, or through caring for others as part of the wife and mother role.

In accordance with symbolic interactionist perspective developed in the thesis, the women were found to interpret the discourses surrounding women's roles across the life span through their relationships with others. Discourses were incorporated into individuals' subjectivity by a process of interaction and reflection. Women reflected upon and used discourses from the position of their individual biographies.

Women often resisted the powerful social discourses surrounding body size and femininity from the basis of their own experiences. This involved some women in the use of alternative discourses, which rejected the traditional expectations of women's lives. The use of alternative discourses involved contradictions, however, so that the women used a combination of opposing discourses. These contradictions are conceptualised in terms of the pervasiveness of dominant ideals. Whilst women are capable of challenging

and resisting powerful social discourses, they find it difficult to construct alternative discourses through which to account for their experiences.

In order to develop a life span perspective of women's relationship to body size and food, this section begins with a comparison of the findings of the three main studies of the thesis. For each study, the relationships within which the women were involved are explored together with the social discourses surrounding these relationships. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical issues surrounding the findings of the research, relating these findings to a symbolic interactionist perspective.

## **2.1 Comparison of the Studies of the Thesis: Body Size, Food and Relationships across the Life Span**

### **2.1.1 Pilot Study: Body Size and Food in Early Adulthood**

The Pilot Study used a group interview methodology to explore the meanings of body size and food for a small group of women (N=3) in their early twenties (Chapter Three). Whilst the Pilot Study was primarily carried out to explore qualitative methodology and to generate research questions for the main body of the research, its findings are discussed here in order to provide some perspective on the meanings of body size for women in early adulthood. The methodology of the Pilot Study is also discussed in section 4.1 below.

The meanings of body size and food for the women participating in the Pilot Study were found to be related to the women's experiences of sexual relationships and their feelings about their sense of themselves in these relationships. Their accounts were constructed in relation to two conflicting discourses. This firstly included the discourse of the thin ideal, where thinness was associated with sexual attractiveness and hence with sexual activity and relationships. Secondly, the women's accounts were also constructed in relation to a conflicting feminist discourse which involved the women in rejecting the thin ideal discourse as part of their political beliefs and values.

As discussed in Chapter Three (section 4.1), the women discussed their feelings about their body size in sexual situations in relation to a thin ideal discourse. As the women felt that their bodies were larger than the ideal of the 'sexually desirable woman', they experienced feelings of self consciousness about their bodies in sexual situations which influenced their enjoyment of sexual encounters. Here the meanings of body size for the women related to the thin ideal discourse, which defines thinness as the most attractive body size.

The women in the Pilot Study also constructed their experiences in relation to a feminist discourse, which involved the rejection of the thin ideal (Chapter Three, section 4.1.2). Thus they challenged the emphasis placed on their bodies by other people and the way in which they felt they were judged in relation to their size. There was thus a contradiction between the women's personal feelings about body size and their political beliefs about these issues. Thus, whilst the women were able to reject the thin ideal of female beauty and the pressure upon women to conform to this ideal, they found it extremely difficult to apply these beliefs to their own lives.

The women's awareness of the contradictions in their accounts indicates that they had not simply internalised the different discourses surrounding the thin ideal and feminism. Instead the women had reflected upon the meanings contained in the different discourses and had related them to their social, relational and individual experiences (see section 2.2.2 below).

The contradictions in the women's accounts also indicate the pervasiveness and the power of the thin ideal discourse. Thus whilst the women rejected this social discourse about women, the discourse is so pervasive that it continued to be difficult for the women to define their sense of self and their feelings about their bodies in alternative terms. This difficulty can be related to the pervasiveness of the thin ideal where the women continued to live their lives and experience relationships in the social and relational context which produces such definitions of female identity and value. Thus whilst the women rejected male opinion and men's right to comment on their size and attractiveness, they continued to be involved in relationships which were based around their body size and sexual attractiveness. This meant that neither the thin ideal or the feminist discourse with which they attempted to conceptualise their body size were able to fully account for their experiences.

### 2.1.2 Study One: Body Size and Food in Late Adolescence

Study One involved in-depth individual interviews with fifteen women aged between sixteen and eighteen (Chapter Six). For this age group of women, the meanings of body size and food were related to their feelings about sexual relationships and their sense of an independent identity within these relationships. Here the meanings of body size were related to the women's desire to be in sexual relationships, where physical appearance was constructed as an important factor in attracting the interest and commitment of men. Body size and food were therefore constructed in relation to the thin ideal discourse which defines thinness as the most attractive body size to be and which defines attractiveness as an extremely important part of the female role (Chapter Six, section 4.1.1). In addition, there was a close relationship between women's self concept and

their physical self. Thus the women felt that they would 'feel better about themselves' if they lost weight, and 'feeling bad about the self' was associated with feeling 'fat' and unattractive (Chapter Six, section 4.2.1). Here the women could be seen to be constructing their accounts of their experiences in relation to the discourse defining women's worth in terms of their appearance.

As discussed in Chapter Six, the majority of the women participating in Study One constructed their concerns with body size and food in terms of an individual desire to be attractive. Thus whilst the women wanted to be thin they related this to personal preferences rather than to 'outside factors', such as media images of women or the opinions and pressures of other people about their body size (see Chapter Six, section 4.2.2). This was expressed in terms of wanting to lose weight 'for themselves' rather than for anybody else. The contradictions in the women's accounts can be related to the women's struggles between the wish to be desired and approved of by others and the wish to develop an autonomous sense of identity.

For a smaller group of women in the study (n=4), the pressures which 'outside factors' placed on women's feelings about their body size were acknowledged and challenged (Chapter Six, section 4.3). These women asserted that they should not be pressured about their size and that they should be valued for 'what I am, not for what I look like'. As in the Pilot Study, there was a use of an alternative feminist discourse as a result of women's reflection upon the meanings of the thin ideal discourse.

The women's use of a feminist discourse can again be related to the women's desire for autonomy because 'outside factors' were identified as influencing women to abandon their individuality so that they all 'look the same'. Alternatively, the rejection of external pressure related to the rejection of perceived 'interference' from the women's parents who assumed the 'right' to advise the women on the size of their bodies and the foods they should and should not eat (Chapter Six, section 4.3.2). Here the use of a feminist discourse can be related to the women's experiences of relationships with others and to their experiences of themselves in these relationships. The women had reflected upon the thin ideal discourse in terms of its meaning in relation to the women's previous experiences. The thin ideal was considered in relation to the effects it had on the woman's feelings about herself.

The findings of Study One also indicate that whilst the women were capable of rejecting social discourses, there were inconsistencies in their accounts which again indicate that there are dominant discourses which shape women's experiences. This can be seen in the fact that the women who rejected the influence of 'outside influences' as oppressive

continued to use a thin ideal discourse. This was seen in the women's use of others' opinions to assess their attractiveness and their assertions that they did not want to gain weight. Here however the women constructed their concern with body size in terms of a concern with health (Chapter Six, section 4.3.2). 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. This relates to the findings of the Pilot Study where health was also used as a way of reconciling the contradictions between women's use of a thin ideal and feminist discourse.

In summary, the meanings of body size and food in late adolescence were related to the women's desires to be sexually attractive and sexually desired by others. Here the women interpreted their experiences in terms of a thin ideal discourse. At the same time, the meanings of body size and food were related to the women's desires to establish themselves as independent adults within their relationships with others. For the majority of the women this resulted in a desire to lose weight in order to be as sexually attractive as possible, although this desire was seen as an individual concern unrelated to social or relational ideals and pressures. Whilst a resistant feminist discourse was used it was contradicted by the importance of sexuality in the women's lives which resulted in a need for confirmation and approval by the women's boyfriends.

### 2.1.3 Study Two: Body Size and Food in 'Middle' Adulthood

Study Two used individual in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of women aged between thirty and forty five (Chapter Seven). The meanings of body size and food were extremely diverse for this age group. This diversity can be related to the role which body size was felt to play in women's sense of themselves and in their relationships with others. For some women, body size was intimately related to their sense of self, so that losing weight was constructed as making women feel better about themselves. For other women a concern with body size was constructed as a preoccupation with the self, which represented selfishness and a neglect of the family. Finally, for a third group of women, a concern with body size was seen as attempting to please other people rather than the self. These women therefore rejected the importance of body size in their lives. The meanings of body size and food were therefore related to the way in which the women conceptualised a concern with body size in relation to their own needs and desires and those of other people.

The different conceptualisations of body size concerns can be related to the women's construction of their experiences in relation to different social discourses surrounding the relationships they were involved in. The women's experiences can thus be seen to be

interpreted by them in relation to different discourses surrounding relationships and the women's reflection upon the meanings of these discourses in their lives.

Many of the women in the group wanted to become thin because they wanted to be sexually desired by men. Here the women's experiences were constructed in relation to the thin ideal discourse. In addition, the meanings of body size were constructed in relation to social discourses surrounding women's ageing, which define women's beauty in terms of thinness and youth. Thinner, younger and 'more attractive' women were thus experienced as threats to women's sexual relationships (Chapter Seven, section 4.1.2).

For the women who wanted to become or remain thin, there was a strong link between body size and the women's feelings about themselves (Chapter Seven, sections 4.1.4 and 4.1.5). These women felt that changing one's body size would bring about a change in how they felt about themselves in terms of 'feeling better about the self' or 'feeling more comfortable with the self'. Here, the women's self concept was intimately related to their self concept so that body size was considered to determine 'who they were' as individuals. As in Study One, such a conceptualisation can be seen to be related to the social discourses surrounding the female body which define it as women's most important asset and which value women in terms of their physical appearance (Wolf, 1990; Ussher, 1989, see Chapter Two, section 4.2).

In addition to sexual relationships, the women's roles as the carers of others were also emphasised in Study Two. Body size and food were thus constructed in relation to discourses surrounding sexuality and women's roles as wives and mothers. These discourses define the 'good wife and mother' as one who puts her own needs behind those of her family. Thus for some women, there was an attempt to balance their roles as sexual beings and as wives and mothers and hence attempted to combine the demands on them to be sexually attractive with the demands to care for the needs of others as part of the wife and mother role. Concern with body size was therefore constructed as a selfish preoccupation with the self which defined women as 'bad mothers' (see Chapter Seven, section 4.1.2). At the same time, these women continued to be concerned about their body size because sexuality and sexual relationships continued to be important to them and because thinner, younger and 'more attractive' represented a threat to the women's sexual relationships (Chapter Seven, section 4.1.2).

Other women in the sample constructed the meanings of body size and food in relation to an alternative feminist discourse which rejected the thin ideal and the wife and mother discourse. As in the Pilot Study and Study One, the feminist discourse involved the rejection of the pressures surrounding body size and food for women. In Study Two,

this pressure was identified as coming from the women's relationships with men and was seen as part of the way in which women 'please men' or meet male definitions of sexual attractiveness. In opposition to this, the women asserted that their bodies existed to please themselves and that they would not therefore be pressured by others to change the size of their bodies. Here then the women were involved in a rejection of the discourses surrounding the traditional role for women at their stage of the life span and constructed the meanings of body size and food in relation to an alternative discourse.

The use of the feminist discourse in Study Two related to these women's experiences of relationships. The women in this group were predominantly single, having experienced the breakdown of relationships in their lives. This breakdown was the result of the women's decision that these relationships were not satisfactory to them either because of the role which the women were expected to take on in these relationships or because of violence or infidelity within the relationship. Here the women had been involved in a process of reflection upon the format of heterosexual relationships and the way in which such relationships are organised around gender power relations. This involved the women in the belief that heterosexual relationships generally involved pleasing the needs of the man rather than themselves, so that there was little room for the women to meet their own needs or develop their own identities in isolation from their partners.

In relation to these experiences, the women's use of a feminist discourse can be related to their reflection upon the meanings contained in the discourses surrounding sexual relationships and the wife and mother role. This reflection took place in relation to the meanings which such discourses had in the context of women's lives (see section 2.2 below).

In summary, the meanings of body size and food for the women participating in Study Two were related to the women's relationships with others and the women's sense of identity within these relationships. The women's experiences were constructed in relation to discourses surrounding their roles as sexual individuals and their roles as wives and mothers. For some women there was a compliance with these roles, whereas for others there was a resistance of them and the discourses which surround them. Here the women constructed an alternative discourse which rejected the importance of body size in their lives and identities. The women's use of these different discourses related to the women's attempts to balance their own needs and sense of identity with the needs and desires of other people, such as their children and partners.

#### 2.1.4 Study Three: Body Size and Food in Late Adulthood

Study Three used in-depth individual interviews to explore the experiences of women in their sixties and seventies. The meanings surrounding body size and food were constructed in relation to the women's relationships with their husbands and families, where there was a shift from sexual relationships to feeding and caring relationships. These relationships were shaped by social discourses surrounding ageing and those surrounding women's role within the family in later life. The meanings of body size for the older women therefore involved a shift from a focus on sexuality and sexual relationships to involve a greater emphasis on health and the physical effects of ageing (see Chapter Eight, section 4.1.2). The meanings of food were focused around the women's relationships with their husbands and adult children.

Many of the older women felt a sense of acceptance about their body size and physical attractiveness (Chapter Eight, section 4.1). On one level, the women still felt that they would be more attractive if they were thinner, indicating that the meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to a thin ideal discourse. On another level, however, they were less prepared to change their bodies through dieting than they had been earlier in their lives. Here the meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to a discourse surrounding ageing and sexual attractiveness. Thus the women simultaneously accepted or complied with the thin ideal whilst rejecting its relevance in their own lives. This rejection was achieved through the use of an ageing discourse which involved the expectation that older women were declining in attractiveness and that old age is a time which naturally brings about weight gain.

Alternatively, the thin ideal discourse was challenged in relation to changes in the women's relationships with their husbands. For some women this was related to the fact that they were now widowed and did not have any intentions about remarriage or future relationships. For other women who were still married, their relationships with their husbands continued to be important, but these relationships were not reliant (at least from the women's perspectives) on the woman's ability to attract her husband and win his approval of her physical appearance. Whilst the women were involved in struggles around food with their husbands, these struggles did not relate to sexuality and the restriction of food. Thus whilst the women were aware that their size was important to their husbands they were no longer as concerned about their husband's opinions in terms of attempting to change their bodies to win his approval.

The meanings of body size and food for the older women were also related to their roles as wives and mothers (Chapter Eight, section 4.3). In a continuation of the theme which emerged in Study Two, the subjective meanings surrounding food for the older women



were not solely related to the women's desire to lose weight through the restriction of their food intake. Instead the women's feelings about food were also related to their experiences of providing food for others as part of the wife and mother role. The older women's experiences of family relationships indicated that growing older involved the women in feelings of loss of power and autonomy and an increasing sense of dependence on others. These feelings of loss related to the fact that the women no longer had their children to feed as part of the mother role. The loss of the 'mother' role was not made up for by the increasing presence of their retired husbands in their lives. The feelings of dependency related to their relationships with their children, where the women were now fed by their daughters in a reversal of the parent-child relationship.

The meanings of food for the older women can thus be related to the family relationships in which women are involved at this stage of the life span. These relationships can be seen to be shaped by social discourses surrounding ageing, which define old age in terms of rolelessness and a return to a 'second childhood' where older people become dependent on others (see Chapter Five).

## **2.2 Development of a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective to Women's Relationship to Body Size and Food**

As discussed above, the findings of the thesis indicate that the meanings of body size and food for women were constructed in relation to social discourses surrounding women's roles across the life span. The women's use of social discourses was found to involve a process of interaction and reflection upon discourses. In accordance with symbolic interactionist perspective developed in the thesis, women were found to interpret the discourses surrounding women's roles across the life span through their relationships with others. Discourses were incorporated into individuals' subjectivity by a process of interaction and reflection.

### **2.2.1 Social Discourses, Interaction and Relationships**

As discussed above, the findings of the thesis indicate that the meanings of body size and food for women were constructed in relation to social discourses surrounding women's roles across the life span. The women's use of these social discourses was found to involve a process of interaction through their relationships with others. Women experienced the social discourses which shaped the meanings of body size and food through their relationships with others. Thus social discourses were incorporated into individuals' subjectivity by a process of interaction.

This can be seen in the accounts given by the adolescent women in Study One. As discussed in Chapter Six, the young women's boyfriends took great pride in their

girlfriends' appearance and encouraged them to be as attractive as possible (see Chapter Six, section 4.1.2). In addition, the women felt they assessed by their mothers in relation to their size, so that the women's relationships with their mother's feelings were shaped in relation to externally defined standards of beauty (see Chapter Six, section 4.3.4). Thus, thinness was presented as the 'best size to be' by many of the women's boyfriends and mothers. These ideas were themselves used by the women because of their interaction with the other people in their lives who proposed the thin ideal as an important construct. Here, then, the women can be seen as experiencing the discourses surrounding body size and femininity in their interactions with others, whereby these discourses are incorporated into the individual's subjectivity.

The importance of relationships in the women's feelings about their bodies and food represents an alternative to the media model of social factors involved in social models of body size dissatisfaction (Chapter Two, section 4.2.2). This research has focused on media ideals of body size without conceptualising the mechanism whereby these ideals influence women. The emphasis on media models has also failed to explore the role of personal relationships in women's feelings about their size (Bordo, 1993), so that media ideals are not related to wider social attitudes towards body size. The findings of the thesis indicate that women's relationships with others play an important role in their feelings about body size and food because it is through their relationships that women experience social discourses. In addition, as will be discussed below, women reflect upon the meanings contained in these discourses in the context of these relationships which form part of their biographical experiences.

### 2.2.2 Reflection upon and Resistance of Social Discourses

The research carried out for this thesis also demonstrates that women are involved in a process of active reflection upon social discourses, where this reflection takes place in relation to women's biographical experiences. Here discourses shaped women's accounts but these accounts also indicate that discourses are used by women on the basis of the meaning they have for them in relation to individual experiences. Thus rather than women internalising discourses or passively positioning themselves between them, there is an active use of discourses, where this use occurs in relation to the meaning of the discourses for the individual.

The women's reflection upon discourses can be seen in the way in which women were able to resist discourses and construct their experiences in relation to alternative discourses. This can be seen in the women's use of a feminist discourse used by the women participating in the Pilot Study and in Studies One and Two. The women who did use this discourse related it to their experiences, where these experiences involve hurt and

conflict around body size and sexuality. Here, then, the women were involved in a process of reflection upon the meanings of different discourses which were then related to the women's experiences.

In Study One, the women who rejected the thin ideal discourse and used a feminist discourse had experienced conflict around body size in terms of their relationships with men or with their mothers, both of which had involved criticism and judgement (Chapter Six, section 4.3). Similarly, the women using the discourse in Study Two had experienced conflicts in their relationships with men, where they felt they were judged in relation to their sexual attractiveness and where this was constructed as part of the way in which women's needs are subordinated to those of men (Chapter Seven, section 4.2). This indicates that women's resistance of discourses involves reflection upon biographical experiences as well as social and media discourses. Here the meanings of discourses for women were related to the experiences of the person and do not represent a construction in the space of the interview as in discursive approaches (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) but part of the participants' identity as constructed prior to the interview process (see Chapter Four).

The reflection upon and resistance of discourses was also seen in the interviews with older women in Study Three. Here, the women were found to resist the discourse of the thin ideal as they asserted that they were no longer prepared to restrict their food intake in order to control the size of their bodies (Chapter Eight, section 4.1). Again the rejection of this discourse involved the use of alternative discourse which surrounded ageing and sexuality. Here the women asserted that they should no longer have to be concerned about body size and dieting at 'their time of life'. Here the older women had reflected upon the meaning of the thin ideal discourse in the context of their lives and relationships.

### 2.2.3 Contradictions in Women's Accounts: The Pervasiveness of Social Discourses surrounding Body Size and Female Identity

The women's accounts involved a number of contradictions. These contradictions are conceptualised in terms of the pervasiveness and the power of certain discourses which continue to influence women through their relationships with others, despite women's attempts to reject them. The main contradiction in the women's accounts related to the women's use of both thin ideal and feminist discourses. This was seen in the Pilot Study as well as in Studies One and Two.

In the Pilot Study, the women acknowledged the role which other people's opinions played in their feelings about their body size but 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 body size and their political beliefs about these issues. Whilst on one level, the women were able to reject the thin ideal of female beauty and the pressure upon women to conform to this ideal, on another level they found it extremely difficult to apply these beliefs to their own lives.

Similar contradictions were seen in Study One (Chapter Six), where the adolescent women who used a feminist discourse also used a thin ideal discourse in their accounts. Here the women rejected the importance of other people's opinions about their body size whilst continuing to value other people's opinions and attempting to avoid weight gain.

As discussed above (section 2.1.1), these contradictions can be explained in terms of the pervasiveness and power of certain discourses in Western society. These discourses can be defined as dominant discourses in that they represent the perspective of the powerful in society and hence they are propagated throughout society by this power (Nicolson, 1992; Foucault, 1973). Thus, whilst women can reflect upon dominant discourses and choose to resist and reject them through the use of alternative discourses, they continue to be influenced by dominant discourses. These discourses surround women because of the social and relational context in which they live. Thus whilst the women rejected this social discourse about women, the discourse is so pervasive that it continued to be difficult for the women to escape from this discourse in terms of the way they defined their own sense of self and their own feelings about their bodies. Whilst the women formulated an alternative discourse to the thin ideal, they were unable to sustain this discourse throughout their accounts.

On another level, the contradictions in women's accounts may relate to the fact that alternative discourses may not be adequate to contain women's experiences. Thus whilst women may use a feminist discourse to reject societal, media, or male pressure, this discourse may not provide them with a framework within which their needs can be met. This can be seen in relation to the women's use of a feminist discourse which conflicted with the women's desire for sexual relationships. Here the sexual relationships within which women are involved continue to be constructed in relation to discourses surrounding women's' sexuality and sexual attractiveness. In constructing the meaning of body size in relation to a feminist discourse, women may not be provided with a way of conceptualising relationships.

### **2.3 Summary**

The findings of the thesis show that the meanings of body size and food for women at different stages of the life span are constructed in relation to women's relationships and

their sense of identity within these relationships. The women experienced these relationships in relation to social discourses surrounding women's roles as sexual partners, wives and mothers. Thus, the young women were concerned with establishing sexual relationships, so that the meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to discourses surrounding female sexuality, including the discourse of the thin ideal. At the same time, body size and food were related to the women's needs for autonomy within relationships as they attempted to develop an adult identity.

The women in middle adulthood were involved in both sexual relationships and relationships involving the care of others, as part of the wife and mother role. Here the meanings of body size and food were related to the women's sense of themselves within these different relationships and the emphasis which the women felt these relationships placed on the needs of others or themselves. The older women were involved in family relationships which involved a decline in the importance of sexuality and a growing sense of rolelessness and dependency. Here the meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to discourses surrounding sexuality and ageing and to those surrounding women's relationships in later life.

The women's use of the social discourses surrounding femininity and the female role across the life span involved a process of interaction and reflection upon discourses. Thus, social discourses were incorporated into individuals' subjectivity through their interactions with the other people in their lives. The women's accounts show that they then reflected upon these social discourses in relation to the meaning of the discourses in relation to their own lives and experiences. Here the women often resisted certain discourses surrounding body size and formulated alternative discourses. At the same time, however, there were a number of contradictions in the women's accounts where opposing discourses were used. These contradictions can be explained in terms of the power and pervasiveness of dominant social discourse. Women continued to live in the social and relational contexts shaped by these discourses and hence alternative discourse did not fully account for the women's experiences of these relationships.

### **3. OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS: CONTRIBUTION OF THE THESIS TO RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO BODY SIZE AND FOOD**

In this section the research carried out for this thesis is summarised and discussed in terms of the contribution the research has made to research on women's relationship to body size and food.

### **3.1 Development of a Social Psychology of Women's Relationship to Body Size and Food: Moving Away From Disorder**

This thesis has focused on the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food for women in the general population who were not diagnosed as having an eating disorder. This represents a shift from the extensive amount of psychological and medical research which has been carried out on eating disordered populations (see Chapter Two, section 2). This shift is important for a number of different reasons.

In focusing on women in the general population, this thesis has demonstrated the complexity of meanings surrounding body size and food for women at different stages of the life span. It has shown that body size and food play an important role in women's feelings about themselves and in their interpersonal and family relationships. Thus rather than body size and food being issues which just affect women with anorexia and bulimia, they are issues which are important in the majority of women's lives. This moves the conceptualisation of women's concerns with body size and food from an individualised and pathologised model to a model which constructs these concerns in terms of the social factors surrounding body size and food and the way in which these factors relate to social definitions of women and the female role.

Whilst explicitly not exploring the experiences of women who are diagnosed as having an eating disorder (see Chapter Two, section 2), the findings of this thesis have implications for eating disorders research. In indicating the role which social discourses and gender power relations play in the subjective meanings surrounding body size and food, the thesis highlights the need for the theorisation of eating disorders in relation to sociocultural factors and gender. If the relationship which women in the general population have to body size and food is influenced by social discourses shaped around gender, it is likely that those women whose behaviours and attitudes are defined as 'disordered' are also influenced by these discourses. As discussed in Chapter Two (section 2), feminist models of eating disorders have been developed (Fallon, Katzman and Wooley, 1994; Orbach, 1993; Lawrence, 1987; Chernin, 1986, 1983) although they have yet to be incorporated into mainstream research on eating disorders (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1992). The findings of this research indicate the need for a greater integration of sociocultural models with mainstream theories.

### **3.2 Development of a Life Span Perspective to Women, Body Size and Food**

In exploring the meanings of body size and food for women from three different age groups, the main studies of the thesis have developed a life span perspective to these

issues (see section 2 above). The development of a life span perspective represents a major shift from the emphasis which mainstream research has placed on women in late adolescence and young adulthood (Chapter Five, section 2).

In taking a life span perspective, this research has challenged the assumptions contained in body size dissatisfaction research, which associate dissatisfaction with adolescence and early adulthood. As discussed in Chapter Five (section 2), this focus on young women relates to the assumption that sexuality and sexual attractiveness are only of importance in adolescence and early adulthood. As discussed in section 2 above, the findings of this thesis illustrate that body size and sexual attractiveness continue to be important issues for women beyond early adulthood, although by old age they may decline in importance. Thus the women in middle adulthood (Study Two) were found to continue to be concerned about their sexual attractiveness to men, either in terms of maintaining their relationships or in attempting to formulate new ones. Sexual attractiveness was also an important issue in the women's attempts to assert other parts of their identities, as part of their use of a feminist discourse. By contrast, the older women (Study Three) were not as concerned about their sexual attractiveness. This was constructed in relation to the social expectations behind older women's sexuality and sexual attractiveness, which can be seen to influence research on women's lives as well as the way in which women interpret their experiences.

The development of a life span perspective in this thesis has also led to the breakdown of the traditional association between body size, food and sexual attractiveness. The findings of Study Two and Study Three demonstrate that the meanings body size and food in women's lives do not simply relate to women's desires to be sexually attractive and to form and maintain sexual relationships. Instead, these meanings are also related to women's roles as the carers of others, as part of the wife and mother role. Here the meanings of food can be seen to be related to women's participation in the feeding of their families and the association which this creates between food, love and nurturance. The research indicates that this feeding role changes across the life span so that in later life it is associated with a loss of women's roles as mothers and the growing dependency which older women have on their children.

### **3.3 Development of a Qualitative Feminist Psychological Approach to the Study of Women, Food and Body Size**

This thesis has developed a qualitative feminist approach to women's relationship to body size and food. It has focused on the exploration of the subjective meanings of body size and food which are theorised in relation to social discourses and gender power relations (see Chapter Four). Social discourses are incorporated into subjectivity through a process

of interaction and reflection upon discourses as described in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

### **3.3.1 An Emphasis on Women's Experiences**

As part of developing a qualitative feminist approach to women's relationship to body size and food, this research has focused exclusively on the experiences of women. This focus is related to a number of substantive, theoretical and political issues which relate to the subject matter of the thesis as well as to the way that women's experiences have been theorised in mainstream psychology.

On one level, therefore, the focus on women relates to the fact that body size and food are issues which have been found to be particularly important to women. This can be seen in the statistics surrounding body size dissatisfaction and dieting behaviour (see Chapter Two, section 2), all of which show the desire for thinness to be an issue which concerns far more women than men. The findings of this thesis indicate that women's greater dissatisfaction with their body size may be related to the fact that body size and food are closely linked to discourses about the female role across the life span. As discussed above, the meanings of body size and food for women have been found to be related to the social discourses surrounding women's sexual, reproductive and 'caring' roles. Thus body size and sexual attractiveness have been shown to be an important part of women's roles as the sexual partners of others, whereas food has been shown to be an important part of women's roles as wives and mothers. These findings go some way towards theorising the widespread dissatisfaction which women have with their bodies.

On another level, the focus on women relates to the feminist critique of mainstream psychology which identifies its emphasis on male experience and its failure to explore the experiences of women (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Roberts, 1981). As discussed in Chapter Four, women's experiences have traditionally been assessed in relation to male norms of behaviour which are presented as universal theories (Griffin, 1985, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Women are often judged as 'deficient' in relation to these theories which results in a distortion of female experience. From this perspective, the research has focused on women in order to attempt to begin the process of redressing the balance towards female experience. Body size and food were therefore chosen as a topic of study because they were perceived to be issues which concern women and influence their sense of themselves and their relationships with others (see Chapter One).

Having focused exclusively on women, however, the findings of the thesis also indicate the need to explore the meanings of body size and food for men. The research findings



illustrate that many of women's feelings about body size related to their relationships with men. Hence, as discussed in section 2 above, women in late adolescence, early and middle adulthood wanted to lose weight because they perceived thinness to be important in both 'catching' and 'keeping' a man. The women therefore perceived thinness to be valued by men so that some women reported that their boyfriends actually pressured them to lose weight or that their boyfriends valued them because they were thinner and hence more attractive than other women.

In the light of these findings, questions are raised about the importance of body size to men's perceptions of women and to men's feelings about relationships with women. Do men regard thin women as the most desirable? Is this something with which adolescent men are most concerned (as suggested by the women in Study One (see Chapter Six, section 4.1.2), so that men 'grow out' of valuing women in terms of their appearance and body size? Or do men continue to be concerned about the body size of their partners and other women at all stages of the life span?

To date, there has been little exploration of the subjective meanings of women's body size for men. In a much-cited study by Fallon and Rozin (1985), men's and women's perceptions of the ideal size favoured by the opposite sex were obtained, as well as their perceptions of their own ideal size. This research found that women perceived men as preferring thinner women than men's ratings actually showed. Whilst these findings are potentially interesting and informative, they have generally been used to vindicate men. Thus the findings have again been used to imply that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is their own fault and that they have some 'deficiency' in their perceptions of men's perceptions as well as in their own feelings about their body size (see Chapter Two, section 3 for a discussion of this emphasis in this research).

On another level however, the findings of this research indicate that we should not make assumptions about the preferences which men have in relation to women's body size. Just as we should not assume that women internalise the thin ideal so that they automatically want to become thinner, we should not assume that men similarly internalise the ideal so that they automatically desire thinner women. More research is required to investigate both the importance of body size in men's attitudes towards women as well as their feelings about their own body size.

### **3.3.2 An Emphasis on Meaning**

The research carried out for this thesis has focused on the exploration of the subjective meanings of body size and food for women. As discussed in Chapter Two (section 4.3), this represents a major shift from the research carried out in mainstream psychological

studies of body size. The positivist emphasis of mainstream research has resulted in an emphasis with the objective measurement of women's 'dissatisfaction' with their body size through simplistic questionnaires and rating scales.

Building on phenomenological (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1962), symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), and grounded theory perspectives (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the research carried out for this thesis has attempted to explore body size and food in terms of the meanings they have for women in the context of their social, individual and relational experiences. There has thus been an attempt to explore the meanings which women attach to their experiences of body size and food in terms of how they interpret and understand these experiences. This has involved the use of an in-depth interview methodology which facilitated the exploration of women's experiences of body size and food from inside their own frame of reference (Henwood, 1993) as well as a method of analysis incorporating social constructionist versions of grounded theory methodology which generates theory which is grounded in participants' own accounts (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992, 1995; Charmaz, 1990; see Chapter Four, section 6).

The findings of the thesis illustrate the complexity of the meanings of body size and food for women and the way in which this complexity relates to the different social, relational and individual experiences in which women are involved at different points of the life span. These findings demonstrate that the attempts of mainstream psychological research to explore women's relationship to body size in the simplistic terms of 'dissatisfaction' versus 'satisfaction' represents a failure to examine the complexity of body size and food in women's lives. Women's feelings about their bodies involve a combination of complex and sometimes contradictory meanings which relate to their experiences of different parts of their lives and identities and their relationship to both social discourses and the other people in their lives.

### **3.3.3 Social Context and Gender Power Relations: The Theorisation of Subjectivity**

This thesis has shown that the meanings surrounding body size and food can be understood in relation to social discourses which are shaped by gender power relations. It has been shown that women construct the subjective meanings of their experiences in relation to social discourses but that they reflect upon these discourses and their meaning in relation to their individual experiences (see section 2.2 above). This reflection and rejection of discourses has been theorised in relation to a symbolic interactionist perspective as developed by Mead (1932) and Blumer (1969).

Research on body size perception (Chapter Two, section 3.1) and the 'treatment' of dissatisfaction with body size (Chapter Two, section 3.2) relates dissatisfaction to individuals' faulty perceptions of size or irrational cognitions about body size. The research carried out for this thesis has demonstrated that women's feelings about their bodies are constructed in relation to social discourses. As discussed above (section 2.1), the women constructed their feelings about their bodies in relation to the thin ideal of beauty and to discourses surrounding changes in women's roles and relationships across the life span.

As discussed in Chapter Two (section 4.3), more recent research on body size has attempted to conceptualise women's widespread dissatisfaction with their bodies in relation to social factors. This has involved a consideration of the 'thin ideal' of beauty which is conceptualised as 'causing' women's dissatisfaction with their bodies. This model can be criticised in a number of ways in relation to the findings of the thesis. Firstly, this research fails to conceptualise how the social discourses surrounding body size are incorporated into an individual's subjectivity or how social discourses come to have individual meaning for women. Instead this research falls back on the concept of internalisation, so that media ideals of attractiveness are conceptualised as directly causing women's dissatisfaction with their bodies, resulting in their desire to lose weight through dieting (see also Chapter Four, section 3.1).

The concept of internalisation in body size research presents a model of a passive individual who is automatically and inevitably influenced by social factors. This involves a 'stimulus-response' model of subjectivity which assumes individuals act mechanistically in response to environmental stimuli. Such a model presents women as the 'passive dupes' of external forces, so that there is no recognition of the fact that women may reflect upon the meanings contained in such discourses and that they may then actively choose to resist and reject these discourses. This is problematic from a feminist perspective (see Chapter Four, section 5) because it implies that women are not able to challenge the oppression which they experience in patriarchal society (Riger, 1992) as well as continuing to present women as passive victims.

In developing a theoretical perspective which conceptualises individuals as engaging in active reflection upon discourses, the thesis presents an alternative to the relativist orientation of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and post-structuralism (Hollway, 1989; Henriques et al., 1984). From this perspective, the relationship between the 'social' and the individual is conceptualised in terms of subject positions, so that the individual draws on social discourses in order to establish meanings in the course of conversation. The use of discourses does not relate to the individuals' experiences or the

meaning of those experiences in the individuals' life. Thus the subject is conceptualised in terms of passive positioning between social discourses rather than as a subject who actively reflects upon discourses and their meanings in relation to their experiences. In taking a symbolic interactionism perspective this thesis has argued that discourses have meaning to individuals and that they reflect upon and are capable of challenging these discourses.

As discussed in section 2.2 above, the findings of the thesis indicate that women are often involved in the resistance and challenging of the social discourses surrounding body size and food. This resistance firstly involves a challenging of the discourses defining female beauty in terms of thinness and valuing women in terms of this ideal of beauty. The women who rejected these ideals did so in relation to reflection upon biographical experiences as well as social and media discourses. Thus in Study Two, the women's resistance of the ideal was related to the women's reflections upon past relationships and the way they had been treated in these relationships. Here the meanings of discourses for women were related to the experiences of the person and did not represent a construction in the space of the interview but part of the participants' identity as constructed prior to the interview process.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In this section of the chapter there is a consideration of the methodology employed in the research process. This begins with a discussion of the method of analysis adopted in the different parts of the thesis, comparing the Pilot Study with the main studies of the thesis. The perspective of critical realism is explored where individual accounts are defined as representations of an individual's experiences but where the analysis process is also defined as a subjective process involving the deconstruction of participants' accounts and the analysis of the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the research process. This is followed by a discussion of the way in which the thesis has attempted to explore the role of power relationships in research. This involves a discussion of attempts to minimise power asymmetries as well as how these asymmetries can vary in terms of the relationship between researcher and participant. This involves a consideration of the role of age in the research process, drawing on the experiences obtained from interviewing women from a number of different age groups.

##### **4.1 Interpreting Accounts as Representations of Experience: The Perspective of Critical Realism**

The analysis of the meanings of body size and food from the women's accounts was carried out from a position of critical realism, drawing upon ideas developed in social

constructionist grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990). In taking this position it has been argued that the accounts which individuals give of their experiences do bear some relation to an actual reality of experience but that participants' accounts are also influenced by the subjectivity of both the researcher and the participants.

In taking a *realist* perspective, the research carried out for this thesis represents a departure from discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) who argue that participants' accounts represent functional constructions within the interview situation, bearing no relation to individuals' experiences or individuals' inner psychological process. In taking a realist rather than a relativist position, it has been argued that participants' accounts are based on their experiences so that the discourses which individuals use in constructing their accounts is based on the meaning which such discourses have to the individual in the context of her life.

The findings of the research indicate that the women's use of different discourses in their accounts related to their past experiences. For example, the women in Study Two who rejected the thin ideal often did so in relation to reflection upon biographical experiences as well as social and media discourses (Chapter Seven, section 4.2). The women's resistance of the ideal was related to the women's reflections upon past relationships and the way they had been treated in these relationships. Here the meanings of discourses for women were related to the experiences of the person and did not represent a construction in the space of the interview but part of the participants' identity as constructed prior to the interview process.

The *critical* realist position adopted in the main studies of the thesis was developed as a result of the experience of carrying out the Pilot Study (Chapter Three). In this study the realist position of the original version of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and of co-operative inquiry (Smith, 1993, 1990; Reason, 1986; Reason and Rowan, 1981) was adopted in returning the analysis of accounts to the participants in order to obtain their interpretations of the analysis. Here there was a commitment to taking participants' accounts at 'face value' with the assumption that this would produce research which was totally 'grounded' in participants' accounts (see Chapter Three, section 2.3).

Such an approach has been identified as problematic because it ignores the interactive and interpretative nature of the research process which takes place in relation to the subjectivities of the researcher and the participant. It is assumed that research can be carried out from an objective standpoint where theory simply emerges from the participants' accounts without any input from the researcher. In taking a critical realist

perspective, the three main studies of the thesis analysed participants' account through the consideration of four forms of subjectivity within the research process (Chapter Four, section 6). These are discussed below.

#### 4.1.1 Hidden Meanings and Deconstruction

On one level, the analysis carried out in the three main studies attempted to take into account the complex nature of participants' accounts and to use a process of deconstruction to investigate the hidden meanings and the multi-levelled structure of individuals' accounts. As discussed in section 3.3.3 above, the women's accounts of their feelings about body size and food were found to be constructed as meaningful within cultural frameworks and social and power relations. There was therefore an attempt to recognise that participants' accounts should not necessarily be taken at face value and that participants' interpretations of their accounts may not match the interpretations which the researcher may make (see Chapter Three, section 6.2.2 and Chapter Four, section 6.4). This meant that a respondent validation approach was not adopted in the main studies of the thesis.

For example, in Study One the majority of the women asserted that they were not influenced by interpersonal relationships or media pressures about body size. In the analysis of this theme this assertion was recognised and documented but was then related to the fact that in other parts of their accounts the women did appear to be influenced by these factors. Here the contradictions in the women's accounts were analysed in order to identify the 'hidden meanings' in the women's accounts. These contradictions were related to the fact that the young women were concerned with establishing themselves as sexual as well as autonomous individuals (see section 2.1.2 above).

#### 4.1.2 Reflexivity and the Subjectivity of the Researcher

On another level, this thesis is carried out from a critical realist perspective because of its recognition of the role of subjectivity of the researcher in the research process. As defined in the social constructionist version of grounded theory (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, 1992; Charmaz, 1990; Chapter Four, Section 6), this involves a recognition of the subjectivity of the researcher who is defined as an interpreter of participants' accounts rather than as a passive medium through which theory about these accounts emerges. Here the researcher is conceptualised as carrying out research in relation to the social, historical and cultural context in which she lives, which shapes her subjectivity. The analysis of data is therefore an interpretative and subjective process which is influenced by the researcher's identity, interests, philosophical stance and biographical experiences. In turn these characteristics of the researcher can be seen to be influenced by the power relations in a given society, structured around gender, class, sexuality and age. A

recognition of the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the research process (reflexivity) involves recognising that the researcher has a perspective from which she carries out her analysis whilst at the same time attempting to go beyond this perspective to investigate the experiences of participants from inside their own perspectives. This has been referred to as the 'flip-flop' between data and interpretation based on research experience (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992).

My subjectivity can be seen to have influenced the research process in terms of the difficulties I found in framing some of the research questions of the study, particularly in relation to the older women interviewed in Study Three. Here I found it difficult to ask the women about sexual attractiveness and sexual relationships (see Chapter Eight). Similarly I saw sexuality and sexual attractiveness as more appropriate in relation to the younger women as seen in the emphasis in body size research on women in adolescence and early adulthood (see Chapter Six). 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). I had internalised the cultural discourses surrounding female sexuality, illustrating that I am not a neutral observer or gatherer of facts but a subjective individual influenced by cultural discourse in the same way as the women were themselves.

#### 4.1.3 The Interview as an Interaction between Two Individuals

Finally, subjectivity is involved in the research process because of the fact that interviews are interactions between two individuals rather than an objective and mechanistic process of information provision (on the part of the participant) and information collection (on the part of the researcher). The subjectivities of the researcher and participant are interdependent on each other. Here the interview should be viewed as a subjective, interactive process where the account given by the participant is dependent on the contingent forces operating in the interview situation, such as the class, gender or age of the researcher and participant. As meanings are constructed through a process of interaction and the interview represents a form of interaction, meanings are also reconstructed through the course of the interview.

In acknowledging that interdependence of the researcher's and participants' subjectivities in the research process, it is necessary to consider participants' perceptions of the researcher and the way in which this influences the research data. This can involve a consideration of the participant's expectations of the research in terms of what the researcher was attempting to investigate. Whilst the general research aims of the research were discussed with the participants at the start of each interview (see for example, Study

One, section 3.5.1), this does not prevent participants from formulating their ideas about what the research is 'really' about. Thus, as discussed in Study One (section 4.4.3) the adolescent women's accounts of their eating habits appeared to be shaped by their perceptions of the research in relating to eating disorders and healthy or 'sensible' dieting. Here the young women constructed their attempts to lose weight through food control in terms of 'sensible' eating which did not involve the more extreme methods employed by other women. Here the women may have conceptualised the research as being about eating disorders and hence wanted to present themselves as healthy, 'normal' individuals.

It is important to realise that it is impossible to remove participants' preconceptions about the research. Even if the research aims of the study were clearly discussed with the women, the participants will continue to have their own feelings about what the research is about. This will relate to their own experiences of the issues which the research explores which will shape what the women will perceive the research to be about. This forms part of the need to recognise that participants do have thoughts and perceptions about research and that we cannot assume that participants carry out research tasks in isolation from these perceptions. Here the assumptions of positivistic psychology are refuted.

The interviews carried out for the main studies of this thesis were also found to be significantly influenced by the age of the research participants. As will be discussed below, the ages of the participants in relation to myself influenced the format of the interviews in terms of whether they were based around a participatory or more traditional 'question-answer' format. In addition age also influenced the power relations in the research process and my experience of the interviews as an 'expert', a 'sharing participant' or a 'young person' or 'granddaughter'. These issues are discussed in the next section which discusses the power relationships in the research process.

#### **4.2 Subjectivity in the Research Process and Power Relationships**

The conceptualisation of the interview as an interactive process leads to the identification of the role of power relationships in research relationships. This thesis has attempted to explore the role of power within researcher-participant relationships as well as possible methods with which to minimise them. As discussed in Chapter Three (section 2.3) power asymmetries can occur in research relationships because of the way that the researcher is defined as the 'expert' and the participant is defined simply as a source of data (Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 1981). The label of 'expert' allows the researcher to have access to the personal experiences of research participants whilst legitimately avoiding revealing any of her own experiences or opinions (Harding, 1987; Oakley, 1981). By



contrast, the participant 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 (Heron, 1981).

In this thesis, a number of different methods have been used to reduce power differentials in the interview process. As discussed above (section 4.1), the Pilot Study used the method of 'respondent validation' in an attempt to avoid the 'interpretative privilege' of traditional research (Smith, 1993, 1990; Reason, 1986; Reason and Rowan, 1981). However, as discussed above (section 4.1), this method was questioned because of its realist perspective which denies the subjective nature of the research process as well as the hidden meanings present in individuals' accounts.

A further attempt to reduce power differentials was attempted through the creation of a relaxed and non-threatening research encounter where participants do not feel that they are being judged or assessed in relation to their accounts of their experiences. This was achieved through sharing information and experiences with participants rather than simply asking questions in the role of the scientific expert. 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 (Griffin, 1995; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Harding, 1987).

The interviews carried out for the main studies of the thesis were primarily based on exploring the participants' experiences. Here a balance was maintained between prioritising the participants' experiences and establishing an environment where the women were able to talk about their experiences in a sharing and mutually informative way. In this case I did not talk about my own experiences unless it seemed that they had some relevance to issues which the woman had already introduced. However the format of the interview in relation to my relative amount of participation was found to vary with the different studies and hence with the different ages of the participants. In addition to this the power relationships within the studies were found to vary in relation to age. I experienced the interviews very differently depending on the age of the participants in relation to me.

#### 4.2.1 Age Issues in Study One

As discussed in Chapter Six (section 3.5.2) the interviews for Study One were often quite difficult to carry out because many of the women answered questions solely with monosyllables or one sentence answers. This formed part of the women's nervousness in the interviews which is likely to relate to their age and lack of experience. Because of

this, the interviews tended to involve a traditional question answer format. This cast me in the role as the 'expert' and the participants as data providers. This was added to by the fact that I was older than the participants and had both more 'life knowledge' and more academic knowledge.

In these situations it was difficult to know whether to discuss my experiences with the women or not because it was unclear whether this would make them more or less talkative. In some situations where the women were finding it particularly difficult to talk about their experiences, I did talk about my experiences. This was found to help the women who then relaxed and discussed their experiences more freely.

At the same time as feeling uneasy about my role as the questioner and assessor of the young women, I also found these interviews easier than those carried out with the older women. 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.

#### 4.2.2 Age Issues in Study Two

In Study Two, the interviews were much more participatory, involving a sharing of experiences and knowledge (Chapter Seven, section 3.5.2). This meant that the interviews were more of a two-way process or 'conversation' than the 'question-answer' format of Study One. This can again be related to the ages of the participants in relation to my age. The women in Study Two were between thirty and forty five whereas I was twenty four when these interviews were carried out. I felt that I had more in common with these women than in Studies One and Three. This was particularly the case with the women interviewed at the further education college who shared my interest in feminism and my experiences of further and higher education. I therefore found that I identified with the experiences of these women far more than those of the young or older women. This also seemed to be the case for the women themselves as they asked a number of questions about my experiences and my feelings in the interviews.

In these situations I was able to both carry out more participatory interviews, which minimised the power differentials in the research process. At the same time however because I was not very much younger than the participants I was able to feel confident in my role as a psychologist carrying out research.

### 4.2.3 Age Issues in Study Three

The interviews carried out with the older women were the most difficult to carry out. This can be related to a number of reasons, with the first one being that these interviews were the first I carried out and hence involved feelings of nervousness and uncertainty for myself as well as for the participants (see Chapter Eight, section 3.5.2). In these interviews, the power differential was again influenced by the ages of participants in relation to my age. On one level the women were less powerful than me because of my role as the interviewer asking questions of the participants and the fact that I was a researcher and had access to knowledge which the older women did not have (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Gelsthorpe, 1990). However, on another level, I experienced the interviews in terms of the older women being more powerful than me. This was because of the way in which the women regarded me as extremely young and hence cast me in the role of a grand-daughter. Thus the women compared me to their own grandchildren, either in relation to my education and qualifications or in terms of comparing my body size to their granddaughter's body size. This is illustrated in the following quote from Betty:

BETTY

Erm a lot of people I think they unless you're really really like you see some people waddling like I say waddling I think that's the time to worry you know because that does affect your heart and everything but I mean such as you and that my granddaughter she's she's erm 5 foot 10, 5 foot 11 and she's 18 and she's but she's solid you know well she'd look dreadful thin at that size she's solid and that and you look a lot happier (Betty, P25)

Here then Betty identifies me as young through grouping me with other young women such as her granddaughter as seen in the phrase 'you look a lot happier'. She refers to my body size through grouping me in with other young women such as her grand-daughter. Here I am considered to be a contemporary of her granddaughter and hence I am cast in the role of a granddaughter in the interview with Betty.

The grandmother- relationship was problematic because it made it difficult for me to feel confident in the interviews. Because I felt like a 'granddaughter' rather than a psychologist I felt quite disempowered in the interviews. In addition to this the fact that the women were experienced as my grandmother meant that I found it difficult to ask them questions about their accounts and experiences. For example, asking personal questions of the older women was experienced in terms of 'prying' about issues which were considered inappropriate for those in the grandmother role.

### **4.3 Summary**

In summary, the methodology employed in the research process involved a critical realist perspective where individuals' accounts were defined as representations of their experiences but where research was also defined as a subjective process. The individuals' use of social discourses can be seen to be related to their biographical experiences so that there is reflection upon discourses on the basis of the meaning they have for women. The role of subjectivity can be seen in a recognition of the researcher's subjectivity in the research process, where the analysis process involves the interpretation of accounts in relation to the researchers' own values and priorities. In addition the interview process is conceptualised as an interactive process involving an interplay between the researcher's and participant's subjectivity. In this these there was an interplay between the ages of researcher and participant which were seen to influence the interview process.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS OF THE THESIS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: BODY ACCEPTANCE AND SELF WORTH**

This section of the chapter aims to explore the implications of the research in terms of reducing the distress and unhappiness which may surround body size and food for women. Body acceptance is important because, as demonstrated in this thesis, women's feelings about their bodies influence how they feel about themselves. The findings of the thesis therefore demonstrate that women who were not happy about their bodies experienced this unhappiness in terms of dissatisfaction with the self. Thus the women described feeling 'fat' in terms of 'feeling bad about the self' (see Chapter Six, section 4.2; Chapter Seven, section 4.1.2 and Chapter Three, section 4.1). It thus seems that any attempts to make women feel better about the size of their bodies will potentially increase women's self worth. In addition the fact that large proportions of women feel dissatisfied about their bodies (see Chapter Two, section 2 for a discussion of these statistics) means that such strategies could be used to help large numbers of the female population.

As discussed above (section 2), a major finding of the research is that many of the women had developed positive feelings towards their bodies which enabled them to accept their bodies regardless of their size and to recognise that their bodies were not the most important part of their identity. These findings have implications for the development of strategies designed to help other women towards this 'body acceptance'.

The consideration of how research can be used to potentially help women forms part of the thesis's commitment to the aims of feminist research. As discussed in Chapter Four (section 5.3), one of the main aims of feminist research is to empower women to

challenge their oppression through identifying the influence of gender power relations on women's lives (Griffin, 1995; Harding, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986).

The following section aims to discuss the possible design of such strategies in relation to the findings of the thesis as well as identify a number of problems which might be encountered in the implementation of such strategies.

### **5.1 Developing Strategies to Achieve 'Body Acceptance' and Increase Self Worth**

The findings of the thesis indicate that women achieved acceptance of their bodies through the rejection of external pressures surrounding women and body size or the rejection of the importance of body size to women's identities. For some women, the pressures surrounding body size were identified in terms of broad sociocultural pressures, such as 'societal attitudes' or 'socialisation processes'. For other women, external pressures were identified as involving the media who were conceptualised as creating a 'thin ideal' of female attractiveness which resulted in women's unhappiness with their bodies. Finally, other women identified external pressure as coming from the personal relationships in which women were involved. Thus the women's parents, partners or men generally were identified as pressurising women into losing weight in order to be thin and therefore attractive. These issues are discussed in section 2 above as well as in the Pilot Study, Chapter Three, section 4.1.2; Study One, Chapter Six, section 4.3.1; Study Two, Chapter Seven, section 4.3.1). The women asserted that such pressures were harmful because they made women feel unhappy with their bodies. The rejection of such pressures involved the assertion of the right to be whatever size the women themselves wanted to be. This went with assertions about the women generally wanting to 'please themselves' rather than 'please other people'.

The women's rejection of external pressure was often combined with a rejection of the importance of physical appearance in the way in which the women felt they were valued and judged. Here it was asserted that women should be valued for parts of their identities other than their physical appearance because 'its what's inside that counts' (see Chapter Six, section 4.3.1 and Chapter Seven, section 4.2.2). In the case of Study Two this was combined with a redefining of the functions of the body in terms other than physical attractiveness and decorativeness. This involved the women in redefining their bodies as biological rather than decorative entities (Chapter Seven, section 4.2.5).

These findings indicate that women are able to develop more positive feelings about their bodies through identifying the external pressures surrounding women's body size which are conceptualised as forming part of the way in which women are valued in terms of

their sexual attractiveness. This suggests that strategies attempting to help other women become more positive about their bodies should involve working around these issues. By raising and discussing the social discourses surrounding women, body size and attractiveness it may be possible to help women to reject these discourses.

## **5.2 Problems in helping women feel more positive about their bodies**

Whilst the findings of the research indicate that women reach acceptance of their bodies through rejecting the social discourses surrounding women and body size, other parts of the interview data indicate that the rejection of such discourses was problematic for some of the women. This means that a number of problems might be encountered in the implementation of a strategy which aims to discuss the social discourses surrounding women, body size and attractiveness.

### **5.2.1 Body Acceptance and Adolescent Women**

The findings of Study One (Chapter Six) indicate that trying to promote body acceptance amongst adolescent women may be problematic if it involves the identification of sociocultural discourses surrounding women and body size. As discussed in section 2.2.2 above, many of women in this study did not identify social discourses surrounding women and body size. In fact they rejected the idea that they were influenced by external pressures such as their boyfriend's opinions and media images of women. They asserted that they wanted to lose weight for themselves rather than for anybody else as part of their attempts to assert their autonomy and to develop a sense of themselves as independent adults. In the interviews with the young women, the suggestion of the influence of 'outside pressures' such as media or relationship pressures resulted in irritation and anger from the women (see Chapter Six, section 4.2.2). Such suggestions were taken as implying that they were the 'passive dupes' of sociocultural factors or media images of women.

These findings indicate that simply illustrating the presence of sociocultural factors surrounding women and body size to women in late adolescence may not automatically result in women rejecting the importance they previously placed upon their bodies. Such an analysis would not fit in with the women's conceptualisations of their feelings and would threaten their attempts to establish a sense of personal autonomy. Any strategy which attempted to challenge these conceptualisations would have to develop a method whereby the identification of the influence of sociocultural discourses was not presented as threatening women's autonomy. This would have to involve encouraging young women to develop their own conceptualisations of sociocultural discourses rather than simply presenting these discourses to women which would possibly result in anger and dismissal of the strategy.

### 5.2.2 Body Acceptance amongst Fat Women: Positive or Negative?

A further problem which may be encountered in helping women to challenge the social discourses surrounding body size and hence to accept their bodies relates to the actual benefits which this acceptance may bring to women. This is particularly important in relation to fat women, for whom body acceptance may be more problematic than for thinner women. The promotion of body acceptance must be aware of the strength of social attitudes towards women's body size and the prejudice and discrimination which exists in relation to women whose bodies are larger than the 'ideal' body size or the average female body. Promoting body acceptance amongst fat women does not remove these social attitudes and hence must also involve methods for helping women to deal with the ridicule, judgement and disapproval which they are likely to receive from others.

As discussed in Chapter Two (section 6) fat people have been found to be denigrated in Western societies because of assumptions about their physical, social and psychological characteristics (Rothblum, 1992; Bovey, 1989; Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Brown, 1985; Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983). In addition there have been found to be discrimination against fat people in education and employment (Rothblum et al., 1990; Canning and Mayer, 1966; Goldblatt, Moore and Stunkard, 1965). These findings are compounded by the findings of this thesis. Thus the findings of Studies One and Two show that the women who defined themselves as fat, and who were bigger than the majority of other women in the samples, had experienced considerable ridicule, criticism and discrimination because of their size (see Chapter Six, section 4.3 and Chapter Seven, section 4.1.1). This had resulted in feelings of exposure, invasion and rejection.

Education programmes which aim to teach women to be more accepting of their bodies must not fail to take the prejudice and discrimination of fat people into account. Whilst all women are under pressure about their size because of the extreme thinness of the current ideal of female beauty, the findings of this research suggest that this pressure is experienced as much more intense for fat women. Education must not simply be based on the experiences of women who are slightly bigger than average for whom the rejection and ridicule experienced by fat people may not be an issue. There must therefore be a consideration that in attempting to make fat women feel more positive about their bodies, and hence encouraging them to stop attempting to lose weight, fat women will continue to experience the pain and rejection they have experienced in the past.

For fat women, losing weight was a desirable aim because it was felt to result in a decrease in the disapproval of others feelings and the feelings of self consciousness and rejection which this brought (Study Two, Chapter Seven, section 4.1.1). Thus losing

weight was constructed as a positive experience because of its removal of the women's pain and sense of rejection. For these women then, body acceptance must involve an increased tolerance of this prejudice and an increased ability to cope with the resulting feelings. It cannot be assumed that once women 'accept' their bodies others will also accept them and that the women will experience no more conflict or distress about these issues. Encouraging fat women to be more accepting of their bodies is removing the opportunity of reducing these feelings. This may be experienced as extremely threatening and frightening for fat women. It may represent a removal of the control which losing weight offers women, in terms of the control of the comments and judgement experienced in relation to the body.

### 5.2.3 Body Acceptance as Removing Women's Coping Strategies?

An additional point which must be taken into account when considering the development of body acceptance strategies involves the fact that the desire to lose weight and hence 'transform one's body' may be a coping strategy for women. The promotion of body acceptance needs to be understood within a recognition of the way in which losing weight is seen as transforming women's lives and feelings about themselves, as part of a way of coping with the negative aspects of their lives.

The findings of Study Two (Chapter Seven, section 4.1.5) demonstrate that some women experience weight loss as a way of coping with the everyday reality of their lives. The women wanted to lose weight because of the association of thinness with success and being in control of their lives. Here the women's lives were constrained by the fact that they were on low incomes or were unemployed, by the experience of being a single parent, or by their restrictive relationships with other people. The women often felt out of control of these aspects of their lives because they saw no real opportunities of changing them. Here the association of thinness with 'being a successful business woman', for example, provides the women with the fantasy of the opportunity to escape the everyday constraints in their lives.

Reflection upon these findings suggests again that body acceptance may be a threatening prospect for many women. Removing the fantasy of transformation may be difficult for women who have no other means of coping with the problems in their lives beyond hoping that 'if only they lose weight things will get better'. Hence removing the promise of a better life may be harmful for women rather than making them feel happier and better about themselves. However, the danger involved in removing the reassurance of this fantasy needs to be counterbalanced against the fact that the women seldom managed to achieve the state of thinness which they associated with transformation. Weight loss was not generally effective for the women in the long term so that the women were involved



in a constant struggle with their bodies. Thus the freedom and control associated with weight loss were only fleetingly experienced as within reach, only to be replaced by the lack of freedom and control associated with weight gain.

In addition, because the women defined themselves solely in relation to their size and appearance, the struggle with body size results in a great amount of stress being placed upon a woman's sense of herself. It prevents women from valuing other parts of their identities which are subsumed under the emphasis placed on body size and the idea that 'once I'll lose weight I'll be a better person'.

### **5.3 Feminism and Body Acceptance**

In the above sections, the benefits which a desire to lose weight may have for women were explored and discussed in relation to whether women should be encouraged to 'accept' their bodies or not. This relates to a further issue relating to whether feminist women should attempt to persuade other women to be accepting of their bodies on an everyday level. These issues have been partially considered in the work of feminist therapists who consider the issue of whether feminists should carry out weight loss interventions (Chrisler, 1989). This raises dilemmas concerning an individual's right to her own opinions about her size and her need to lose weight. In the final analysis women should be able to make their own decisions about these issues.

This point relates to the critique developed in Chapter Two about the way in which mainstream psychological research has constructed women as passive in their relationships to their bodies. Here women are constructed as being influenced by the thin ideal through a process of internalisation which denies their reflection and consideration of this ideal and its role in their lives (see also section 3.3.2 above). Women should be conceptualised as having the freedom to make their own choices about these issues. Thus when a woman steadfastly asserts that she wants to lose weight and that she believes this will transform herself and her life she should be able to have the right to this opinion. However at the same time this should not be interpreted as denying the power of the thin ideal on women's lives and the difficulties which women experience in relation to it.

As a feminist coming into daily contact with women who are concerned about their body size, I think it is important to share your own experiences of body size with others. If this involves no longer being concerned about one's size then one should attempt to state this. For example, when women state that they are on a diet, it may be necessary to say that you do not diet and that you are reasonably happy with your size. Alternatively, feminists who are concerned about the size of their bodies should not feel guilty about this or see it as evidence that they are not 'good enough feminists'. As with the women in the thesis

who used contradictory thin ideal and feminist discourses, women who are feminists continue to experience their bodies in the social and relational context which defines fatness as 'wrong' and thinness as 'right'. In this context it may be extremely difficult to develop a positive sense of one's body regardless of its size.

#### **5.4 Summary**

In summary the findings of the thesis have implications for the development of education strategies to help reduce the feelings of unhappiness surrounding body size and food and to increase women's feelings of self worth. These education strategies could involve the discussion of the social discourses surrounding women, body size and attractiveness which might then enable women to reject these discourses and be more accepting of their bodies. Problems with this approach involve the fact that adolescent women may experience such an approach as a threat to personal autonomy. Losing weight may provide fat women with the hope of a decrease in the ridicule and judgement they may receive from others about their size. In addition, weight loss also represents a fantasy of transformation for some women providing them with a means of coping with the constraints upon their lives. Here the potential benefits of body size acceptance must be balanced between a recognition of the threat and difficulties which this may represent for some women.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This thesis has explored the subjective meanings of body size and food for women across the life span. Rather than being conceptualised as the concerns of women in adolescence and early adulthood, body size and food have been shown to be an important part of the lives of women of all ages in terms of their social, relational and individual experiences. However, the actual meanings of body size and food have been found to vary across the different age groups of women. These meanings can be seen to relate to the relationships which women are involved in at different points in the life span and to women's feelings about their identities within these relationships. Women's experiences of the relationship between self and others were constructed in relation to the social discourses surrounding femininity and women's roles across the life span, in terms of women's roles as sexual partners and as wives and mothers.

In adolescence, the meanings of body size and food have been found to be related to women's sexual relationships and hence to their roles as sexual individuals. The meanings of body size and food were constructed in relation to discourses surrounding female sexuality, including the discourse of the thin ideal. At the same time, body size

and food were related to the women's needs for autonomy within relationships as they attempted to develop an adult identity.

In middle adulthood, the meanings of body size and food have been found to relate to women's sexual relationships and relationships involving the care of others, as part of the wife and mother role. Here the meanings of body size and food were related to the women's sense of themselves within these different relationships and the emphasis which the women felt these relationships placed on the needs of others or themselves. For a significant group of women there was a rejection of these roles through the construction of an alternative feminist discourse. This discourse involved the assertion of the rights of the needs of the self in relation to those of other people.

In late adulthood, the meanings of body size and food have been found to relate to ageing discourses surrounding women's sexual attractiveness and to women's changing role within the family. The women were involved in the change from involvement in the powerful role of motherhood to the dependence and loss of role involved in old age. In addition, the older women's roles as sexual individuals declined as the women constructed their sexual attractiveness in relation to discourses surrounding ageing and sexuality.

The emphasis on subjective meanings has involved a shift away from the quantitative emphasis of previous research on body size and food. In adopting a qualitative approach, the meanings of this dissatisfaction for women have been explored in terms of their feelings about themselves and their relationships with the other people in their lives. These feelings have been explored from women's own perspectives rather than from the perspective of prior theory. In exploring women's experiences from inside their own frame of reference the thesis has adopted a critical realist perspective, which relates women's accounts to an actual reality of experience which recognising the role of subjectivity in the research process which results in accounts being conceptualised as constructions within a given interview context.

The thesis has developed a theoretical framework which conceptualises the meanings of body size and food across the life span as constructed through a process of interaction and active reflection upon social discourses. This shifts the widespread dissatisfaction which women feel about their bodies from a model which focuses on individual pathology and deficiency to one which takes into account the social discourses surrounding body size and food, women's roles across the life span, and physical ageing. In accordance with a symbolic interactionist perspective, social discourses are

conceptualised as being incorporated into subjectivity by a process of active reflection upon these discourses through interaction with the self and others.

Such a framework represents a shift away from mainstream psychological models which theorise social factors in terms of an internalisation of social discourses resulting in a one-to-one correspondence between societal images and women's feelings about their body size. In addition, there is a rejection of discursive models which conceptualise subjectivity in terms of passive positioning between social discourses. The subjective meanings contained in individual's accounts of their experiences are conceptualised as representing more than a functional use of discourse. The discourses contained within individual's accounts are conceptualised as relating to the meaning which such discourses have to the individual in the context of their biographical experiences.

**APPENDIX ONE****RECRUITMENT POSTERS****POSTER USED FOR STUDY ONE****WOMEN, FOOD AND BODY  
IMAGE  
RESEARCH**

**VOLUNTEERS** required from women aged 16-18 years, to take part in an interview study on women's eating habits and attitudes towards dieting and body size.

Interviews will be around one hour in length and will take place in the school. Confidentiality and anonymity assured.

Please contact:  
(name of contact)

Interviews to be carried out by:  
Jill Tunaley,  
Department of Psychology  
University of Sheffield

**RECRUITMENT POSTER USED FOR STUDY TWO****EARN £3****WOMEN, FOOD AND BODY  
IMAGE  
RESEARCH**

**VOLUNTEERS** required from women aged 30-45 years, to take part in an interview study on women's eating habits and attitudes towards dieting and body size. Interviews will be around one hour in length and will take place in the University or volunteers' own homes. Payment available of £3 per interview. Confidentiality and anonymity assured.

Please contact:

Ms Jill Tunaley, Postgraduate Research  
Student

Department of Psychology  
University of Sheffield  
Western Bank  
Sheffield S10 2UR

**Telephone:** (0742) 768555 Ext. 6558

## APPENDIX TWO

### INTERVIEW GUIDES

#### STUDY ONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

In this interview I would like to discuss the following areas with you:-

##### **I. Personal Details**

Age

School subjects and ambitions for future

Who comprises household

Parents - marital situation, occupation

Siblings - how many, sex, age, what do they do

Relationships - have you got a boyfriend, how long together

##### **II. Eating Habits**

Do you enjoy food

Foods like to eat and why

Are there certain foods you treat yourself with

Feelings of guilt about eating

Situations where eating different to normal

Do you try to eat certain foods because you think that you 'should'

Do you try to avoid certain foods because you think that you 'should'

Changes in eating habits when growing up

##### **III. Food and the family**

Family eating habits - are mealtimes together or separate

Who does the majority of the cooking at home

Role of father in food shopping / cooking / clearing up

Brothers' vs sisters' roles in food shopping / cooking / clearing up

Who decides what you are going to eat - what happens if there are disagreements

Personal experiences of mealtimes - enjoyable or a source of arguments

Importance of family meals to other members of the family

#### **IV. Body Size Issues**

Do you worry about your size and weight

Are there particular situations where you might feel more or less bothered about it

Would you like to change particular parts of your body

Who would you most like to look like and why

If you were thinner ... do you think your life would change

... do you think you would feel differently about yourself

If you were fatter ... do you think your life would change

... do you think you would feel differently about yourself

Do you talk with your friends about your weight

Do you talk about body size with your friends

Positive/negative comments of friends about your body size - how does this make you feel

Positive/negative comments of boys about your body size - how does this make you feel

Boyfriend's comments about your body size

Effect on your feelings about your attractiveness

Does your boyfriend make comments about what you eat

Does this affect your eating habits

#### **V. Body Size and Family Relationships**

Mother's and father's attitudes towards their own weight and size

Mother's attitudes towards your body size - comments and advice as a child / when growing up

Father's attitudes towards your body size - comments and advice as a child / when growing up

Mother's and father's attempts to control your eating

Your reaction to this

Comments of others in family about your body size - brothers and sisters, other relatives

#### **VI. Dieting Behaviour**

Do you try to control what you eat

Are you always on a diet or only at particular times

How old were you when you first went on a diet

Whose idea was that

Form of food control - type of diet / exercise



## STUDY TWO INTERVIEW GUIDE

In this interview I would like to discuss the following areas with you:-

### I. V. Personal Details

Age

Occupation

Marital relationships / Partner - marital status, length of marriage

Partner's occupation

Children - how many, sex, age

Place of birth, moves since then

Parents - occupation

Siblings - how many, sex, age

### II. Eating Habits

Do you enjoy food

Foods like to eat and why

Are there special foods you treat or reward yourself with

Effect of mood on eating - do you eat differently when bored, down, stressed

Do you try to eat certain foods because you think that you 'should'

Do you try to avoid certain foods because you think that you 'should'

### III. Body Size Issues

Feelings about your size and weight - are you happy with this or do you want to change it

When does it bother you most - different places, situations, people

Developmental issues - have you always felt like that / when did it begin

What would change if you lost/gained weight - do you think your life would change  
would you feel differently about yourself

Partner's comments about your body size

Effect on your feelings about your attractiveness

Are you trying to lose weight at the moment / in the past

Feelings at start of diet

Does this change as the diet continues

Do your diets usually work - feelings about this

#### **IV. Developmental Issues: Body Size and Family Relationships**

Mother's attitudes towards your body size - comments and advice as a child / when growing up

Relation to her feelings towards you more generally

How did this affect her attitudes towards what you should eat

Mother's attitude towards own body size and diets

Father's attitudes towards your body size - comments and advice as a child / when growing up

Father's attitude towards own body size and diets

Comments of others in family about your body size - brothers and sisters, other relatives

#### **V. Food and the family**

Food in the home - How do you divide up cooking, shopping, planning, washing up

How did you arrange this

Does it work out satisfactorily

Differences in food preferences between you and your partner

Are there any reasons for this: weight, health etc

How do you decide what you are going to eat - what happens if there are disagreements

How are disagreements resolved

Do you tend to eat as much as your partner

Does he ever comment on the amount or type of food that you eat

Relationship between 'femininity / masculinity' and amount food eaten

Family eating habits - do you eat together or separately

How important is this to you

Experiences of mealtimes - enjoyable or stressful

Importance of family meals to other members of the family

## **STUDY THREE INTERVIEW GUIDE**

In this interview I would like to discuss the following areas with you:-

### **I. Personal History**

Marital Relationship - marital status, length of marriage

Husband - occupation, age

Who comprises household

Place of birth

Parents - occupation

Children - sex, age, occupation, children of their own

Employment - before and after marriage and children

Activities since retirement

### **II. Eating Habits**

Do you enjoy food - reasons

Foods like to eat and why

Is there a special meal and why - eg birthdays, treats

Are there certain foods you feel you should and shouldn't eat

Feelings of guilt about eating

Situations where eating different to normal

Changes in eating pattern since children left home / husband retired

### **III. Food and the family**

Eating habits of family - together vs separate

Importance of family meals to different members of the family

Experiences of mealtimes - enjoyable or source of arguments

Was this the same when you were a child

Who does the majority of the cooking at home

Has this changed since children left home / husband retired

Role of husband in food shopping / cooking / clearing up

Sons vs daughters roles in food shopping / cooking / clearing up

Was this the same when you were a child

Who decides what you are going to eat - what happens if there are disagreements

Any differences in shares of food between family members

Who gets the biggest or best portion

#### **IV. Body Size Issues**

Feelings about present body size - reasons

Do you ever feel self-conscious about your body

Are there any parts of your body you would like to change

If you were thinner do you think ... your life would be different

... you would feel differently about yourself

If you were fatter do you think ... your life would be different

... you would feel differently about yourself

At what stage in your life did you begin to think about your body size : when growing up, before and after marriage, after children

#### **V. Body Size and Family Relationships**

Mother's attitudes towards your body size - advice when growing up

Father's attitudes towards your body size - advice when growing up

Comments of others on body size as a young woman

Mother's and father's attitudes towards their own weight and size

Mother's and father's attempts to control your eating

Your reaction to this

Attitudes to body size and dieting towards your own children

#### **VI. Marital Relationships**

Husband's comments about your body size

Effect on your feelings about your attractiveness

Does your husband make comments about what you eat

Does this affect your eating habits

Have you ever felt pressured from others about your weight

#### **VII. Dieting Behaviour**

Do you try to control what you eat

Do you diet at particular times

Form of food control - type of diet / exercise

Do your diets usually work

Feelings about this

## APPENDIX THREE

### PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

#### PILOT STUDY BIOGRAPHIES

##### **Emma**

Emma was twenty two and was white. She had just graduated from university with a degree in sociology and social policy. She was currently working as a full time volunteer advice worker for a local homeless charity. Her mother was a probation officer and her father was now unable to work due to illness. Emma had one older and one younger brother. She currently lived in house shared with friends and had no current partner.

##### **Jo**

Jo was twenty two and was white. She was currently working part time as a volunteer advice worker at a local citizen's advice bureau. She had recently graduated from university with a degree in sociology and social policy. Her mother worked as a secretary and her father was an accountant. Jo had no brothers or sisters. She was currently living in a shared house and had no current partner.

##### **Kate**

Kate was twenty one and and was white. She had recently graduated from university with a degree in Geography. She was currently working as a part time conservation volunteer and as a part time barmaid. Her parents were divorced and her mother worked as a teacher and her father as a solicitor. She had one older brother. Kate was currently living in a flat with her partner whom she had been with for one year.

## STUDY ONE BIOGRAPHIES

### **Helen, Y1.**

Helen was sixteen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in psychology, geography and physics. She was planning to go to University to study for a B.Ed. Helen lived with her parents and younger brother, who was fourteen. Her father was now working in an office after being made redundant from his job as a miner. Her mother was not currently working. Helen had split up with her boyfriend (who she had been seeing for six months) a few days before the interview. The interview with Helen lasted forty minutes and generally went well, although with a slow start. She needed to be put at her ease and seemed nervous at first but this wore off as the interview progressed.

### **Kim, Y2.**

Kim was sixteen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in geography and English language, as well as for an 'A/S'-level in business studies and courses in physical education and typing. Kim planned to become a P.E. teacher after she left school. Kim's parents had divorced when she was nine and she then went to live with her father. When Kim was fourteen her father remarried and Kim decided that she wanted to live with grandparents. She explained that this was because there 'wasn't enough room' at her mother's who lived with her second husband and Kim's four brothers. Kim had a boyfriend whom she had been seeing for around a month. Kim had a lot to say in the interview and was very lively and cheerful. She seemed very confident and self assured and much more mature than many of the other young women in the sample. The interview lasted for fifty five minutes.

### **Jan, Y3.**

Jan was seventeen and was white. She was currently re-sitting her GCSE's. She had no clear ideas about the type of work she would like to do apart from that she would like to work with children. Jan lived with her parents and younger sister, who was twelve. Her father worked as a dustbin man and her mother worked in a factory. Jan had a boyfriend who was 27 and whom she had been with for two years. Jan was one of the biggest women interviewed in this group and much of the interview centred around discussing her feelings about this and the way in which she felt she was treated as 'different' to other people. The interview with Jan was the longest carried out with the young women, lasting for eighty minutes.

### **Louise, Y4.**

Louise was eighteen and was white. She was studying in the upper sixth for 'A'-levels in art, geography and English language. After her 'A'-levels Louise was planning to go to Australia to visit her father and gain some work experience. In the long term she planned

to become a graphic designer. Louise currently lived with her mother and her older brother, who was twenty. Louise had been seeing her current boyfriend for around four months. The interview with Louise was quite difficult with Louise seeming reticent and tense. The interview lasted around thirty minutes.

**Sally, Y5.**

Sally was sixteen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in French, history and English literature. She was planning to go to university, possibly to study law. Sally lived with her parents and her younger brother, who was thirteen. Her father worked as a sales manager and her mother was a part time receptionist. Sally did not have a boyfriend at the time of the interview. She was cheerful and relaxed and the interview went smoothly. Again however it was difficult to get Sally to give more than a few details about her feelings about her body size or eating habits. The interview lasted for thirty five minutes.

**Fran, Y6.**

Fran was seventeen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in psychology, English literature and English language. She intended to go to university to study psychology. Fran was an only child and lived with her parents. Fran's father had taken early retirement from his job as a lorry driver because of an accident at work. Her mother did not work. Fran did not have a boyfriend at the time of the interview. She was quite tense at the start of the interview but she went on to talk quite confidently particularly at the end of the interview where she 'opened up' more about her personal experiences. The interview lasted for thirty five minutes.

**Michelle, Y7.**

Michelle was seventeen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in psychology, sociology and history. She was hoping to go to University to study psychology or criminology. Michelle was currently living with her parents and her younger sister, who was eleven. Both Michelle's parents were teachers, with her mother teaching maths and English and her father teaching design. Michelle had been seeing her current boyfriend for two years. The interview with Michelle was short (thirty minutes) and whilst Michelle seemed relaxed and self assured she gave short answers which she found it difficult to elaborate on.

**Caroline, Y8.**

Caroline was eighteen. She was white and was studying in the upper sixth for 'A'-levels in geography and Spanish. After taking her exams she was planning to train to be a nurse. Caroline lived with her parents and younger sister, who was fourteen. Her father was unemployed, having been made redundant from his job as a miner. Her mother

worked as a shop assistant. Caroline had a boyfriend, who she had been seeing for two-and-a-half years. The interview with Caroline lasted for forty five minutes. This was a relaxed interview with Caroline talking confidently and easily about the issues raised. She had clear ideas about her feelings about weight and diet and elaborated on these fully.

**Joanne, Y9.**

Joanne was sixteen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in psychology, biology and geography. She was planning to go to university with the possible aim of training to be a probation officer. She lived with her parents and her older brother, who was nineteen. Joanne's father was a self employed carpenter, having been made redundant from his job as a miner. Her mother was a teacher. Joanne did not currently have a boyfriend but had had a 'serious' relationship in the past (lasting ten months) which had clearly been important to her. The start of the interview was quite tense as Joanne arrived early and I wasn't fully prepared. However we both relaxed as the interview progressed. The interview with Joanne lasted for fifty minutes.

**Nicky, Y10.**

Nicky was seventeen and in the lower sixth. She was white and was studying for 'A'-levels in psychology, English and business studies but hadn't decided what job she would like in the future. Nicky lived with parents and her younger sister, who was fourteen. Her mother worked in a factory and her father was a lorry driver. She had a boyfriend who she had been seeing him for around a year. This was a very relaxed interview with Nicky coming across as cheerful and happy to talk. The interview with Nicky lasted fifty minutes.

**Heather, Y11.**

Heather was eighteen and was white. She was currently studying in the upper sixth for 'A'-levels in English and history. She was unsure about what she would do when she left school. Heather was an only child and lived with her mother, who worked in a shop. Heather's parents were divorced and she had not seen her father since she was four. She was in what she considered to be her first 'serious' relationship and had been seeing her boyfriend for around two months. The interview with Heather was extremely difficult to carry out because of Heather's nervousness and self consciousness. This therefore involved me in self disclosure, talking about my own experiences, in order to try and draw her out. By the end of the interview Heather had relaxed and seemed more at ease with the situation. I ended the interview by trying to make Heather feel better about her nervousness by reassuring her that what she had told me was useful and relevant (which it was). The interview lasted around forty minutes.



**Carrie, Y12.**

Carrie was eighteen. She was white and was studying in the upper sixth for 'A'-levels in psychology, Spanish and business studies. She intended to go to university to do a teaching degree. Carrie was the oldest of three children, having a younger brother, aged sixteen, and sister, aged seven. Her mother was a secretary and her father a teacher. Carrie had a boyfriend, who was two years older than she was, and whom she had been seeing for eighteen months. She was relaxed and confident and elaborated fully on her answers. The interview lasted for thirty five minutes.

**Maggie, Y13.**

Maggie was seventeen and was white. She was studying in the lower sixth for 'A'-levels in French, Spanish and geography. She intended to go to University but as yet did not know what she would like to study. She lived with her parents and her younger brother, who was fourteen. Maggie's father was an engineer and her mother was a teacher. Maggie did not currently have a boyfriend. The interview lasted for thirty five minutes.

**Jenny, Y14.**

Jenny was seventeen and was white. She was in the lower sixth and was studying for her 'A'-levels in psychology, English literature and English language and hoped to study one of these subjects at university. Jenny had one older sister, aged eighteen, who was currently away at university. She thus lived with her father, who was a farmer and mother, who was a housewife. Jenny had a boyfriend whom she had been seeing for a year. The interview with Jenny lasted fifty minutes and was very relaxed with Jenny and I connecting well.

**Lisa, Y15.**

Lisa was eighteen and was white. She was in the upper sixth and studying for her 'A'-levels in business studies, German and economics. She had decided to study business studies at university and wanted to go into management after this. Lisa's parents had split up when she was twelve and Lisa now lived with her mother (a midwife) and her older brother, who was nineteen. Lisa's father (a lorry driver) now lived in London and so she only saw him at Christmas or when his work brought him to Sheffield. Lisa was currently in a relationship and had been seeing her boyfriend (who was 23) for twelve months. She was very talkative and came across as relaxed and cheerful. She expressed much interest in my research and was not intimidated by the interview situation. The interview lasted seventy minutes.

## STUDY TWO BIOGRAPHIES

### **Penny, M1.**

Penny contacted me after seeing one of the posters describing the study in her local church hall. Penny's was interested in the research as she was currently studying for a GCSE in child psychology. She had also done a GCSE in sociology and hoped to go on do a psychology A-level. Penny was white and was thirty six. She was currently involved in looking after her two young daughters, who were now aged two and three. In the past she had worked as a nursing auxiliary and then as a hotel housekeeper and she hoped to go back to work when the children were old enough to go to school. Penny had been married twice with her first marriage ending in her early twenties. Her current husband worked as a credit controller for a local joinery firm. The interview took place in Penny's home and lasted for an hour and a quarter. Penny was relaxed and cheerful and was happy to talk about her feelings and experiences. The interview went well despite interruptions from her two daughters.

### **Carol, M2.**

Carol contacted me after seeing one of the posters in the university student union where she worked in administration. She was thirty seven and was white. After leaving school at eighteen, Carol worked for a fashion company and since then had done clerical / administration work. Carol married when she was twenty but was now divorced, having separated from her husband seven years ago. She now lived with her two children, aged sixteen and fourteen, who continued to see their father every six weeks. I interviewed Carol at home and the interview lasted for an hour and a quarter. Carol talked at length about her feelings about body size and eating habits and was relaxed and open.

### **Angie, M3.**

Angie worked part-time as a secretary at the hospital where she had seen one of the posters advertising the study. She was thirty eight and was white. Angie had been married twice and had one son (aged eleven) from her first marriage and a daughter (aged nine) from her present marriage. Her husband had also been married twice and had two sons, both in their teens, who spent every weekend with their father and Angie. She had returned to work four years ago, when her daughter started school. Her husband worked as a sales representative. The interview was very relaxed with Angie talking confidently about her feelings and experiences. It was carried out at Angie's home and lasted around fifty five minutes.

### **Fiona, M4.**

Fiona contacted me after seeing of the posters at the university, where she worked as a recreation officer. She was thirty one and was white. Fiona was interested in the study

on a professional level because of her experience of food and body size issues as an aerobics instructor and personal trainer, as well as at a more personal level through her personal experiences of dieting and exercise. The interview was thus quite varied involving Fiona's personal experiences as well as her thoughts about the experiences of other women which Fiona had come into contact through her work. She had been with her current partner for three years, had no children but was considering having them in a few years time. The interview took place in the psychology department and lasted for one hour.

**Karina, M5.**

Karina was thirty six and was African-Caribbean. She was in the second year of an access course at the F. E college. Karina's marriage had ended four years ago as part of her rebellion against her husband's traditional attitudes. These attitudes had involved the expectation that she did not go out to work but stayed at home in order to look after him. She now lived alone and was on income support which made her financial situation very difficult and which greatly affected her eating habits. Karina was extremely relaxed in the interview and talked at great length about all the issues raised. The interview lasted for about an hour.

**Gina, M6**

Gina was forty and was white. She had been studying on an access course at the F. E. college for the last two years. Gina's long term goal was to do a B.Ed course specialising in special needs, which arose out of her experiences of having a special needs son. Gina had been divorced for six years and lived with her daughters, aged twenty and sixteen, and her son, aged thirteen. The interview with Gina was extremely difficult to carry out because Gina gave very short answers to my questions and did not elaborate on the brief statements that she made. This meant the interview comprised of a 'question and answer' sessions which failed to explore Gina's experiences or feelings. The interview thus lasted for thirty minutes.

**Val, M7.**

Val was thirty three and was white. She was contacted through the women's studies course at the F.E college. She was taking an access course at the college and was planning on applying to university place the following year to study communication studies. After leaving school, Val had worked as a sales representative. She had separated from her husband two years previously due to her husband's alcoholism. She now lived with her son, who was three, and daughter, who was two. Both children had places at the college creche. Val was self assured and relaxed and the interview went smoothly. My interview with her lasted an hour.

**Judith, M8.**

Judith contacted me after seeing one of the posters describing the study in the student's union, where Judith worked as a secretary and receptionist. She was thirty seven and was white. Judith had been married for fourteen years and had a daughter (aged 8) and a son (aged 6). Her husband worked as the manager of an engineering works in the North East and hence was away from the family home for very long hours. This meant that the care of the children rested largely with Judith. The interview took place in the psychology department and lasted an hour and a quarter. Judith was relaxed and confident and had clear ideas about food and body size.

**Jean, M9.**

Jean was forty five and was white. She contacted me after seeing one of the posters describing the study displayed at the F. E. college. She was currently working with special needs students and was involved in escorting the students to the college. Jean had previously been involved in further education having been on a women's computer course. She had been married and divorced twice. Her first marriage took place after she became pregnant with her first son when she was sixteen. Jean left her first husband after a year as a result of his violence towards both her and their son. She returned to live with her mother for another 8 years before marrying her second husband. This marriage lasted for 8 years and Jean had two more children, a daughter (aged 18) and a son (aged 15). Only Jean's youngest son was now living at home with her. This interview was distressing to carry out because of Jean's life story and because of the distress which Jean herself felt around food and body size. This involved Jean cycling between dieting and weight loss followed by 'over eating' and weight gain. These cycles were centred around the distress Jean felt over both her financial problems and her feelings of loneliness and family conflict. The interview lasted for one hour.

**Tess, M10.**

Tess was white and was forty four. She was currently studying on a two year access course at the F. E. college. Tess left school without many qualifications and went straight into a job in retail management, where she was employed until she was made redundant two years prior to the interview. She decided to take a year out and decided that her long term aim was to work in counselling although her next step was to apply for a place at university to study either women's studies or communication studies. Tess had lived with her last partner for thirteen years but they had spilt up four years ago. She had no children and was now unable to have them having had two miscarriages. Tess was now living with two female friends in a house they were all buying together. My interview with Tess was the longest of the middle women group, lasting for an hour and a half. This interview went well with both Tess and myself relaxing and talking easily about the issues involved.

**Gail, M11.**

Gail was white and was thirty seven. She was studying on the access course at the F.E. college. In addition to this she was doing unpaid work at a local solicitors to gain experience which she hoped would eventually enable her to train as a legal executive. Gail had separated from her husband two years previously as a result of the extreme pressure they had been under when their haulage business went bankrupt. The family home was repossessed and so Gail moved back to Sheffield to be near her family. She now lived alone with her two sons, who were eleven and eight, in a small council house. The interview with Gail lasted just over an hour and much of it centred around the relationship between Gail's feelings about food and her body and the current problems in her life.

**Rachel, M12.**

Rachel was contacted through the women's studies course at the F. E. college. She was thirty two and was white. Rachel was about to finish her access course at the college and had been offered a place at university to study for a diploma in social work with applied social studies. Rachel currently had a partner but did not yet live with him. She was now divorced but had been married for three years in her middle twenties, having one son, now aged seven. This marriage had been very unhappy due to her husband's heavy drinking. The interview lasted around 45 minutes and focused on Rachel's feelings about her size which had ranged from 13 to 23 stone.

**Mary, M13.**

Mary had found out about the study through the F.E. college, where she attended the women's group and a writers group. Mary had studied on the access course at the F.E. college in the past but had decided to give this course up because the workload had been too much for her. This was partly because of the demands made upon her time by her son, who was eleven and who had special needs. She was forty five and was white. Mary was not in a relationship at the time of the interview. The interview with Mary was difficult to carry out because of the distressing experiences which she talked about. These experiences centred around the abuse she had experienced in childhood which had resulted in a nervous breakdown when her son was born. The interview lasted for about forty five minutes.

**Elaine, M14.**

Elaine was forty one and was white. Contact was made through the women's studies course which she was taking as part of her one year access course. She was currently training to become a counsellor for Rape Crisis and had previously also done counselling work with Victim Support. Elaine had recently decided not to go on to do a degree after

her access course, opting instead for a B.Tec in nursery nursing with her long term aim being to work with families. Elaine had been married twice and had two sons, aged twenty three and eighteen, and one daughter, aged thirteen. Elaine's first marriage had been in her late teens but had ended after three years. Elaine married again but the marriage ended due to domestic violence. She had not been in a relationship in the ten years since her second marriage ended. Despite her life history Elaine was extremely self assured and seemed to have dealt with these experiences and put them behind her. The interview went well with Elaine talking openly about her experiences and lasted around 40 minutes.

### **Karen, M15.**

Karen was thirty seven and was white. She was contacted through the women's studies course. Karen worked as a nurse but had also trained as a dietician and had done administration and clerical work in the past. She described herself as at a cross-roads in her career and was currently considering training to become a teacher. Karen had been married for eighteen years and had a daughter (aged fifteen) and a son (aged twelve). Karen was originally from the north west of Scotland and believed this to be extremely important to who she was as well as to her beliefs about eating and body size. She described herself as coming from a tradition of 'strong women' who were independent from men with a strong sense of who they were. Karen was very lively and talkative and expressed herself forcefully. The interview lasted for an hour and a half.

### **Bridget, M16.**

Bridget was recruited through the F.E college where she was studying on a part time access course which included women's studies and history. She was forty and white. Bridget had been working as a midwife for the past twelve years but was planning to go to university to study for a history degree. She lived with her partner and two sons, who were aged eight and six. Their house was also shared with a friend. In the past Bridget had lived on a small holding in Ireland and she had also spent some time in West Africa. The interview with Bridget was free flowing as Bridget talked openly about her experiences. The interview lasted for an hour and a half.

### **Suzanne, M17**

Suzanne was 31 and was white. My interview with her at the F.E. college lasted 50 minutes. She lived with her husband and had one son, aged 12. She was currently 6 months pregnant with her second child. Suzanne was on the one year access course and had got a place to study History at university in the next academic year. She saw this as a big challenge because she had been intending to come to college for many years having left school with no qualifications. Before having her son she had done office work (after taking a short secretarial course) and bar work. Having become unexpectedly pregnant

whilst on the access course she and husband decided that she should take up her place at university, with her husband, who was currently not working, planning to look after the baby. Suzanne described her feelings about her body and her eating habits as springing from childhood when she was teased by her bother and sister (both of whom were a lot older than her). In adolescence she continued to think of herself as fat and had attempted to lose weight many times.

### **Alison, M18**

Alison was thirty five and was white. She contacted me after seeing a poster about the study in the church hall where she did 'Keep Fit'. She rang saying that she had dieted for many years but had recently lost weight and radically changed her eating habits. I interviewed her at her home and the interview lasted around an hour and a quarter. Alison was married and had 4 daughters, aged eight, six, five and three. She had a degree in Housing Studies, having just returned to work 3 days a week for the council's housing department after her fourth child. Her husband worked as a fitter for British Rail. The interview with Alison lasted for an hour and a quarter.

## STUDY THREE BIOGRAPHIES

### **Anne, O1.**

Anne was sixty eight, was white and lived with her second husband. She had two sons and two daughters from her first marriage. After her first marriage broke down Anne worked as a cleaner where her employer allowed her to live on the premises with her children. She had then married the son of her employer and had now been married for thirty six years. Anne had six grandchildren. She was now retired and was involved in age concern on an organisational level. The interview was free flowing and Anne talked readily about her experiences. The interview took place in the psychology department and lasted for an hour and a half.

### **Margaret, O2.**

Margaret was seventy and lived with her husband who was a retired fitter. She was white and had been married for forty seven years. Margaret had three daughters, one son and two grandchildren. Earlier in her life Margaret had been employed as a cook in the canteen of a large company. After retiring she had studied at college and was now very active in age concern at an organisational level. She described herself as very active. The interview was extremely relaxed and Margaret was keen to share her experiences and feelings. The interview took place in the psychology department and lasted an hour and a half.

### **Betty, O3.**

Betty was sixty seven and was white. As her mother had died when Betty was seven, she had left school at fourteen in order to look after the home. She had worked in the Land Army during the Second World War, where she met her first husband. Betty had three sons and a daughter whom she had brought up on her own after the breakdown of her first marriage, which had lasted for fifteen years. She had then worked as a shop assistant and cleaner in order to support her children. Betty lived with her second husband, who was a retired steel worker, and to whom she had been married for twenty years. Betty was now retired and was involved in swimming, yoga, keep fit and gardening. She had twelve grandchildren. The interview took place at Betty's home and lasted for an hour and a quarter. The interview went smoothly and Betty was very willing to talk her past and present experiences.

### **Kathleen, O4.**

Kathleen was sixty nine, was white and lived alone. She had been married for fifteen years but was widowed in her thirties. Her husband had been an engineer and had worked in India, taking his family with him. After his death Kathleen had supported herself and her children by working as a secretary. She had three sons and five



grandchildren. She was a firm believer in keeping active in old age and took classes in floral art, keep fit. She also liked swimming and was the member of a local environment group. The interview with Kathleen took place in her own home and lasted for around one hour.

### **Ruth, O5.**

Ruth was seventy and was white. She was now retired but in the past had worked as a secretary at an engineering firm and an accountants. Ruth now worked as a volunteer in a local hospital. Ruth lived alone because she had been widowed at the age of fifty four, with her marriage lasting thirty three years. She had two daughters and two grandchildren. She was born in Sheffield and had lived there all her life. Her mother was still alive although she was now living in a home after Ruth and her sister decided that they could no longer manage to look after her themselves. The interview took place in Ruth's home and lasted for an hour and a quarter.

### **Emily, O6.**

Emily was sixty six and was white. She had been married for thirty four years and had a son and a daughter. Her husband was now retired but had been employed by British Rail and then as a council rent collector. Both Emily and her husband now worked part time together collecting money for Littlewoods Pools. Emily was interviewed in the psychology department. This was quite a difficult interview to carry out because Emily seemed tense. She was also upset because her son had been involved in a car accident the previous day and whilst he was not seriously injured, this had obviously upset Emily considerably.

### **Marion, O7.**

Marion was sixty eight and was born and had lived in Sheffield all her life. She was white. Marion was now retired from her job as a short-hand typist although she still did some typing for her son's work as a driving instructor. Marion had been married for forty two years and had two sons and one granddaughter. She now lived with her husband and her eldest son who she described as 'showing no signs of getting married'. Her husband had been a clerk for most of his working life but was now retired. Marion was very active and enjoyed attending her exercise class, going to concerts and the cinema. She had two close female friends who she regularly socialised with twice a week. The interview with Marion took place in the department and went very well. Marion was very relaxed and cheerful and she talked about the issues confidently. The interview lasted for forty five minutes.

**Evelyn, O8.**

Evelyn was sixty three and hence was the youngest woman to be interviewed amongst the older women. She was white and had been born and lived most of her life in Sheffield. She had been employed as a nursery nurse but retired early at fifty five. She said that this was to allow her to get herself 'sorted out' before her husband retired from his job as a sales engineer. Evelyn had two daughters, a son and six grandchildren. She was a member of the University of the Third Age and also took part in walking, bridge, keep fit and swimming. The interview took place in her own home and lasted for seventy minutes.

**Cissie, O9.**

Cissie was seventy three and was white. She lived with her husband to whom she had been married for fifty years. Cissie had worked as a nanny, as a school dinner lady and in the steel industry. Her husband was now retired but had also worked in the steel industry. Grace had no children. She was involved in keep fit classes and also went bowling and dancing with her husband. This interview took place in Cissie's home and she was relaxed and confident. The interview lasted for an hour and a quarter.

**Esther, O10.**

Esther was born in Sheffield and had lived there all her life. She was white. Esther had been married for forty years but had been widowed eight years previously. She lived alone in a old person's flat. She had a son who worked in Sheffield and a daughter who worked in Leeds. She was now retired but had had a variety of jobs in the past including being in the land army during World War II, office work, and youth work. She had also been a tram conductor. Her last job had involved working as a warden at a school for the blind. Her husband had been a plumber. This was a formal interview where I did not feel that either Esther or myself were particularly relaxed. The interview took place in Esther's home and lasted for one hour.

**Grace, O11.**

Grace was seventy five and had lived in Sheffield all her life. She was white. Grace had been married for thirty seven years but had been widowed ten years earlier and hence now lived alone. Her husband had been a maintenance fitter but she herself had not worked when her children were young. Grace said that this was because her husband did not want her to, although she did return to work part time when her children were older. Grace had two daughters, a son and ten grandchildren. She was contacted through age concern as she attended the sewing class there. The interview was carried out in her home and lasted for an hour and a quarter.

**Nancy, O12.**

Nancy was sixty seven and was white. She had lived in Sheffield all her life and had worked as a typist and shop assistant. She was now a widow having lost her husband twenty three years earlier. She had been married for seventeen years. Her husband had been a coach spray painter. She had two sons but now lived alone. She was very active and enjoyed socialising with friends and attending the age concern exercise class as well as her church club. Nancy was relaxed and talked confidently about her experiences. The interview was carried out in the psychology department and lasted for one hour.

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