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## **A softer side to men**

Michael J. Lenney  
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*Doctoral Dissertation*

*Doctor of Philosophy (Human Services).*

*Edith Cowan University.*

# A softer side to men

By

*Michael. J. Lenney.*

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To Garry. Thank you for giving me the tools to continue on with my life and for grounding me in my own reality.

*'A Softer Side to Men' is dedicated to Jan Rosemary Tompkins (Mum), and David John Tompkins (Davy). "I love you both".*

*The people we are in relationship with are always a mirror, reflecting our own beliefs, and simultaneously we are mirrors, reflecting their beliefs. So relationship is one of the most powerful tools for growth ... if we look honestly at our relationships we can see so much about how we have created them.*

Shakti Gawain  
Creative Visualisation



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## Abstract

*"I am on time. It's the afternoon of my medical for life-insurance suitability. The AMP building in Sydney is my destination. I arrive with about twenty minutes to spare. I don't remember the receptionist. I don't remember the faces of the doctors who attended me that day. All I can remember is that I could see the clouds passing over the glass ceiling as my blood pressure was taken several times. The first doctor took my blood pressure three times before seeking another opinion. The second doctor confirmed his fears. I was in the 'too high' risk category. At the time I was 22 years of age, and weighing, on average, one-hundred and fifty kilograms. Over the next nine months I reach an extreme level of weight loss. At my lightest I weighed eighty-two kilograms."*

I am a male researcher, researching masculine bodyweight and masculine embodiment. In the qualitative tradition, seven men (primary participants) who underwent significant weight gain and loss were interviewed with the purpose of understanding how they experienced their sense of self as socially reflected. In addition to this, seven significant others (secondary participants) were interviewed in relation to their observations of primary participants during these periods. This is an interdisciplinary study which utilises symbolic interactionist concepts of self, and social identity, in conjunction with sociological and philosophical concerns about body-image, bodyweight, and the expression of subjective and social masculine identities in a gendered socio-cultural context, where tension exists between individual freedom and social control (See Bordo, 1999a; Cooley, 1964; Drummond, 2002; Foucault, 1980; Goffman, 1963b, 1967; Mead, 1934; Sparkes, 1999).

It was found that different levels of male body fat influences subjective conceptions of self, subjective expressions of masculine identities, and social projections of what it

means to be a fat and thin man. This study reveals that men went to extremes to lose weight, in most cases by restricting their food intake. In addition to this, it was also found that thinner men consume more fashion than fatter men, and that happy fat men in sexual relationships were least likely to regulate their bodyweight until these relationships ended. Self-regulation was found to be more prominent in those men competing for intimacy in the sexual market. In brief, this study establishes there is a softer reflective side of men than had been previously documented.

# Chapter 1

## The study

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, in sociological theory (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987; Gagnon, 1974; Kimmel, 1988; Oehberg, 1987; Seidler, 1989, 1990), the male body has been conceptualised in terms of its significance in perpetuating patriarchal traditions. The male body was deconstructed and exposed with the aim of challenging male sexual power, dominance and authority in both the private and public spheres (Bordo, 1993; Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 1993; Wolf, 1991). In analytical traditions of this nature, the male body was associated with physical strength, aggression and violence. In short, muscles were symbolisms of manhood. 'Stronger men came to be thought of as better men' (Gagnon, 1974, pp. 139-140). However, this image is becoming blurred as masculinity is redefined (Kimmel, 1987, 1990; Kimmel & Messner, 1992), and the media creates and responds to emerging images of men that emphasise beauty and attractiveness over strength and aggression (Bordo, 1999a; Gamble, 2001; Cashmore, 1998; Wacquant, 1995). The consequence of this re-conceptualisation, is that the male body is increasingly objectified in relation to physical appearance, attractiveness and desire (Bordo, 1999a; Cashmore, 1998; Drummond, 2002; Gamble, 2001, Petersen, 1998). Currently, the ideal look for men is 'tall, well-built, with wide shoulders, 'v'-shaped back, firm bottom and flat stomach. Men ... linked the slim, muscular ideal with being confident and in control' (Ogden cited in Grogan, 1999, p. 63). In this study, the relationship between masculine embodiment and the attractive ideal is explored using the interactionist concept of reflected self (Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934).

This study focuses on the relationships between self; identity; and bodyweight as determined by the amount of body fat seen and experienced. I am questioning the traditional link between muscles and identity, and exploring the links between self, body and identity. This study researches men's experiences of extreme weight gain and loss. There is little information available on men's attitudes towards their level of bodyweight, defined here as referring to body fat (Bordo, 1999a, p. 284). The common view has been that men are not as affected by fatness and thinness as women (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998, p. 113), and that male bodies are foremost working and power-laden bodies (Farrell, 1994; Petersen, 1998). In comparison, the female form has



been researched as the object of the male sexual gaze. In response to such analyses, this study revises the traditional link between body form and identity and establishes that men experience a range of emotions as recipients of the gaze of the other, or others. In so doing, it explores the subject's expectations of the social male body.

In industrialised nations it is said a healthy body reflects a healthy mind (Chernin, 1983). People's physical state of health is indicated by their physical appearance. The size, shape, tone, colour and mobility of the body transmits, to the onlooker, a host of symbolic messages indicating its visible and invisible state of health. A person's external body form can indicate how ill or how well they are, or how dependent or independent they may be (Lenney & Sercombe, 2002; Oliver, 1996). This visual analysis extends to the emotional and mental wellbeing of the invisible mind. To the observer, the physical body can infer emotional and mental stability or instability of the subject. For example, symbolically, thin bodies have come to indicate that people are in control of their lives, and are responsible (Bordo, 1993). In contrast, fat bodies can indicate the loss of control, and irresponsibility (Bordo, 1993; Ogden, 1992; Thone, 1997). In brief, control is understood to be a key visual factor denoting good health. In the context of this study, the connection between symbolic control and health is explored and discussed using both subjective and social contexts.

Terms such as 'bodyweight' and 'body fat' are used interchangeably in text. This is due to participants preferring to use different terminology when describing their experiences of excessive weight, and extreme weight loss. I understand bodyweight can be experienced in other ways than primarily through the amount of fat that exists. For example, in his story on Pyecraft, H. G. Wells draws the distinction between experiencing weightlessness, and losing weight (2004, on-line).

It was really a most extraordinary spectacle, that great, fat, apoplectic-looking man upside down and trying to get from ceiling to the floor ... "Loss of weight almost complete ...". "By jove, Pyecraft", said I. "What you wanted was a cure for fatness! But you always called it weight. You would call it weight" (p.7).

In this study the term bodyweight refers to the amount of fat being carried at any one time. The phrases 'experience of weight' and 'having weight' in the context of this study, refers to the extremity of weight gain and loss experienced by participants. Different bodyweights meant different interpersonal interactions, and these were based on negative and positive associations made to thin and fat bodies (bodies with and without body fat). As an example, the following section gives an account of my experiences of excessive body fat, and extreme weight loss.

### **Personal reflections on my bodyweight**

'There is nothing worse for the soul nor more confining for the mind than trying to live up to an image' (Crow, 1974, n.p). Crow's words sum up my experience of childhood, adolescence and maturity. The projected image of manhood from others has eluded me. As a teenager, I was fat. My weight affected my sexual development. I was, in most cases, rejected by girls at school. I was teased and laughed at for being overweight and physically slower than my peers. When I finally approached a potential girlfriend, I was told "No way. You're fat and ugly". The rejection had a profound effect on me. I realised I am my body. Looks do matter, and bodyweight is a significant determinant when presenting an attractive ideal. My weight continued to increase at a rate of approximately one stone per year from the age of twelve.

At the age of twenty-two, I applied to take out life insurance. At the medical, I was told that I was in the high-risk category. I was informed that my heart could no longer withstand my excessive lifestyle. I was told to lose weight. I was going to die if I did not. Up to this point in time, I had been attempting to lose weight without success. At night, I would pray to wake up fat-free so that women would find me attractive and my life would be different to the one I was presently living. The insurance medical acted as a catalyst for me to lose weight. The weight reduction process was risky, and involved low food intake, illicit drugs and an excessive exercise regime (interestingly, I am told to lose weight due to health reasons and the way I lose weight was to undertake extremely unhealthy practices). I lost forty-seven kilograms in nine months and continued to lose

weight until I had shed sixty-seven off my original total of one-hundred and fifty-five. I was now, more than ever, self-conscious of my body and behaviour when socialising with others.

Weight reduction affected my self-concept. I look back at fat photographs and see a person who was actually socially competent, albeit too loud both visually and verbally. That self became less prominent after weight loss. I no longer knew where I fitted in. I became overly self-conscious in relation to a sexual *self* that had remained (for the most part) restricted whilst being fat, for fear of rejection. Again, I had to re-negotiate my standing with others, in relation to my sexual drives, and desires. I was now visible and available to the opposite sex. Before losing weight, I was a large bulk of a man. I had presence. After losing weight, I realised that I now blended in. I was now normal in the sense of having a comparable normative masculine body within my social group, as opposed to having an overly large body. For me, having a normative body meant that I became invisible to those closest to me. Therefore, I lost more weight, in an attempt, to regain visibility and their attention.

It is now sixteen years since I first lost weight. I am now caught in a cycle that sees me swing from controlling my bodyweight, to trying to let go of a personal self-concept linked to physical appearance and body image. This personal history has resulted in me trying to understand the relationships between rationality, emotions, and the physical body, the construction of self, social identities and social control. In this context, the research question that lies at the core of this study is: How do men who undergo significant weight gain and loss experience their self-concepts and social identities?

In addressing this question, I have chosen to put the concepts of 'self' and 'social identity' at the centre of this thesis. My understanding of these concepts is gleaned from the human services, sociology, political ideology and social psychology. This has led to a trans-disciplinary approach that reflects the ideological tension between the personal and the social or, in liberal terms, between the individual and society (Heywood, 2003; Sercombe, 1996).

## **Framing the study**

The original title, 'Sensing difference' encapsulated the essence of the study prior to drafting the results and discussion chapter. It explained how I conceptualised difference as occurring through the use of the human senses. It reflected the interview process where participants felt discriminated against in both the private and public domains. The title expressed my personal concern with the construction of difference. It also reflected the connection between the senses and discrimination when it came to judging others based on bodyweight, a process clearly reflected in the mirror of men's experiences of weight loss. However, after completing the results chapter, and upon beginning the discussion, it became clear that men in this study reacted emotionally to their subjective and socially-reflected impressions about their weight. The emerging title 'A softer side to men' encapsulates the subjects' experience of weight gain and loss, and their resulting shifting identities. In general, this study explores and frames the tension between how individuals experience their social world, and how the social world affects the individual's self-construct and his expressions of social masculine identities.

The significance of this study is that it addresses a clear gap in literature and research on the male body, and the construction of self and identity, contextualised to bodyweight (Bordo, 1999a). There is a large volume of work describing the patriarchal enforcement of body size for women (Bordo, 1993; Ogden, 1992; Sartore, 1998; Wolf, 1991). In contrast, research on men and male bodies has been concerned with the aggressive and dominant roles men assume. The work that has been done (Parker, 1996; Sabo & Jonsen, 1998; Wacquant, 1995) focuses on men projecting an ideal masculine image based on physical strength and desirable muscular images (Connell, 1983, 1990, 1995; Farrell, 1994; Laura & Dutton, 1994; Levy & Heaton, 1993; Messner, 1994; Roser, 1996). The private, or rather personal, lives of men have remained mostly invisible (West, 2000).

The implications for men undergoing body transformations due to weight gain and loss have not been investigated. There is limited research that explores the experiences of men prior to and after weight-loss, and the extent to which men face new problems concerning

their body image, appearance, and body size in relation to defining their self-worth (Hearn & Morgan, 1990, pp. 6-11). Featherstone and Turner (1995), emphasise the need for more research that looks at how the body affects individuals in their daily interactions (p. 8), and West (2000) calls for more research that explores different kinds of masculinity as lived experiences. Hence the significance of this study, which fills some of the gaps in the literature by examining how bodyweight and an ideal body form affect men's view of their self-construct and social identity.

The research is significant for those involved in men's studies, researchers investigating men's health, community development workers, and those interested in investigating the construction of masculinity in Western culture. The research is also significant for men in general, and for researchers critiquing masculinity. This study will enhance an understanding of the symbolic interaction processes that occur prior to, during, and after weight loss in men, and, in the process, analyse the relationship between body form and contemporary constructions of masculinities.

This research seeks to understand how men construct themselves, and others, in their social and interpersonal interactions after gaining, and then losing, a significant amount of body fat. If the notion of a self-construct is reflected in how an individual reacts to others (Brown, 1979; Cooley, 1964, 1983; Mead, 1934), then men who lose a significant amount of weight may undergo a process of redefining themselves through their social interactions. Their self-concept may change, and in so doing, alterations to their self and social identities may be evident. How they relate to others' may also alter. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate, examine and understand, how men experience themselves and how they react to others after achieving an objectively and subjectively thinner body.

### **Ideological considerations**

The research question does not reflect an ideological position, yet I have indicated that ideology will play an important part in discussing the results. With this in mind, it is

necessary to define the term, and the way ideology frames the discussion. Seliger defines ideology as 'a set of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify the ends and means of organised social action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order' (Cited in Heywood, 1992, p. 6). Sercombe (1996), extends this definition, albeit in accordance with Seliger's work, and suggests that political ideologies have at least four components. The four components comprising an ideology are beliefs, ideals, explanation and action.

According to Sercombe (1996), political ideologies have central beliefs which explain human nature, and the relationships between human beings and the environment. Ideological beliefs shape a particular picture of the social and physical world. Each political ideology has at its core a concept of the ideal society. It provides a picture of what ought to be, and this has to be credible. From an ideological point of view, the term credible means that the picture is not constructed upon fantasy, but upon known truths. The ideal acts as a vision of what is possible. With these criteria in mind, political ideologies are capable of using a range of theories to explain the way things are today in any given society (Sercombe, 1996). However, systems of theory and explanation need to be testable. Lastly, all political ideologies have an action component. Change is brought about through different forms of action both individually and socially, violent and non-violent (Heywood, 1992, 1998). The methods of action used will differ depending on the ideology.

In a nutshell, political ideologies inform us what is, why it is, what ought to be, and what action is required for change to occur (Sercombe, 1996). They are guidelines to social and political action. They offer a blue-print for social structure and interpersonal relationships, and offer a way of organising and interpreting the social world. Ideologies can be used when placing meaning onto individual and social behaviour or action (Heywood, 1998; Sercombe, 1996; Tinning, 1990). Political ideologies, such as Marxism, have been used to critique the current dominant ideology in the West, liberalism, with the view to changing social structures, and more importantly to re-direct economic capital to the working and lower classes. However, it must be stated that Marx denounced ideology

as an additional opiate for the masses, yet contradicts his position when offering an alternative socialist ideology as the framework for his proletariat revolution (Heywood, 1998). Feminism and environmentalism, as cross-spectrum ideologies, have also been favoured as ideologies to address gendered social inequalities, gender discrimination at an interpersonal level, and to create sustainable environments where possible. In this study, the results are framed and critiqued using symbolic concepts embedded in intrapersonal interactions which underpin the dominant ideology of liberalism.

### **Materials and methods**

This research develops an understanding of the experiences encountered by men after significant weight loss. Two groups of participants were interviewed for the study. They are referred to as primary and secondary participants. A primary participant is defined as the person who has lost weight. The weight loss parameter was set at twenty (20) kilograms or more. A secondary participant is defined as a significant other, in this case the primary participant's partner, parent or close friend. Both primary and secondary participants had to meet two criteria for selection. The primary participant had to be male, and have lost twenty (20) kilograms or more in weight. Secondary participants needed to have known the primary participant for at least three years, and they needed to have known the primary participant prior to, during, and after the weight loss period. Seven primary and seven secondary participants were interviewed for the study, giving 14 in all.

Primary participants were asked to provide 'before' and 'after' photographs. The purpose of this was to assist primary and secondary participants in describing the person in the photographs. In the case of the primary participant, the subject becomes objectified through use of the photographs whilst at the same time being the subject. The photographs were used only as a reference point, and in some cases, were dismissed. Participants were not interviewed together. This protected each participant where disclosure was sensitive. There were no group discussions, or events where participants could meet and discuss each other's experiences.

Secondary participants constituted the social world. Time and monetary constraints meant that an ideal interactionist study of weight gain and loss could not be conducted. As an interactionist, I would have preferred to film participants in their interactions during the weight gain and loss process and interviewed subjects upon watching the recorded interactions. Therefore, the secondary participants, in this context, are the links between primary participants and their social worlds. A social interaction consists of more than one person, be it a physical or non-physical interaction. Secondary participants offered the researcher a social interactionist perspective on their observations of themselves in relation to the primary participant, and the interactions between the primary participant, themselves, and social others.

Primary participants were self-selecting. I did not advertise for participants, but, through word of mouth, participants contacted me, or indicated through a friend that they were interested in participating in the research. I would be at a café or gym with a friend or new acquaintance discussing what I do and they would remark that they knew someone who had lost a lot of weight and may be interested in talking about it to someone. All primary participants were recruited through word of mouth. The level of interest in the study took me by surprise. From the literature, it is assumed that men do not like to talk about their personal issues. On the contrary, I found that men were eager to talk about their personal lives and experiences and often commented that they enjoyed the experience, but had few close male friends they could talk to about their emotional needs. This in itself reflects the recommendation most authors make when researching men: that men in general benefit when they are able to connect emotionally with other men, and discuss their private concerns without shame and guilt (Bordo, 1999b; Hearn, 1993; Lupton, 1998; West, 2000).

I work in the human services and this research is located in the human services which incorporates disciplinary practices from sociology; political ideology, social psychology and community studies. This influences the type of research I undertake, and the preferred methodology I use. I use subjective, personalised accounts; observations, lived experiences (Narratives of self), and self-reflection as tools to guide my research interests



and work practice. This type of methodology has been subject to criticism. Andrew Sparkes makes the following point on the issue:

A small number of sociologists of sport have opted to produce what have been defined as autoethnographies or narratives of self. These are highly personalized accounts that draw upon experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding. Such work is located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and raises questions as to what constitutes proper research. In this paper, I explore this issue by focusing upon the criteria used by various audiences to pass judgment on an autoethnography/narrative of self that I submitted to, and eventually had published, in a leading journal. The problems of having inappropriate criteria applied to this work are considered, and the charge of self-indulgence as a regulatory mechanism is discussed. Reactions to a more trusting tale are then used to signal various criteria that might be more relevant to passing judgment upon this kind of tale in the future (2000, p. 21).

The central concern for Sparkes (2000), is that research which incorporates narratives of the self is often judged using inappropriate (academic) criteria. In light of this, it is important to note that this research incorporates narratives of myself in order to extend that audience's understand my theoretical, sociological and ideological analysis. How I experience my bodyweight influences my assumptions about the social world around me; how participants experience their bodyweight challenges me to be reflective on my experiences, and my assumptions. The product is not a sterile, objective piece of scientific work. The product is a thought provoking piece of work, which draws upon the rationalisations and raw emotions of participants in order to ground the research in human experiences. This research explores; 'the symbolic', when fat and thin men interact within their social worlds. Taking my lead from Andrew Sparkes (2000), I seek to avoid inappropriate academic criticism of my use of narrative and to assert that I am a researcher, and practitioner in the human services who draws on a range of social scientific methods and theories to ground the enquiry in the real world of participants.

## **Design**

This is a qualitative study analysing data gathered from a series of interviews. The nature of such a study allowed me to understand how people placed meaning on their concepts of reality through their lived experiences (Berg, 1989; Smith, 2001). The qualitative tradition refrains from making assertions based on instrumental measurement (Kloos, 1988, p, 223). There are no scales being used to ascertain the extent of body dissatisfaction in men as compared to women. The claim to using qualitative methodology is based on allowing participants to freely express their experiences of weight gain and loss around loosely defined social topics. Rather than looking for measurements of dissatisfaction, I am seeking subjective meaning of experiences.

## **Validity and reliability**

In comparison with quantitative research, qualitative research has been criticised for its lack of scientific objectivity and its ability to ensure validity and reliability with reference to data collection (Smith, 2001). The tension between these methods is often located in the apparent superiority of quantitative methods to produce value-free, or objective findings. Data collected through quantitative methods is said to be more reliable and can be validated by processes that contain uncontrollable factors and researcher bias in a manner that imitates the experimental method. In contrast, Smith addressed the importance of studying human beings through understanding their lived experience contextualised to their immediate reality, rather than studying them like animals in a vivarium:

The process of quantification has served the scientific method well in its pursuit of knowledge in the natural sciences ...The human condition as a field of inquiry is, however, both aided and circumscribed by the current methodologies of the positivist tradition ...The continual reduction in the focus of inquiry, and the concomitant statistical techniques necessary to analyse the product of its study, while providing valuable insights to the natural sciences, has served to isolate psychology from the lived experiences of the human being. The observations, measurements, and theories

postulated regarding the research 'subject' is in many cases, as far removed from the real world as proposing that investigating animals in a vivarium is analogous to studying them in the wild (2001, p. 69).

A more fundamental criticism of the dualistic tension between quantitative methods and qualitative methods pertains more to their symbolic associations projecting the embodiment of emotions and rationality. The quantitative method is believed to be more rationally constructed and therefore has the ability to contain any emotive elements during the research process which may affect the objectivity of the researcher in their observation of data, and in their discussions. Williams and Bendlow (1998) write:

Even to the present day, emotions are seen to be the very antithesis of the detached scientific mind and its quest for 'objectivity', 'truth' and 'wisdom'. Reason rather than emotions is regarded as the 'indispensable faculty' for the acquisition of human knowledge. Such a view neglects the fact that rational methods of scientific inquiry, even at their most positivistic, involve the incorporation of values and emotions. Rather than repressing emotions in western epistemology, therefore, it is necessary fundamentally to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and to construct conceptual models that' (p.xvi), 'demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion' (Jaggar cited p. xvi).

The quote suggests that equal value needs to be given to the emotional and rational explanations of human and social behaviour. Seidler (1998) agrees, and argues there has been a 'disdain for emotions as sources of knowledge' (p. 201). It is important to remember that some emotions do need to be kept in check, and this refers more to those of the researcher, than of participants. In the case of qualitative research, reliability and validity are enhanced where researchers acknowledge their subjective emotional biases, offering them insightfully as a way of framing their social world.

In this research, I have, and continually do experience profound shifts in my interactions as I loose and gain bodyweight. By highlighting this I risk being criticised for finding what I want to find in my research. I am an insider (Bartunek & Reis-Louis, 1996). This

means that the way I present myself to participants may affect their decision to participate in the study, and may affect both positively and negatively their disclosures. Being an insider, someone who has shared the experience of the study group, as opposed to an outsider, someone who has not had those experiences, means that I am more likely to elicit deeper information about the topic (Bartunek & Reis-Louis, 1996, p. 1). '... Being perceived as "one of them" is an advantage for the researcher. It can have an equalising effect on the relationship between interviewer and respondent and allows for a level of confidence from the outset which might otherwise have to be developed' (Cotterill & Letherby, 1994, p. 116). However, at the point of data analysis, insiders may only see what they want to see because they may intrude themselves in the data.

Outsiders are more likely to interpret the data from a social perspective. Looking in, they are in a position to be emotionally detached from the study (Bartunek & Reis-Louis, 1996, p. 3). 'In large part, these differences between insiders and outsiders stem from differences in their interests in gaining knowledge about the [topic]' (p. 3). In general, the insider/outsider dilemma means that researchers may see different things. This difference is to be expected. As Weber explains; 'The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society. No-one is outside society the question is where he stands within it' (Cited in Cotterill & Letherby, 1994, p. 109). Every researcher brings their own capacities, limitations, idiosyncrasies to the research process and therefore each will be affected differently when exposed to the data (Kloos, 1988).

I cannot detach and quarantine my emotions from this study. I come to this study affected emotionally about the extent to which I believe myself to be my body. However, in this relationship between self and data, I come with access to knowledge that may assist me to understand what is occurring subjectively for participants and when mapping the data for self and identity formations. The premise being 'The basis of all research is a relationship, this necessarily involves the presence of the researcher as a person. Personhood cannot be left behind, cannot be left out of the research process, and to so we insist that it must be capitalised upon, it must be made full use of' (Stanley & Wise, Cited in Cotterill & Letherby, 1994, p. 109). 'What matters is that the reader should be able to

see what choices have been made that influenced the construction of the body of ... knowledge, and why' (Kloos, 1988, p. 236). Hence there was a need to maintain a journal during this process to map my emotional and rational reflections on the data and research process, from conception to completion. However, this position leads to issues with regard to validity and reliability. Sparkes (1998), takes the position that research credibility becomes an issue where the researcher has 'to build a case for trustworthiness in the data collection, analysis and conclusions' (p. 368). In this study, the use of a journal establishes a basis of trust that is reinforced by reference to theory and background literature.

Reliability refers to the extent to which a test or questionnaire 'produces similar results under constant conditions' (Bell, 1993, p. 64). For qualitative researchers using interview prompts, the issue of reliability can be daunting. There are arguments to suggest that research skills are innate and reliability is better served by employing naturally skilled, as opposed to unskilled, researchers. In contrast, research skills may be framed as technical skills which can be learnt by anyone (Berg, 2001, p. 66).

To obtain reliable qualitative data, Berg (2001) suggests that attention should be redirected from the researcher to the problem of language. Reliability ought to refer more to the language barriers that may prevent participants connecting to the research project and prompts (p.77). Berg suggests 'interviews must be conducted at the level or language of the respondents ... when interviewing a cross section of subjects on the same topic, you may need to consider varying levels of language' (2001, p. 77). To address the issue of reliability in this study the following excerpts from the interviews are used to substantiate my claim; That I am a competent interviewer; that my questions were adequately communicated and understood by participants; and that I modified my language to suit participants needs. The inclusion of these excerpts also assist in the case for building trust in the data (Sparkes, 1998).

According to Sparkes (1998), the inclusion of interview excerpts builds trust and confidence in data collection processes. For example, I demonstrate refocusing the

respondent to the topic; using appropriate language; summarising content, and moving the participant forward through his experiences of body weight. The issue of clumsiness emerges as the participant speaks freely about his schoolboy days.

L. Can you start off by telling me how you got to be that size?

P. Oh shit ! Weight has always been an issue for me for my adult life. I think the first concept of being over weight, earlier my life, was at the age of 12. I was in grade 7. I considered myself fat. I didn't start putting my weight on until five years later.

L. So what age would you have roughly been then?

P. Seventeen. My last year at school. I can see school photographs of myself. I can remember leaving school and going to one of those weight watchers. I think it was weight watchers? No, it was something similar to it, where you go along every week. I would have been 76kg at that stage. I felt myself to be fat, so in my case, I have always seen the fact I had the perception of being fat before actually being fat or overweight.

L. What caused that perception? Have you been able to identify it?

P.(Laughs). Yes, the problem I have is now – I can give you – I'll give you the situation without going into depth. Not because I don't want to. It's because it's part of my nature. I'll explain everything to me, then you'll understand me.

L That is fine. I understand.

P. It does to a degree, looking back, have to do with my sexuality. Okay, I was in a certain school. It was an all-boys school from grade 5 or 6. I had been in an all-boys school for the first four years of my schooling. I was now in a mixed class... I went to grade 7 at this new school, and it was the wrong year to go into it. I've got different interpretations of it now, but the basics was I was one of two people new to the school and that's it. I don't remember anything for the next 18 months. I don't have any memories at all of that year, and the year after. All I do know is that I was physically and emotionally abused and basically ostracized ... But it's amazing how you go into situation where there is a certain belief and upbringing you're confronted with, and looking back now all it was, was boys being boys. I was someone different. Someone who allowed themselves to be picked on. Boom! Everyone is in there. So that's when my self esteem suffered a great plummeting, and I took it all on board. I didn't tell my parents what I was suffering until 18 months later when I was half way through yr 8 but the damage had been done. I think it was compounded being of not all great in church. I never read before then, but I must have looked up what a posh pansy was at least, and then came up with homosexual. So I had a concept of

homosexuals being in a very negative light. Having had no experiences with homosexuals in my life. Oh, by the way, I am homosexual.

L. (*I refocus the participant*). Thankyou, let's bring it back to school, and your perception of being fat before you were fat.

P. Yeah. So that I think that ties in with lack of self esteem, and a disassociation from the body, and I think it was compounded when I did hit puberty the year after, and actually then had the feelings that were described. So I had the definition beforehand, and then my psyche realised that it was true to some description. So that's when I really shut down and hived off my sexuality.

L. What I cannot see is the link between that and your weight, your perception of being fat before you were fat.

P. That's to me just part of it.

L. Can you explain that to me?

P. Because .....(*there is a long pause*).

L. (*I see the participant having difficulty forming a response*). Try to explain to me how you see it, or would visualise it.

P. Never been a physical person, and actually that has a part to play in it as well. Apparently, I had bowed legs and rickets. I was very clumsy, not very well coordinated and I don't know how that sort of led up to me, that's all part of the precursor event, precursor belief system involved. All that would have been bought about exasperated by my younger sisters and brother. He is 5 five years younger than me. He was a sportsman from the year dot. He was the rebel of the family. Totally different personality you couldn't tell him to do anything. He was his own person. In our family, that is accepted there are other incidences of uncles on both sides of the family. Part of it is to do with colouration of the hair. So there is a whole belief system that you know he looks like this uncle over here, on this side of the family, and he's sort of got the same hair as this uncle over this side, and they sort of had similar personalities. So, uh, it's allowed, and my father could cope with it better from my understanding.

L. (*I am thinking about the participants relationship with his brother and I am hearing perhaps there is an issue with other men in family with regard to his sexuality*). Were you comparing yourself to your brother?

P. I don't remember.

L. In terms of ...

P. But I wonder if I did.

L. Yeah.

P. Because my brother, he did little athletics. He did it two years before they usually go in. So at the age of four he was coming 3<sup>rd</sup> in his events. Age of five he was coming 2<sup>nd</sup>. Age of six he was winning and he was the top athlete. He could have gone into the States and maybe even National's, if he had applied himself, or if our family had provided that environment? He was naturally gifted. Now from what I can see of you I'm not conscious of that, may be, it's so deeply buried and so far back there I just, and I don't have any memories.

L. Well let's just look at that. Can you discuss (*I reflect on the thought*) the experience of going to a new school, feeling the way that you felt regarding being ostracized and the affect of this on your body.

P. Yes. The body form and then not taking much care of it. Not being physical added towards that, not being coordinated and not being comfortable. I know I tried to do basketball at this new school. I stuck it out for say six weeks, no even four weeks, and just felt that without the coordination there I am just making a fool of myself.

L. (*I focus the participant and move him forward in time*). Okay I'm going to come a little bit forward now. So you've put, started to put on weight.

P. Only in the last year of school.

In the next excerpt I discuss the interview procedure with a participant. I did this for all participants prior to starting with the prompts. I also clarify that the participant has understood their responsibility in the process. The participant was keen to answer my questions and in some places cuts me off mid-sentence. I simply allowed this to happen. In most cases, he anticipated my questions, or statements correctly. Towards the end of the passage the participant makes a reference to good and bad weight as he discusses building muscle tone. I miss the opportunity to direct him to discuss these terms in a little more depth. This opportunity comes later in his next interview when we discuss the issue of weight lost and his need to bulk up.

L. At any point you wish to stop the interview please indicate that you wish to stop. If you do not want to answer anything, or you feel that I am prying a bit too far then please say so, and I will back off. Basically, you have control. If you feel you want to stop then please say so and indicate you wish me to stop tapping.

P. Fair enough.

L. I am easy.



P. That is okay. If I pause or take long to answer, it is not because you are going too far. I'll let you know when you have gone too far.

L. Thank you.

P. It is because I am thinking about how I am going to answer.

L. (With reference to Berg, (2001), *I negotiate terms and language with the participant*). What sort of terminology do you like to use about when you had weight, which would you prefer? Fat or over weight, or over sized?

P. Over weight will do.

L. Over weight. Okay. Let's just have a look at the photographs.

P. See if you can pick me? There is a common thread amongst the three.

L. Wow! How much weight did you actually lose?

P. Well, I don't know at what weight I was at that time. The last time I weighed myself before then, lets think, I tried the gym before then I was 104kg. So I presume I was heavier than that? I am now currently at 73kg. So that is 31kg and I have been down to close to 66-67kg. I have come back up a little bit, but not from putting weight on through fat.

L. What do you mean by that?

P. I am back at the gym again now.

L. Right. So you stopped exercising for a while or ...?

P. No, no I was doing an exercise routine to lose the weight. I wasn't actually at the gym at that stage, but since losing the weight I have gone back to the gym. So now I am building up strength.

L. Are right, yep, so your weight?

P. Has gone back up.

L. In terms of muscle tone and ...?

P. Exactly, Good weight as opposed to bad weight.

L. I am going to use that one there, and ask just to hold that and look at that as we start to go through this process. So looking at that photograph can you tell how you got to be that big?

P. At the time, I wasn't probably thinking how I got to be that big. I guess it was a case of just from leading a very comfortable life style. I have always enjoyed my food. And I haven't been big on exercise in the past. So it just sort of slowly crept on I guess.

In the last excerpt the participant and I demonstrate that using humour can be a good way to break the ice. He jokes with me about getting paid for his story and that the microphone is working. His language is colourful, and although in this excerpt my

language is less colourful, it becomes more so as the interview continues (Berg, 2001). However, there is an easiness about my language in this passage which is absent from those above. I felt this was because of the connection between the participant and myself. I felt extremely comfortable in his presence and appreciated his sense of humour, and straight forwardness. Here he discusses his obligation to work away from home and the emotional dislocation he was experiencing. This is our second interview and we have already established the terminology to be used from the first interview.

P. Aren't you supposed to get paid?

L. Who have you been talking to?

P. I've been doing a bit of investigating of my own.

L. All right, we're rocking and rolling, let's get into it.

P. Testing! Testing! Hello. One-two. Have you got this L?

L. The microphone is on. I can see the little dial. It's all doing it's little thing. Alright, here we go. The first thing we need to talk about is Darwin. Can you briefly explain to me the process of you actually going to Darwin. What led up to that ?

P. Okay. That was, I had I'd been up there before and really enjoyed it and then I got to know the boss that was up there, and about 12 months after he came down and we worked together. And I sort of made that obligation. I'd promised that if they needed work up there the next season, I'd go up and give them a hand. And so he gave me a call and I had to go.

L. Did you want to go ?

P. Not at that time. I'd just moved out with three, three, yeah three of my friends. We'd just got a house together and we'd just moved in. So I didn't want to go at all. I'd wanted to stay.

L. And you couldn't say no?

P. No I felt very obliged. I could have said no but I couldn't on the other hand though.

L. Did you do a fix termed thing and say you could only go up for a certain amount of time ?

P. Well I thought of, I sort of took it as being only a couple of months. Well maybe six weeks or something. That's usually what we did. We did 5 week stints but it end up being 3 months.

L. So that wasn't talked about ? That it was on going ? How long you'd have to stay up ?

P. No. I actually had to ask to come home they wanted to keep me up there.

L. Oh really, so how long did they want to keep you up there for?

P. Until the work started down here because while I was down here doing nothing I was still getting paid. And they'd rather have me up there getting paid to be doing something.

L. That sounds fair ?

P. Fuck fair! To them, but Jesus Christ I wanted a rest.

L. So you didn't want to go and you actually wanted to come back a lot quicker than ?

P. Oh yeah! I was actually ready to come back in the first week.

L. Why were you ready to come back?

P. I was just really missing being part of the house that I'd been in for a week and seeing as the start we'd got off too was fantastic. And I really wanted to be there.

L. Fuck, okay, you come back from Darwin. Your fat! You've put on a fair bit of weight describe the process that you undertook to lose weight.

P. Okay. I would get up in the morning about half past four/five o'clock maybe some where there, and then I'd put on my running shoes and then I'd go for a run. Yeah it was a wobble for the first couple of times. I had about a 5km section marked out and I'd run the first one. By the first one I couldn't even make it. I couldn't make half of it. I ended up having to walk back and then I was too soar to do it for the next couple of days. I did it again later and eventually I got there.

L. When you say that ... you eventually got where ?

P. Eventually, I was able to run the full 5km.

To assist with the more technical aspects of reliability, several key considerations need to be addressed. Firstly, the interview space needs to accommodate equipment and be located away from undue noise. The most important point is to ensure that the interview takes place in a secluded setting that is quiet and free from interruptions. Secondly, the interview setting needs to be comfortable. Both the interviewer and interviewee need to feel at ease in the setting. Thirdly, the interview equipment may need power and a separate table. There needs to be enough space for the equipment to be set-up and not impede the interview. Therefore, interviews were structured to compensate, where possible, for environmental, spatial, and emotional variables (Bell, 1993; Morse, 1994).

The design of the interview prompts needs to be precise. Essentially, another researcher should be able use the same prompts and to elicit similar responses. However, it cannot be assumed that researchers have similar techniques or interview styles, or that interviewers are experienced enough to be aware of the respondent's emotional state during the interview process. Morse (1994) explains that it is imperative that researchers are attentive to respondents. If there is any indication that respondents are

uncomfortable, the interviewer needs to clarify whether they are able to continue and stop taping if need be. The respondent, in this context, is the primary constituent and should be respected as such. In this excerpt a secondary participant becomes upset and is unable to continue. I immediately ask whether she would like the tap stopped and stop the tape as she loses concentration. The interview continues after a short pause.

P. Oh yeah! Looking back I can remember saying you have until you are 25, and if you're not married by the time you are 25 your out. I can see S at 40. I'd still be running around after him. I just had this ... he had until he was 25 and looking back now he wasn't a happy chappie. I didn't know that he wasn't motivated at all. He didn't have girl friends. He didn't go out a lot with friends. I don't know whether he had a real friend.

L. Did you have any concerns about that for yourself and for S?

P. I am going to end up in tears here. Actually, no I should have, but I don't know. I obviously lived ...*(I notice there are tears welling in the participants eyes. She looks down as she clasps her hands together. The participant is having difficulty focusing and her tears start to flow.*

L. If you wish to stop please stop *(The interview is stopped).*

L. *(Interview starts)* You don't have to answer anything you don't want to F.

P. No, we are talking about S not about me. I am now very aware of how unaware I was. It was mainly due to my background and the way I was brought up.

L. *(I attempt to comfort the participant).* You're not alone F.

P. I know, but that doesn't make it any easier when you come to ... I did what I did with the knowledge that I had. I realised that he didn't want to work. He didn't want to go to work he wanted to go onto University. But he never got to go. All I could say to him was there's a little boy inside of you who really knows what you want to do, and you have to learn to listen to that. I think had come to that by now, but his father couldn't see that and his grandmother couldn't. He got the full brunt being the first child. I've often said that you should have three paper kids first or something that you work on and then screw them up and throw them away and start all over again. Heavens and he was a very quite child. He was taught to be well mannered. I came from a sporting family all my brothers played football and tennis, and sport was very important to us. S had no co-ordination he had nothing going for him and looking back now you put a kid into gymnastics or you would do something about it but we never did anything about it. Then I came along and he is so good at sport and so co-ordinated you know that I suppose we pushed them. S

was the academic one, and J was the sporting one. Now that isn't true, but that is the general thing he may have picked upon.

In short, the issues of reliability were dealt with by employing the following techniques; A journal was maintained throughout the research process, my biases have been placed up-front, I have alerted readers that I consider myself to be an insider, yet maintain the position that all researchers see and listen through filtered eyes and ears, I have included excerpts from the interviews to substantiate the claim that I used appropriate language and good interpersonal skills whilst interviewing. In addition to these, the same prompts were used for each interview. The prompts were sorted into a list and that list acted as the interview schedule. The prompts for all interviews were delivered in the same order.

Participants were asked to choose a location for the interview where we could be alone. I asked them to pick a place where they felt comfortable and to schedule two hours for the interview to avoid interruptions. I rehearsed the prompts prior to the first interview, and I used the pilot study to gauge the reliability of the prompts (Bell, 1993). This included obtaining input from my supervisor's.

Prior to interviewing, reviewers and supervisors were asked to examine the proposed interview prompts. Minor amendments were suggested. Interviews were scheduled so that all the primary participants did their first interview in the same week. This also applied to the second interview and to the interviews for secondary participants. This meant that I was able to concentrate on using the interview prompts in a similar contextual style. The first set of interviews were on getting fat, the second set on getting thin, and then the third set of interviews (secondary participants) set the social context.

The other issue confronting researchers is that of validity. Credibility of the data needs to consider both reliability and validity (Sparkes, 1998). Validity refers to the measuring process, and in this case refers to the effectiveness of the prompts in gathering data pertinent to the study (Bell, 1993). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) it is clear that validity can be addressed by researchers questioning the extent to which they would back their data and analysis against social policy.

Validity cannot be dismissed simply because it points to a question that has to be answered in one way or another; Are these findings sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them? (p. 178).

The issue is further complicated when considering the extent of control the researcher has when presenting the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 175). The point being that where there exists a power relationship between researchers and their funding bodies they may be under pressure to present their findings in a particular way (Germov, 2003). Therefore, all researchers have a responsibility to clearly outline the paths they took when reaching their conclusions, and name their funding body. However, because this is a postgraduate project, the control I have refers more to what information I include and exclude to support the connections I make in the analysis, than to any power relationship that exists between myself and the university funding the project. I have to be concerned only about the amount time I take to finish the project and that participants are respected.

A balance needs to be struck between participants disclosing and researchers taking these disclosures and examining them for their significance. In this project, participants had control of the data up to the stage of analysis. Each participant was asked to read each of their transcripts and sign them to endorse the transcripts as a true reflection of the interview. Participants were permitted to amend and add any additional data they thought would assist in the research process. This procedure validates the data from each respondent's perspective.

Upon completion of the pilot study, copies of the transcripts were handed to both principal and associate supervisors. They scrutinised the interview data and coded the

transcripts. Using the same transcripts, I also did a preliminary coding. This meant reading each transcript and plotting where stories converged, and differed. Once coding was complete, I met with my supervisors separately. It was agreed that the data was rich and relevant to the study question. Similar codes were identified by both supervisors and by me, and discussion centred on how to structure the thesis to maximise its findings. I then proceeded with the research.

The validity of these findings is that the stories gave rise to common themes. Where individual stories converged I analysed each story for symbolic meaning. The themes did not emerge immediately and the process took eight to nine months and is documented in the journal. The final product reflects my understanding of the data when concepts of self, social identity, bodyweight, and social control of the body are applied to the data. Richardson (1997) explains validity as a crystal that has infinite yet reflective qualities. I like the imaginary Richardson presents. In particular, the last sentence fits with my stand on the illusion of objectivity. What researchers see in their data reflects the angle of their ideological, sociological, and or psychological positions.

I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for the postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transformations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose ... (Cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 181).

## **Interviewing**

Semi-structured interviews were the foundation of the research process (Berg, 1989). The semi-structured nature of the interviews refers to the use of tested questions to prompt

participants to disclose information covering a wide range of social topics. Primary participants were interviewed twice. The first interview focused on discussing their experiences of having weight, and the process of weight loss. The second interview focused on discussing their experiences of having a subjective thinner body. The process allowed participants to focus on specific periods of their lives. Secondary participants were interviewed once. This interview was split into two sections. The first section concentrated on how they saw the primary participant prior to weight loss. The second half of the interview concentrated on how they saw the primary participant during and after weight loss. The decision to interview secondary participants was prompted by the interactionist perspective which informs this study. From this tradition, the question of how to gather information relating to how the subject is observed before and after weight could only be addressed by interviewing those who observed the weight loss as it occurred.

The interviews for both primary and secondary participants were semi-structured in design. This allowed participants to discuss openly their experiences in and on their own terms (Berg, 1989; Morse, 1994). In a semi-structured design, questions are formulated around a predetermined topic (Berg, 1989). The topic for this study centred on the experiences of men who underwent weight gain and loss. The questions were designed to allow the participants to explore their experiences of subjective embodiment and embodied interactions taking place in a gendered, class-based, industrialised socio-cultural context. For example, participants were asked, using the before photograph, to explain how they came to be that big. During the discussion, I asked participants to clarify points and elaborate on words used during the conversation. For example, one participant mentioned that he was aware that his size meant that he was discriminated against in night clubs. I asked him to describe that discrimination in terms of how it made him feel and what signs he witnessed to frame the interaction as discriminatory. Open, as opposed to closed, questions were used during the interviews. Closed questions can be restrictive (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985, pp. 20-21; Geldard, 1989). They commonly allow for one-word answers. Closed questions are used when looking for specific answers to specific questions. "Were you discriminated against for being fat" is



an example of a closed question. It calls for a "Yes, no" response. On the other hand, open questions allow for expression and expansion (Geldard, 1989). Using the same example, "Describe for me how you were discriminated against when fat" allows the person being addressed to either disclose their experiences, or to reject the question and state they were not discriminated against. As the answer is delivered, the interviewer is able to ask for elaboration on topics of interest and importance. For example, as the participant relays his story, the researcher is able to ask for clarification. If the participant did experience discrimination, and retells the experience, the interviewer can ask "What gave you the impression that you experienced discrimination?" "Can you describe how you felt?" "Can you describe what the other person was doing?" "What did you notice about their body language?" Or "Specifically, tell me what was said". This line of inquiry allows for a deeper exploration of the lived experience. The open-ended questions used in this study permitted such a level of inquiry as participants disclosed their experiences of weight gain and loss.

Geldard (1989), commenting upon open-ended questions for counselling, suggests that it is important to avoid 'why' questions. 'Why' questions, according to Geldard, generate rationalisations for action, and tend to clamp down emotions. Berg (1989) also suggests avoiding 'why' questions because they tend to elicit negative responses. However, rationalisations of action add to the understanding of a participant's course of action, as do negative responses. In order to avoid unsubstantiated inferences about behaviour, and to collect data that addressed both emotions and rationalisations, why questions were used in this study. By asking 'why' questions participants were given the opportunity to rationalise their behaviour, and not leave me to rationalise their behaviour for them. This meant the voice of the participant was not silenced by avoiding rationalisations. 'Why' questions were employed with follow-up questions to explore a course of action, or to seek explanation. It was found the use of 'why' questions did not produce adverse effects. A copy of the interview prompts for primary and secondary participants may be found in Appendix 3 (p. 261).

Data from the pilot study has been included in the results. After the data from the pilot study was analysed, and alterations completed, four more primary participants were recruited to complete the study. Prospective participants were sent an information pack outlining the research aims and methods. The information also explained the criteria for participation and contained a copy of the consent form (See Appendix 2, p. 255).

The pilot study comprised three (3) primary and secondary participants. The process indicated several design flaws that were amended. Firstly, upon initial contact, primary participants were asked to nominate a secondary participant, who was then contacted and sent an information pack at the same time as the primary participant. The first secondary participant was contacted and she agreed to be part of the study. However, the process proved inadequate for the study because I realised, during my first interview with a primary participant, that here was the key to finding the secondary participant. The interviews were a means to identify several key people in the participant's weight loss experiences. These key people were not necessarily the named secondary participants. It became evident that I needed to interview the primary participants first and from the interview identify several key people who could be considered as secondary participants. The term 'key' refers to the closeness of particular people to the primary participant as he lost weight. In some cases, it was a parent or relative, in others a partner or close friend. Essentially, I needed a person who was close to the primary participant during his weight gain and loss experience, and who was framed by the primary participant as important to them at that time.

Subsequently, secondary participants were not nominated until after the first interview. During the interview, significant names were noted as they were mentioned. After the interview a list was formulated as to who might be the most informative in sharing their observations of the weight-loss process. After the interview, names were prioritised by the primary participant. In most cases, there were two or three names on the list. The preferred secondary participant was contacted with substitutes already named should they decline. The preferred secondary participant agreed to participate in all cases. This meant that the secondary participant was of the primary participant's choosing. Processes to

empower subjects should be encouraged at all times to develop trust in the research and ownership of the process. (In the case of this research, the design flaw was acknowledged prior to any other interviews taking place. All secondary participants taking part in the pilot and main study were the preferred participants identified by primary participants).

Secondly, participants reacted emotionally to the use of photographs. The use of the photographs proved helpful in locating participants in time and space, and connecting them to former fat and thin selves. Lupton has commented on the use of photographs in research to focus participants on their emotions (1998: 151). However, it was also observed that the use of photographs can distract participants during the interview process. I found that participants became distracted by memories triggered by other symbolisms caught in the picture. These distractions helped in some instances, but hindered in others. This became apparent during the first interview for the pilot study, when the participant began to wander off in his response as he started to recount the histories of those in the photograph. Therefore, in subsequent interviews, the photograph was turned over after a short period to focus the respondent on the issues addressed by the questions. The use of photographs was continued because they facilitated the interview process by turning the attention of the participant back to having weight. They also proved helpful for secondary participants who were able to connect to the person with and without weight. In general, the photographs assisted in constructing experiences associated with weight gain and weight loss for all participants involved. They provided an impression of the subject to be explored.

### **Ethical issues**

Kimmel, (1988) and Morse (1994) identify the issues of privacy and confidentiality as key concerns, in the context of social research. Privacy refers to people, and the extent to which they wish to engage in society. Confidentiality refers to the use of information about people once it has been obtained. The four types of privacy described by Kimmel (1988) are: solitude; intimacy; anonymity; and reserve. Solitude refers to a 'complete state of privacy, where an individual intentionally separates themselves from the

mainstream' (p. 87). Intimacy, as Kimmel uses the term, refers to a relationship between the researcher and the participant where the researcher uses the intimate relationship to gather facts about the participant, and the need to instil trust to protect the participant (p. 87). Anonymity is where 'an individual seeks freedom from identification and surveillance in public settings' (p. 87), and reserve refers to the individual's right to withhold information (p. 87).

Anonymity and reserve are key concerns for this study. Both primary and secondary participants were assured of anonymity as a means of protection from identification. All participants were referred to by the first letter of their given name and were given a code number for identification. No person, other than the researcher, was aware of participants' identities. The issue of reserve is addressed by confirming with participants their right to withhold information they deem sensitive. Prior to each interview, I explained to participants that if they felt I was being too intrusive or that I was too close to a sensitive issue, then they needed say so and I would stop that line of questioning immediately. I explained to participants that they needed to take responsibility for the information they were giving, and they could ask me to stop recording at any time. There were several instances when participants did ask for the recording to stop, and there were several occasions when emotions took over. The researcher also has responsibilities. I took responsibility for the well-being of participants by clarifying what I was observing at the time. For example, where I saw participants look away, or start to fidget I asked whether they were comfortable with the question. At times, I saw participants get emotional over certain issues and I was mindful to consider their feelings and respect their privacy. In some of these cases recording was stopped and continued after a short break.

The issue of confidentiality is another matter. A breach of confidentiality may cause subjects a great deal of psychological harm (Reynolds, 1982). Usually confidentiality becomes an issue where a subject has revealed personal or sensitive information to the researcher. In this example, the researcher has an obligation to ensure that confidentiality is guaranteed, with regard to how the information is used. This study asked subjects to

reveal information about themselves that could be deemed sensitive. For example, some disclosed the changes in their sexual experiences with weight gain and loss. In response to this point, and to guard against a breach of confidentiality, the following procedures were employed to protect subjects (all points were approved by the University's Ethics Committee).

1. All recorded information is stored in a locked cabinet at my home address.
2. All data (transcripts and recorded) will be destroyed as of June 2006.
3. The only people who are permitted to have access to the data are the principal and associate supervisors, examiners, and the researcher.
4. No other researcher has access to the recorded information, or has permission to use the data, without consent of participants.
5. Primary and secondary participants have no access to each other's disclosures.
6. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview process. However, if participants indicated they wanted to withdraw from the study after the interview process had been closed, a process of consultation was suggested to resolve any issues concerning the use of the data. No participant indicated a desire to withdraw during or after closure of the interview process.
7. All participants were sent copies of the transcripts for signed approval.
8. Prior to interviewing, all participants read and were asked to sign a consent form outlining the research aims and methods.

The aim of the research was not to cause discomfort to participants, but to explore their relationship with others after achieving a subjectively thinner body. The study focused on researching subjective '*normality*'. No enduring adverse effects for participants has been observed. Prior to commencement of the pilot study, ethical clearance was sought and approved by the University's Ethics Committee. This requirement is standard for all postgraduate research and the research may not commence until ethical clearance is received.

## **Instruments and equipment**

Interviews were recorded using an 'optimus omnidirectional boundary microphone', and a 'Sony m2-r37' mini disc player. Each disc allowed for one hundred and forty-eight (148) minutes of (mono) recording time. The reason for using a mini disc player as opposed to a conventional tape player is that the mini disc player offers digital recording facilities, and is not prone to loss of material, or tape breakage. Mini disc players offer greater editing facilities than do conventional tape recorders. This allowed flexibility when transcribing, and when analysing material (May, 1997). Mini disc players also have a delete function that permits instant deleting of tracks. This provided the opportunity to delete certain passages of text, if required for ethical reasons, without losing any other material on the disc. The original data was transferred onto compact disc for storage. The final study comprised 14 participants and 21 interviews of approximately 105 minutes each.

## **Data analysis**

Interview analysis requires two conventions (Benney & Hughes, 1984, cited in May, 1997). Firstly, there is equality, which refers to 'respondents [participating] in dialogue in their terms' (p. 124). Secondly, there is comparability, which refers to the ability of the researcher to compare the responses of participants. Where there is a complete lack of interview structure, the task of comparison becomes difficult. However, in this study, a semi-structured interview process permitted comparability between responses.

The conventional method of data analysis, where a semi-structured interview process is employed, requires the researcher to code data relevant to the study, and the questions posed. This enables comparisons to be made. Coding is a general term used to describe the conceptualisation of data material into categories that offer provisional answers to the questions posed (Strauss, 1988, p. 201). It requires the researcher to examine the data and draw out similarities in each of the experiences of the participants. I listened to each interview several times in order to familiarise myself with the text. During this process, I

identified key words or phrases that were used to describe the participants' experiences of thinness and fatness. These key words and phrases became codes for exploration. I also transcribed each interview, giving me greater exposure to the text.

Analysis of the interview data included a focus on how participants constructed their identities within their social settings. The symbolic meanings placed on clothing, experiences, gestures and words formed the basis of the symbolic interactionist analysis. During analysis, the concept of '*bracketing*' was employed (Denzin, 1989). Bracketing is a term used by Husserl where the researcher '*brackets off*' the phenomenon for examination. 'The phenomena is deconstructed by being taken out of the world where it occurs' (Cited in Denzin, 1989, p. 55). Bracketing resembles an individual holding aloft an artefact for examination on its own terms without other artefacts influencing the examination. The artefact is then returned to the social world and its interdependence with other artefacts is examined and explained (Denzin, 1989). For this study, '*concepts of language and imaginary*' replaced concrete artefacts. It is the symbolic nature of language, both verbal and non-verbal, and visual images that are of primary importance for this study.

To summarise my position, objectivity is illusory especially where people are concerned. 'A central problem of interpreting the world is determining how, in fact, human beings proceed to do so' (Chomsky, 1971, p. 3). 'The science of persons is the study of human beings that begins from a relationship with the other as a person and proceeds to an account of the other still as a person' (Laing, 1965, p. 21). 'As no discourse or knowledge is value-free, there is no way of escaping this position, but it is important to be aware of one's position as producer and reproducer of certain discourses and practices ...' (Fox cited in Lupton, 1995, p. 13). Therefore, whilst bracketing is useful, it does not compensate for researcher bias based on lived experiences, or account for what the researcher is bringing to the analysis. Even by triangulating the data and in a sense placing the researcher as a mediator between sources of data, the researcher is still observing and reporting through filtered eyes, selective ears and particular ideological persuasions. Each individual is the sum total of his or her lived experiences, and these

experiences influence emotional behaviour, action and beliefs (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Nicoll, 1987).

For research to be transparent, a journal describing the context, experiences, behaviours, emotions and thought processes of the researcher, prior to, and during the research period needs to be kept. This will allow others to examine how the researcher reached his conclusions. This is described as an 'autobiographical motivational' process that is frequently used in qualitative research. It is otherwise referred to as an audit trail (Berg, 1989, p. 56). The journal requires researchers to discuss what they are bringing to the research process, and to what extent their lived experiences, and their experiences of the research process, have influenced their findings. Berg (1989) states that no researcher can eliminate the 'subjective motivational factors' underpinning any research (p. 56). The aim of such a disclosure is to bring the research alive 'over-rationalised, highly objectified, nearly sterile methodological accounts of field-work efforts are not *complete* (my emphasis added) descriptions of the research enterprise' (p. 57). An autobiographical motivational account of the researcher's lived experiences, and experience of the research process have been kept and is presented as appendix 1 (pp. 244-264) in this thesis.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations in this study. Firstly, participants were being asked to describe their experiences of fatness and thinness in a context that sought to understand how they have constructed themselves, the social other, and their experiences of the social other, in their daily interactions. There was a risk that participants would not be able to articulate these experiences. The researcher was aware of these limitations, and compensated for them by constructing questions that elicited discussion of the lived experiences of participants. The use of the 'before' and 'after' photographs aided this process. Splitting the interview process into two separate sections also assisted primary participants to explore their experiences by giving them time to formulate responses. All participants were extremely articulate in their interviews.



Secondly, the reality of researcher bias needed to be confronted. It was of primary concern for both supervisors. To address these concerns I kept a journal that described 'autobiographical motivations' (Berg, 1989) underpinning the research. Abstracts from the journal have been included in the discussion to demonstrate my intentions and motivations whilst examining the data and writing the thesis.

Thirdly, the study is being conducted in a Western industrialised nation. As such, findings cannot be generalised to those cultures that are not considered to be part of the industrialised Western world. Interpersonal interactions occur in the industrialised West framed through concepts of identity that cannot to be transposed onto other cultures. The industrialised West has often been accused of hegemonic practices that reflect a united ideological position on the structure of society. These practices include capitalism, personal freedom, free trade and the concept of individuality (Heywood, 2000; Johnston, 1985; Sercombe, 1996). With these in mind, I have presented the results as experiences which converged around significant symbolic themes. The experiences of bodyweight in this study are not reflective of all men, but of those men who participated in the study. In addition people in the industrialised West enjoy a level of comfort that exceeds survival. Therefore, Westerners have a different sense of self as a consequence of these structural, environmental and interpersonal factors. Self, as a term, refers to individual subjectivity and aligns with a liberalised view of the world where the social is supplanted by the individual self (Smith, 1985, pp. 24-55; Johnston, 1985, pp. 91-138). As a consequence, the concept of identity in relation to and in connection with body image may be purely a Western experience (Smith, 1985).

Lastly, the research is being conducted in a state within a continent that experiences extreme hot weather during the summer months. There is a culture of body exposure that may not be prevalent in other Westernised continents. Under these conditions, body exposure may be an expected norm, thereby exaggerating some of the phenomena under discussion.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical framework

### Sensing difference

## Introduction

Sociology can make the undesirable visible. It is not my intention to proclaim fat people as unhealthy, or conversely that thin people are, in contrast, healthy people. This is not a study about the health problems, and benefits, associated with fatness and thinness *per se*, but a study about the symbolisms associated with fatness and thinness when constituting self and identity during interpersonal interactions. As such, it explores men and their social relationships in bodies of different sizes. Therefore, it is my intention to address the social symbolic significance of bodyweight in relation to the concepts of self and social identity as defined by symbolic interactionists (See Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934).

Throughout the chapter I use the terms 'symbolic' and 'symbolism' to include the concrete and abstract symbol, and the processes by which symbols come to hold both social and subjective symbolic values. It is generally agreed that people identify with a range of symbolic images, both concrete and abstract, and in the process ascribe a range of subjective metaphors within social frameworks to give the symbols meaning (Brown, 1979; Hamachek, 1971, p. 35). 'Symbolic' and 'symbolism' are terms that incorporate those social processes. For this study, there is an underlying assumption that the symbolisms associated with thinness and fatness will affect the self-constructs of participants differently. This is in response to the claim that Western culture today, as a consequence of hegemonic ideological practices and industrialisation, is overly image conscious in relation to issues of the self and social identity (Billington, Hockey & Strawbridge, 1998; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

The central issue for authors such as Sturken and Cartwright (2001) appears to be the symbolic associations placed on images, and the power of identification to direct identity formation. Identification for these authors aligns with Aronson's account of identification where 'an individual's desire is to be like the influencer' and is based on the value attributed to the symbolic (Aronson, 1976, p. 27). The more popular and desirable the symbolisms connected to the symbol are, the more the individual wants to be like, or have, the symbol of desire. In the context of bodyweight, fat and thin symbolisms, to

some degree, are known to affect women's sense of belonging (See Bordo, 1989; Brown, 1989; Chernin, 1983; Edgley, 1990). The degree to which bodyweight symbolisms affect men has not been established. Hence the uniqueness and value of this study.

### **Theoretical considerations**

Theory underscores the way researchers interpret gathered data, and informs professional practice. Theoretical frameworks direct the researcher and practitioner; like a road map, they tell them what to look for, what to be mindful of, and what to dismiss. The symbiotic relationship between theory and practice reflects the same relationships between body and mind, individual and social. One cannot exist without the other. For example, the text here is a manifestation of a body, whether it is through typing or voice activated software. The body acts as the only testable means for expression. That is until such time that thoughts exist without the use of organic matter symbolically presented as the body. There is a need for the researcher in this context to be open to incorporating different theoretical perspectives to explain the research phenomena (Weiss, 1999). This provides a multi-dimensional account of the findings and adds depth to the research process. This was the opinion of Cooley (Cited in Dewey, 1948), who emphasised the need for an open-ended, as opposed to a restrictive, methodological orientation.

Knowledge requires both observation and interpretations, neither being more scientific than the other. And each branch of science must be worked out in its own way, which is mainly to be found in the actual search for truth rather than by a priori methodology (Cited in Dewey, 1948, p. 844).

Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study incorporates the principle that the body is the only site for expression, and that all language is symbolically laden with socio-cultural meaning. This study links several theoretical models that to some degree deal with the irrational, rational, habitual and sometimes downright confusing aspects of the human being. To address this complexity I have aligned authors who I interpret to be writing about similar concepts, problems and terms. For example, Mead's concept of self

(1934) incorporates an account on externalisation (a term he does not use) which has religious and new-age overtones. In light of this, I have read widely across a number of academic and non-academic disciplines to present a comprehensive interpretation of the symbolisms associated to fatness and thinness.

There are three basic premises set for this work: firstly, that society is about relationships. This means a relationship with the self, relationships with others, and a relationship with the physical environment (See Blander & Grinder, 1979; Burstyn & Smith, 1985; Cooley, 1964, 1983; Mead, 1934; McDermott & O'Connor, 1996). These three relationships are interrelated and influence one another through conceptions of social value, power and identity. Secondly, that human beings use the symbolic to construct self-concepts and social identities (See Baudrillard, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984; Cooley, 1964, 1983; Goffman, 1961, 1963a, 1963b, 1967, 1969; Mead, 1934). Finally, 'We're all earthlings, desperate for love, demolished by rejection' (Bordo, 1999a, p. 297).

## Symbolic Interactionism

The term symbolic interactionism refers 'to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings' (Bulmer, 1969, p. 78). Part of the process of becoming social is learning social constructions of reality through a common language (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Mead, 1934; Taylor, 1989). This, primarily, is about being taught and remembering the agreed meanings attached to cultural symbols. To make sense of the social world, symbols in any culture have shared social meanings. Symbolic interactionism is a discourse that explains social interaction by symbolically defining the objects used in the social world. A symbol is anything that stands for, or conjures up, a meaning for the individual, and group (Brown, 1979, p. 113). Symbols can be words, letters, objects, gestures, and emotions, abstract or concrete concepts. The primary premise for understanding symbolic interactionism is that individuals look to symbols as a basis for expressing themselves to others. Communication is, therefore, dependent upon a shared understanding of the symbols

used (Berger & Luckman, 1971; Denzin, 1992; Firth, 1973; Mead, 1934). In the context of this study, the shared meaning of fat and thin are discussed in a masculine and social context.

Interactionists are the observers, or voyeurs, in the qualitative tradition. However, the interactionist is not solely located in the social sciences. Researchers from other disciplines use the observational techniques of this practice for informed analysis (See Sacks, 1973, 1985; Foucault, 1980; Goffman, 1961, 1963a, 1967, 1969). The interactionist observes interpersonal behaviour and interprets their observations with reference to self and social identity constructions. The observation takes place usually on site, and outside of manipulated environments. The researcher in this instance is observing the subjective behaviour unhindered by the knowledge that they are being watched. The natural behaviours of individuals are the focus of the observation, and all parties in the interaction are asked to discuss the interaction and its symbolic meaning to each (Denzin, 1992; Lenney, 1999; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002).

Observation, for the interactionist occurs in all settings. Sacks observes 'the clinic, the laboratory, the ward are all designed to restrain and focus behaviour, if not indeed to exclude it altogether' (1985, p. 116). I agree with this comment, in regards to the sterile environment of the laboratory, and the structural restraints placed on patient behaviour. However, as is evident from clinical observations made by Sacks (1985, 1973) behavioural observations in wards and clinics have, from an interactionist point of view, been very fruitful (See Foucault, 1980; Goffman, 1961, 1963a, 1967, 1969; Sacks, 1973, 1985; Sullivan, 1947, 1953, 1964). This research uses observational techniques, that are not set in the actual time of the event, but that form the other aspect of interaction analysis, that is of introspection, based on the observations of the other (Denzin, 1992) [Ideally, I would have filmed participants' fat and losing weight. However, budgetary considerations in connection with filming and time-lines prevented such a project]. In this study, introspection refers to the individual's ability to reflect upon and place meaning on their own behaviour, actions and language (Mead, 1934).

Interactions are influenced by symbolic power dynamics. Drawing on the works of both Cooley and Mead, Sullivan established that there are power dynamics at play in every interpersonal interaction. Each interaction occurs based on the relationships that exist between individuals and the symbolic. Sullivan replaces Mead's concept of 'significant language' (1934) with his concept of 'significant others'. Sullivan suggests that a person's 'sense of self is shaped by ... people who are most influential in our lives ... [and how they] see and treat us' (Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 87). In addition to the work done by Sullivan, other authors have extended the interactionists' work to include other symbolic dimensions pertinent to the interactions that occur in a contemporary, image-conscious society. Langer (1996), uses the concept of symbolic violence. 'Symbolic violence', is a term used in reference to the power associated with cultural symbols, and how these symbolic associations are used to manipulate consumers and influence identity construction (Langer, 1996). Murphy (1994), uses the term 'symbolic control' to discuss the power relationship between symbol, meaning and action.

An important criticism of symbolic interactionism has been its failure to address the concept of power. In particular, the theory fails to acknowledge the power that cultural symbols have and how they are used as controlling social mechanisms (Langer, 1996, pp. 57-68). Langer's criticism is aimed at fragmenting Mead's theory of self. Langer rightly points out that 'the self does not emerge through interaction with an abstract, universal other', but with a particular family situated in a particular time in its history ...' (p. 58). Langer's argument suggests that power relationships between social symbols and the concepts of self and social identity would be different based on a range of demographic, historic, and socio-cultural determinants. Fragmentation of the social world means that there can be no universal or closed sense of self. This seems to have been underestimated by earlier symbolic writers.

Similarly, Foucault's (1980) work on subject constitution and bio-power primarily addresses the observed power relationship between professionals and individuals and the symbols used to direct individual and social behaviour. Whilst some academics may look askance at my inclusion of Foucault in the interactionist camp, yet his work on power and

powerful symbols is of significance to the analysis. His work on future prison systems outlined the power associations made by symbolic surveillance techniques. The darkened glass dome in supermarkets today bear testimony to his work about creating the illusion of surveillance to direct individual and group behaviour, regardless of whether or not there is a camera in the dome. Symbolic interactionism also needs to address issues of surveillance, concepts of power and the symbolic associations attached to symbols when discussing the meaning behind individual and social behaviour (Langer, 1996; Murphy, 1994).

Association is a powerful, often emotion-laden, concept, and the power of identification cannot be underestimated (Aronson, 1976). In his work, Aronson outlines the connection between identification and desire (p. 27). Advertisers play with, and succeed in, symbolically associating abstract concepts with consumer goods, so that consumers identify with the message associated with the consumer item (Bordo, 1993, 1999a; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). For example, the illusion that the owner of a pair of Nike shoes will come to enjoy sporting success and increased body mobility and speed is symbolically crafted into an advertisement. The consumer is being sold a product based on what the product will do for their sporting ability, career, image or social standing. The consumer can identify with the product on a number of levels. However, if the owner expects recognition arising from ownership of a pair of Nikes, then this requires an observer to respond in an expected manner, based on the shared meaning attached to the shoe. This scenario also highlights the other criticism of symbolic interactionism which refers to the construction of subjects as actors and their preoccupation 'with daily ritual, and enforced performances of stigmatized identities' (Denzin, 1992, p. 20). The interaction between the wearer of Nike shoes and the non-wearer could ultimately be documented as a meeting between superior and inferior shoe wearers, or between those who can afford Nike shoes and those who cannot (a traditional class analysis), thereby further cementing a hierarchical relationship between the wearer and non-wearer in the interaction.



From an interactionist perspective, the shoe scenario can be written in a manner that requires the subjects to conform to the way I envisage the symbolic interplay between them. If this were the case, there would be an element of control embedded in the story, and the story would have been written with the intention of highlighting the power of social symbols to influence interpersonal interactions. However, as written, there are several ways the scenario could be played out and this would depend on the participants' subjective intentions, motivations, and the relationship that existed between them, and importantly, whether they share an understanding of the symbolic social value placed on wearing expensive, sporting, footwear. The interactionist understands this dilemma, and in this case would seek to understand the subjective and social significance (if any) of wearing expensive footwear for each participant, and the significance for them when identifying with the power of the symbol to direct their interaction.

Therefore, in response to the criticism levelled at the interactionist construction of people as performers it is important to understand that social interactions occur utilising a range of social conventions, laws and subjective experiences, and that these come together and direct the flow of the interaction. In this context, each interaction is an improvisation and subjects use a range of symbolic constructs available to them based on the society they live in, social expectations placed on individuals, their socialisation process, and their lived experiences (Goffman, 1974; Read, 1993). Therefore, the symbolic associations attached to fatness and thinness may affect the flow of an interaction, dependent on the acceptance or rejection of the attached symbolisms.

Every-day life is synonymous with theatre, the only difference being that daily interaction is not scripted, nor is it absolute in its direction (Read, 1993). People at times abide by the social conventions surrounding multiple interactions, and at other times they do not. It would be a machine-like world if interactions were allowed to be scripted and directed in an absolute manner.

## Summary

Symbolic interactionism assumes that the search for self and social identity is embedded in the interplay between the individual (represented as a body), their environment, and their interpersonal relationships (Brown, 1979; Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934, Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996). This assumption draws analysis of the formation of self and social identity from the other theoretical disciplines of social behaviourism, structuralism and post-modernism. In brief, I am synthesising discourses to give meaning to behaviour and action of the 'embodied subject' in interaction with other 'embodied subjects' (Smith, 1990, p.1). Trans-disciplinary approaches of this type aim to synthesise findings and produce a comprehensive account of the data collected (Higginbotham *et al*, 1996). This pragmatic approach reflects DeVault's (1995) stance when he states that:

In pursuing such an analysis, as well as in conducting the interview. I will be most successful if I consider carefully what knowledge I need for a rich and robust interpretation and how my access to that knowledge is either facilitated or limited by my own particular location in history (p. 627).

Theoretically, interactions are complex. They are governed by self-concepts and social identities operating in a contextual loop (Brown, 1979; Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996). Identity, from an interactionist point of view, can be triangulated. For example, Sullivan, drawing on the character of Eliza Doolittle, in Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, states, '[you are] not only influenced by how others perceive [you but you] also react to that perception, which influences those who perceive [you], which in turn influences [you] and so on ...' (Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 88). Identities are interactively constructed and socially expressed. Identities are also socially observed, and framed. In the process, identity is reflected back at subjects. Therefore, depending on the setting and the people interacting, each individual in the interaction will differ in the way they see themselves and the interactive other.

Individuals in an interaction may continually evaluate and change their self-concept based upon what is seen, felt, heard, and on the power relationship that exists between individuals. This may come into conflict with, or affirm, their existing frameworks of self-construction and identity. In most cases, individuals usually look for environments to confirm their existing self-frameworks (Taylor & Bogan, 1989). The most significant object or symbol used by the actor to convey self and social identity is the body. The body as the site of all expression transmits information through verbal and/or non-verbal language. It is through the use of language (verbal and non-verbal) that the actor can convey both abstract and concrete meaning of their subjectivities (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986). There is, then, an assumption by symbolic interactionists who agree with this that actors will interpret the meaning attached to language correctly (Brown, 1979; Cooley, 1964; Goffman, 1967; Mead, 1934). This is not always the case.

## Chapter 3

# Development of Self & Identity

## **Introduction**

To imply that there is one theory explaining the concept of self is itself misleading. There are a number of theories attempting to explain how one comes to know who he or she is. The theories underpinning social behaviourism, social role theory, or post-modernism are, to a point, geared towards explaining the concept of self with the view of exploring the intrinsic social processes involved in its construction. I shall be using aspects of these theories to analyse the data, as I see there are points where they intersect and complement each other. This aligns with the work of Weiss, who states that ‘...I have focused on the multiple points of intersection between various disciplines, methodologies, and approaches to bodies and body images, an approach I believe is essential to do justice to the richness and complexity [of the data]’ (1999, p. 3). Synthesising the works of authors in this way seeks to establish an inclusive rather than an exclusive practice (Cooley, 1983).

## **Development of self**

There is a great deal of importance placed on self-construction. Not knowing who you are can lead to internal anxiety and social conflict (Blander & Grinder, 1979; McDermott & O’Connor, 1996; Rodgers, 1956). However, at the other end of the spectrum knowing too well who you are can lead to arrogance and being dismissive of others. A rigid self-construct does not necessarily lend itself to being inclusive of other self-constructs, and can, by definition, exclude other selves (Hamachek, 1971). Most people seem to fall somewhere between these two points and actively, or passively, set about constructing selves and social identities based on the need to fit in, yet often with the view to being distinct.

The opposite ends I speak of are sites for locating two important theorists from the interactionist perspective. Both Mead (1934) and Cooley (1963, 1983) spent their academic careers researching the construction of self and social identities. They are not normally placed together in this fashion, unless in a general sociological text, because

they represent different modes of thinking on the concept of self-construction. However, I am placing them together because their theories on 'self' rely on sensory information gathered from social environments. People *hear*, *see* and *speak* of difference. Self-constructs and social identities are formed primarily through the visual and auditory senses and through discourses available at the time (Hamachek, 1971; Kellehear, 1996b).

A fundamental concept underpinning symbolic interactionism is that of 'self'. In general, symbolic interactionists see the concept of self as defined by the result of the individual's relationship with others, and developed through the process of social interaction (Bulmer, 1969; Cooley, 1964, 1983; Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1964). According to Mead, the self is developed in relation to social experience, and 'is structured by the principle of sociability' (Cited in Denzin, 1992, p. 6). 'Mead's self is an *object of awareness*, rather than a system of processes' (Hamachek, 1971, p. 49). The self depending upon the social environment is formed through interpreting the reflected responses of others. There is one body, and at the core 'one' self. However, Mead established that people could use many scripts, and therefore project many identities, to interact with others based on their interpersonal and professional relationship, and based on the numerous environments in which they find their *self* (Cited in Anthis & Kelly, 1995, pp. 367-375). To this end, Mead concentrates on the use of verbal language from significant others and on what he calls significant symbols, as opposed to non-verbal language. Individuals are therefore reflexive in their language when interacting. They would avoid using negative or intentionally harmful language directed at the other based on the reaction they would have if the same words were directed at them (1934, pp. 160-161).

In contrast, Brown (1979) explains that Cooley understands the formation of the self through mirrored reflection. In this formation, the self and society become opposite sides of the same coin. It made no sense to Cooley (1964) to separate the individual from the social. The self is developed through interaction and reflection, and 'is based upon self-feeling and the imagined, inrajected judgements of others' (Denzin, 1992, p. 4). Essentially, Cooley is saying that each individual imagines their self from the point of

view of the other, or others (1964, 1983). When I interact with another, I am looking at the other for clues to tell me how I am being observed, an impression forms and I begin to create an imagined picture of myself from the others' perspective. Cooley refers to this as the 'looking glass self' and states 'Each to each a looking glass. Reflects the other that doth pass' (1964, p. 184).

The concept of the looking-glass self suggests that people are influenced by others as they imagine themselves reflected back by the other. An individual constructs a self-concept by imaginatively interpreting what is reflected back to them, and acting upon it (Brown, 1979, p. 116). There is one body, and a continually changing self. The self responds to changes in the perceived environment, rather like a chameleon. By observing the reactions of the other they gain a sense of their self in relation to the other. This may happen in one-to-one interactions, or by observing the looks of passers-by. The social performer in this analysis uses a mixture of gestures, language and consumer items to convey who they are as determined by the reflected responses they receive. They utilise these symbols dependent on the environment in which they find themselves. In their imagination, when they are negatively looked at, they would question their imagined self. This line of thought fits the observations made by Baudrillard (1992) and Goffman (1963a) when describing self-construction and observable identities, whereby the self is expressed through the utilisation of symbolic accessories and modified by the social reaction to these.

Both Cooley (1964), and Mead (1934), overlooked the notion that people form both positive and negative self-concepts, and act in ways to substantiate, reinforce and reject these. Part of this process has to do with personal interpretations of symbolic messages gathered during the enculturation process. It is important to understand a flaw in the interactionist approach to self-development. The flaw rests with constructing the individual as an open receiver who accurately interprets messages and takes appropriate action. The receiver depends on their life experience for decoding incoming messages. However, the sender may have an agenda that is not transparent. Cooley (1964) leaves too much to the imagination of the receiver, and Mead (1934) leaves too much to the

rational mind and assumes each individual has the ability to be empathetic and to act accordingly towards others. My criticism of this is that interpersonal interactions are imbued with emotions, rationalisations, motives and intentions which are not transparent. In other words, interpersonal interactions can occur based on subjective schemas that are invisible to those interacting. Negative and positive self-constructs influence the way people interact by establishing inferior and superior identities (Kellehear, 1996b, p. 7).

It is suggested that once positive and negative self-concepts have been constructed, all incoming information is filtered, and only that information which confirms the negative or positive is endorsed. Personal construct theory, as discussed by Kelly and Rodgers, insists that 'people react to what they interpret that stimulus to be' (see Shackleton & Fletcher, 1984). Any positive information disconfirming the negative self-concept or the negative concept of others is acknowledged, but does little to change the construct. For example, I know that I am fat. Any praise or incoming messages that attempt to assert that I am not fat are ignored or filtered out. If I achieve losing my fat stomach, my legs are now too fat. In other words, I may shift the focus onto another body part in order to remain fat. I can never admit to looking thin, as that would undermine my self-concept, which is to be fat. I am fat and will always be fat. This will continue to be the case unless I change and no longer see the need to be fat. To do this I first need to understand why I need to construct myself as fat.

The question I could ask myself is "what does being fat do for me"? The answer may lie in a self-concept that is best kept invisible and to do this I must either hide my self-construct and not discuss it, or avoid other selves that may challenge it. Therefore, I must weather the storm in isolation, or find people who will accept me without challenging my construction of self, which in this case, is to be fat. In the study, fatness, for some, offered a sense of safety from homosexual desires, yet for others it was symbolic of a comfortable sexual relationship. The difference is that the latter is socially condoned whilst the former is socially stigmatised. The symbolic importance of this is that symbolism can be used in this manner to exclude people from group membership. Thereby, forcing people into a marginalised position.



Mead's answer to questions about being accepted and rejected, and being accepting and rejecting, lies in the use of significant symbolic language, as adopted and perpetuated by different social communities (1934, p. xxi). Mead refers to the importance of verbal communication when social selves are constructed, and as such overlooks the importance of non-verbal communication when inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. Therefore, the individual hears that they will be accepted or rejected in the verbal language used to constitute subjects in different social groups. However, Cooley (1964) implies that people see acceptance and rejection in the visual expressions of the other. In this case, individuals rely mainly on their visual sense when ascertaining who the other is and where they belong, and whether they would be accepting of, or rejecting of, an interaction.

Mead's analysis leads to the assumption that the individual has a fixed self-concept that is proactive in substantiating itself within any contextual environment. It is a self that is self-assured, yet may use conscious deception for survival (Giddens, 1991). An example of this may assist an understanding of how Mead's self is interpreted. I am going to use homosexuality as an example, due to the continual stigmatisation this group endures (Petersen, 1998, pp. 96-109). "I am gay". In some environments this statement is acceptable. In other environments it could lead to conflict, avoidance, or exclusion from the group. If I wanted to avoid conflict arising from being gay, it would be healthy for me to avoid certain environments. Environments to avoid may be publicised by other gay people, or by gay media, or I may experience hostility and avoid them directly. However, in all environments I have choices. I can conceal my sexual preferences from those whom I construct to be unsafe. If I am fearful of hostility, I may want to hide my sexual preference. In these interactions concealing my homosexuality is fundamental to avoiding stigmatisation and passing as heterosexual which is constructed to be the normative identity (Goffman, 1963a, 1969). I do not necessarily construct a different persona but I may do so. This means being conscious and reflective in terms of my verbal and non-verbal language. This requires vigilance and constant observation. Through my language and by listening to the language of the other I am able to gauge their reactions to homosexuality, and to ascertain whether my sexual preference has been discovered.

However, underneath this persona, if used, I still feel the same. I know I am playing a game or role to mask my sexual preference from others. However, if I am not fearful of hostility or conflict I may choose to challenge those in the environment who are themselves either fearful, or unaccepting of homosexuality. Mead's self allows for this kind of interaction. The subject is self-assured and self-aware. Giddens (1991) would refer to this ability as reflexivity. The ability to reflect objectively on one's use of discourses, for Mead (1934), means being reflexive about one's use of language.

On the other hand, Cooley's analysis leads to the assumption that the self is reactive rather than proactive in its formation, and under constant change or in constant flux. It responds to what is happening and constantly changes to suit the immediate imagined external stimuli. It is self-g geared towards survival. Using the same example, "I am gay", I enter an environment and through observing the reflected responses of the other, or others, come to an understanding that gay people are not welcome here. I imagine the reflections of the other as having observed that I am gay. Whether this is due to the way I gesture or speak is of no consequence. The gaze of the other is imagined to imply my gayness has been discovered. I may frame the experience as direct alienation or homophobia.

Alternatively, or coincidentally, I may overhear a conversation framing gay people as undesirable, or sick. I immediately feel bad about myself and construct myself as being abnormal. I reaffirm that I am sick and not like other men. I have reacted in such a manner that I am disturbed and may exhibit low self-esteem (Rugel, 1995). At its extreme, Cooley's self is constantly trying to fit in but underneath is insecure about its self-construct. Cooley's self may attempt to conceal itself but, ultimately, underneath feels insecure about itself when exposed to environments that are framed as non-accepting. In this context, the individual may respond in social situations by constantly trying to please and fit in. Cooley's self, at times, is under siege and is self-anxious. The opposite of this is that they are self-assured by those who accept them (Hamechek, 1971). This is usually achieved by inhabiting those environments that are framed as safe (Goffman, 1974). Mead's (1934) self is capable of crossing between different social

environments without too much anxiety. Cooley's (1964) self is capable of crossing between different social environments depending on the safety of the environment.

Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds (1975) criticised the concepts of self offered by Mead and Cooley because in some instances individuals do not act as themselves, but act as others would have them act. Alternatively, they act in accordance with the social conventions pertaining to the environment in which they find themselves. The point is how do individuals know that the other is not putting on an act purely to get what they want, or to go undetected? In any interaction, individuals may withhold information to protect their self-concept by constructing a false social identity as they respond and react to the interaction process by displaying appropriate and expected behaviour. This criticism suggests that the concept of self that underpins the theory can become masked by displays of conventional role playing (Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1975). My response to the criticism is that Meltzer *et al* are placing two concepts together that require separation, and that deception by definition requires creating the illusion of conventional role playing.

The 'self', as an interactionist observes it, is different to an identity. Both Cooley's (1964), and Mead's (1934) selves are singular in formation. The difference is that Mead's is a disembodied self (1934 : 136), whilst Cooley's concept of self is primarily an imagined yet embodied concept (Cooley, 1964 : 184). Cooley's is prone to change dependent on the environment, yet Mead's is not. Mead's self is essentially static once formed (1934). Cooley's self is expressed openly when it feels safe and secure and will seek these environments. Otherwise it is self-conscious about its self in imagined hostile environments. Mead's self, being self-assured and self-aware, expresses itself by projecting an identity that will fit in accordingly, thereby having the ability to hide its true self. This is the point of criticism to which Meltzer *et al* (1975) refer to.

They are highlighting Mead's concept of social identity where the self is able to deceive those around it into believing it is one of them. The criticism is better understood in terms of the failure of Mead to engage in the power dynamic at play between competing selves

and their expressed social identities, and the way these are framed by observers. In other words, I have a choice in the ways I express my self, thereby projecting a sociable or hostile social identity, but in a social context my projected identity may be observed to be myself, and this may differ from who I believe my true self to be. There is often a difference between one's subjective self, one's expressed/projected self (self identity), and one's observed self (social identity). This affirms that there can be more than one self, contextualised to observing the differing identities expressed and projected in both the private and public spheres of social life (Bordo, 1993, 1999a; Lupton, 1998, 2000). This leads into the next criticism levelled at Mead's work on self-constructs, which is that he portrays self-construction as a disembodied process.

Can an individual lose or change a body part and not be affected in their concept of self, as Mead proposes (1934, p. 136)? Mead assumes that because his concept of self is disembodied, the body plays an unimportant part in self development. I take a different view based on my work in the disability field (Lenney, 1999; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). In the case of Mead's proposition, I agree that in private this may be the case: that is, the loss of a body part may not impinge on the subject's sense of self, but even here the individual will be prone to scrutiny and projections of difference depending on what part of the body is missing or changed. This could lead to the person being avoided, pitied, or excused. Subjectively, the subject may want to disembody their self-constructs, thereby distancing their selves from the disabled body, and or body part. Disability discourse is rich with such accounts (See Morris 1989, 1991; Oliver, 1996). In this discourse, the symbolism attached to dependency influences the way subjects with a disability frame themselves, and are framed. Conversely, there can be both negative and positive changes to self-constructs when modifying the body through choice, or where the body is modified by accident or force (Blaser, 1996, pp. 40-42). In the case of breast implants, the person could be criticised, envied and admired at the same time by observers, whilst feeling subjectively confident, self-assured and yet ambivalent to the projections from those around her.

The power of symbols to redirect a person's social standing is something that the interactionists were unable to foresee. In an increasingly image-conscious social world, the power of symbols is unprecedented when it comes to identity construction (Brown, 1979; Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; Wearing, 1996; Wrenn & Meneke, 1975). To become disfigured may be read symbolically as being less than a fully-functioning individual. The person is discredited and devalued because disability currently symbolises individual dependency and stigma (Goffman, 1963; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). The issue here is whether disfigured individuals accept or reject the assumption. In their social circles, they may have little choice. It would seem, then, that the concept of self is far from static. It changes, based upon people's experiences of themselves, their experiences of others and their experiences of their social environments. It follows that the concept of 'self' is not as fixed as Mead suggests (Mead cited in Anthias & Kelly, 1995, pp. 365-376), and the process of self construction is an embodied process.

If I construct my 'self' based on the reflected appraisals, or responses from others, then, if a part of me changes, the reflected response to this change, negative or positive, will cause a change in how I see my 'self' in relation to the person with whom I am interacting. Hence the importance, in this study, of interviewing significant others. Other examples of selves changing include people diagnosed with terminal illnesses, and people experiencing the aging process (See Hancock, Hughes, Jagger, Paterson, Russel, Tulle-Winton & Tyler, 2000). The change, whether it be disability, aging, illness, or weight gain and loss, is seen to affect *who* the person is in the eyes of the other. This external pressure to change my 'self' can be unsettling and can result in conflict. The 'other' may frame the inability of individuals to accept their new imposed self based on their changed self-image as their inability to accept their fate (Morris, 1991; Oliver, 1996). This study is specifically designed to explore the tension between subjective constructions of self and imposed self-constructs as a result of weight loss and gain, by interviewing the men concerned and a preferred significant other.

The paradox here is that individuals may display rigid constructions of self indicating over-confidence and resistance to change. This aligns with Mead's analysis, or they may modify their construct of self suiting Cooley's analysis. It seems plausible to suggest that individuals slide between two extremes dependent on a number of determinants including contextual power relationships (Becker, 1963; Game, 1991; Goffman, 1959, 1963a; Foucault, 1980; Hamechek, 1971; Sullivan, cited in Muss, 1996; Wearing, 1996). At one extreme, Cooley's self is constantly seeking reassurance from others about who they are, and could appear to be neurotic and overly self-conscious. At the other extreme, Mead's self is unaffected by anyone or anything. In this context, the individual could appear arrogant, static, inflexible and self-absorbed. The extent to which the self is constructed through the reflected responses of the other forms a key component in the discussion in this study which addresses the differences experienced by men in their self formation as they lost weight.

### **Social Identities**

There are several ways of looking at the question of social identity construction. It may be that social identities are purely behavioural concepts. Each person constructs a repertoire of behaviours for interacting with others in social environments. People see themselves, and are seen by others, as the sum of their behavioural traits (Shackelton & Fletcher, 1984). Acceptance or alienation is based purely on observable behaviour. Behaving in accordance with the behavioural standards for any social setting will more than likely bring rewards and establish a positive social identity. However, if a person behaves in a manner that is incongruent with the behavioural standards for the setting then, depending on the degree of their aberrant behaviour, they may be cautioned, disciplined, punished, alienated, or shunned. Conversely, they may be pitied, attended to, and cared for. In the former case, the person's social identity could be framed and interpreted as different from the norm and accordingly be given the label of social deviant (Becker, 1963). As a consequence of this, they could be 'othered' and constructed as be socially inept (de Beauvoir, 1949; Wearing, 1996). Such is the case for people dealing with a range of intellectual, physical or mental disabilities (Lenney & Sercombe, 2002;

Taylor & Bodgan, 1989; Wolf, 1994). Conversely, if the behaviour meets the behavioural standards of the setting, the person may be accepted as a friend, or an acquaintance, or at least be seen to fit in, becoming behaviourally invisible. However, the degree to which behavioural conformity in environmental settings is enforced will depend on the environment and the power relationships between individuals and groups (Sullivan cited in Muss, 1996; Shilling, 1993).

Social identity is framed by how individuals want to express their self concept within a social environment; by how individuals see each other; and by the way individuals perform in public and social arenas. Social identities, as constructed by the individual and observer, need to reflect the expected norms for any given environment. Information about these expectations is gathered through observation, and verbal questioning and is often communicated by those who are aware of the social expectations required for a particular setting, to those who are unaware. Social identity is found in the visual, behavioural, and linguistic clues people transmit (Goffman, 1963a; Maslow, 1956; Rogers, 1956; Skinner, 1974; Denzin, 1992). Through these processes people shape their selves and are shaped into identities for the purposes of distinction, allegiance and alienation. However, the interpretation of social identity is based on a shared understanding of the clues transmitted. This requires an accurate interpretation by persons receiving symbolic transmissions. Here there may be slippage between the intended messages being sent and the messages as they are received. How the receiver acts may indicate the degree of accuracy in their interpretation. However, it is apparent that an accurate interpretation does not always occur. Misinterpretation can lead to abusive or awkward interactions, needing some, if not constant, clarification (Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). This works the other way round, where the transmitter sends an unintentional message by using inappropriate or confusing symbolic language.

All language is the process of symbolic association. When I use the word fat or thin in a conversation the immediate image the words convey will be different for each person included in the interaction. Each person will have a subjective parameter for these words, and they will frame the fat or thin person within a social identity thereby establishing a

reference point for the fat or thin person. The power of language to influence identity constructions became apparent when interviewing primary participants. 'Fat', in contrast to 'over-weight', as a term, held negative symbolic associations for some, whilst for others it did not. [This could be explained by associating the term 'over-weight' with a more medical approach to explain excesses of body fat? This was not clear from the interviews, but some participants did prefer me to use the term over-weight in place of fat when interviewing them. I respected their preference].

Subjective construction and projection of social identities require using language that reveals the self to others (Taylor, 1989). Social identities are constructed to leave an impression of who/how the person creating the impression wants to be framed/observed. In the context of identity, life is spent observing people to ascertain who they are and whether they would be accepting and open to an interaction, or, conversely, whether they should be avoided. The subject in this example is also the object of the other's observations and deliberations towards approaching or avoiding. Symbolic information is gathered through the senses and interpreted on this basis when an interaction is imminent, or when assistance is required. In this way people sense whether the other is different to themselves and the extent of the difference is calculated using symbolic values attached to social symbols. In short, alienation from, and allegiance, to the other is decided upon by comparing who the other is to the observer. The identity of the other is formed, rightly or wrongly, by interpreting the symbolic meaning of what is seen and heard. In the West, identity construction frames all interpersonal interactions (Gahagan, 1984; Goffman, 1959; Hamachek, 1971; Taylor, 1989). Identity construction also frames all social roles ascribed to and performed by individuals. Social role theory is another means to ascribe social identities based on a number of social determinants including class, gender, race and disability.

Social role theory assumes that multiple social identities are formed through the roles each person performs on a daily basis. Sullivan's work on role formation suggests



the concept of social role describes the capacity of the person to make fluid shifts in form, in varying measure, in accordance with the adaptational requirements of the person's position in society. This is, in essence, the process of social adaptation. Under pressure, the individual may react to the social pressure with compliance, protest or withdrawal (Johnson, 1952 : 208-209).

The question of who people are is answered by identifying with the roles they assume, or the roles that have been socially assigned to them. For example, there is usually a distinction made between what are masculine and feminine roles. Each role comes to have a set of social expectations attached to it that are socially defined and require degrees of subjective acceptance. Failure to perform the role may mean being socially condemned as incompetent, or abnormal (Connell, 1979, 1995). Opposite to this is the attachment and identification to performing roles well. The person becomes overly connected to the social role under discussion. An example of this is the role Yul Brynner played in the stage and film versions of the 'The King and I'. Yul's role of the king was reported to be performed by him on and off the stage. He became the king, no matter where he was, and was consumed the role (Brynner, 1989). Thereby, the roles individuals play may become too appealing in certain contexts, especially if the role endorses a power relationship between the individual and the social other.

One of the central criticisms of gendered role theory is that it can lean towards biological determinism and gendered exclusion from the role (Connell, 1990). In a deterministic context, males and females would have set gender roles, and failure to meet them, or performing non-gender specific roles, could mean questioning the individual's sexual identity. This was Butler's (cited in Weiss, 1999, p. 20) main premise, in relation to the body, where she asserts that the body cannot be separated from the cultural expectations placed upon it. The expression of gender roles, that is 'doing gender', will always require a body for its cultural expression. However, there can be distinction made between the person and the role although that distinction can become blurred (Connell, 1979; Van Krieken *et al.* 2000). The problem is that 'role theory [seeks to] create a false unity' (Connell, 1979, p. 10). In this context, role theory attempts 'to attribute a kind of

homogeneity to social life' (p. 10). This attempt at social analysis is too simplistic when, as Connell argues, at its best, role theory provides '[prescriptive] ... sets of actions (role behaviours, tasks) whose performance constitutes the enactment of the role. [The theory] is unable to deal with the complexities of the interaction and presume a linear line of action and reaction' (Connell, 1979, p. 10). Connell's analysis refers to the improvisation I spoke of earlier, whereby role compliance by both parties is required if a linear line of action and reaction is expected. It is agreed this does not always occur. Interactive settings can only be prescriptive to a point, and subjectivities can be manipulative, deceptive, and pleasing all at the same time.

In today's social environment, it is agreed that individuals do perform certain roles in order to function in society, and that roles do have prescriptive expectations attached to them. The issue for people today is that they perform multiple roles, and identity formation based on these becomes fragmented and inconsistent. Social identity in the context of role theory assumes that the individual will perform the expected role to a level of social competence in accordance with the social expectations placed on that role (Sullivan cited in Johnston, 1952; Connell, 1979). Social competence is the ability to sustain the narrative underlying the image being presented at any given time (Sullivan cited in Johnston, 1952; Giddens, 1991). This can also be referred to as identification with the role (Butler cited in Weiss, 1999).

Identification is an important concept in the formation, expression and performance of social identities and social roles. Butler's work on sex, gender and the body plays with the concept of identification in the following way:

...If to assume a sex is in some sense an "identification," then it seems that identification is a site at which prohibition and deflection are insistently negotiated. To identify with a sex is to stand in some relation to an imaginary threat, imaginary and forceful, forceful precisely because it is imaginary (Cited in Weiss, 1999: 36).

The point for Butler is that identification with a sex or certain body image lends itself to be exclusive of other sexes or body images. For example, if I identify with the male sex I stand in relation to the imaginary threat of the female sex to undo or challenge my identification. I also, in the act of identifying with maleness, stand in opposition to any negative and positive stereotypes and prejudices aimed at women, and at the same time, stand in accordance with any negative and positive stereotypes and prejudices aimed at men (Aronson, 1976, p. 183). Yet if I do not identify with the male sex (and I am a man with male genitals) then in my imagination I am open to be attacked by both men and women who may construct me in deviant, stereotypical ways leading to interactions imbued with prejudice and stigma. Identification lends itself to the need to be located somewhere, with somebody, for protection, security and stability. Yet it also affirms for observers with whom the person is not identified. The same process applies to identifying with social roles and performances. In this case, it also applies to identity. Men in this study may identify with certain body images and identities, or with the expectations placed on their social performances of fatness and thinness. The implication of this with regard to the construction of a self-concept and social identities are unclear and lie at the core of this study.

Social identities, to some degree, are formed through role affiliation. However, role formation is questioned by integrating the validity of those in positions of power to impose role constructs and therefore social identities (Becker, 1963; Connell, 1979, 1995; Van Krieken, et al 2000). The key question here is "Who gets to decide what a role incorporates"? Moreover, who decides, "Who should be performing the role"? This line of enquiry parallels Foucault's analysis of 'constitution of the subject' where professionals are in a position to impose labels onto individuals and ascribe them with a particular social identity. The individual's identity then reflects the identity attributed to the group. In this process, those in positions of power tend to use their position to impose constructs without consultation. Foucault's (1980, pp. 166-182), analysis is often used with reference to medical and other oppressive structures which exert power over patients and people. In the medical context, patients are often passive in the construction of their identity, and have little opportunity to challenge the passive patient construction. How

issues of power and authority play out in the context of men's body image, and role performance, form part of the fabric of this study.

### **Foucault on issues of symbolic power**

Social life exists through symbolic interactions. Embedded in these interactions are issues pertaining to self, identity and social positioning. As Kellehear writes:

The formation of identity may be seen as being influenced by the major groups to which one is exposed in family, at school and at work. The role of one's social position within any of these environments is also important to the kinds of values and attitudes one may come to hold.

An important key to understanding the social processes operating at this level is the identification of how others treat you in that social position, because it is the variable ways that others treat you that shape one's experience of being in a certain social class ...member of a gender or ethnic group, or holding a certain [occupational] status ... (1996b, p. 7).

Symbolic interactions between people claiming a particular social status or position require a shared understanding of, and conformity to, the symbolisms being projected. In this context, symbolic interactionists envisage social control to be maintained through symbolic recognition of social positioning. Uniforms are symbolically, indicative, of this process, they establish solidarity and group conformity and in relation to each other they hold status determined in some cases by what they afford the wearer. Some uniforms are symbolically more powerful than others by virtue of the social mandate symbolically inscribed within them. A police uniform calls forth a different response, from both wearer and observer, when compared to the uniforms worn by fast-food operators, or compared to those forced to wear school uniforms. However, where uniforms do not exist or where they are constituted from certain fashions, for certain subjects, symbolic social positioning is maintained by observing and respecting other symbolic clues.

In most cases, social control through symbolic positioning works using a range of social determinants. Each have their particular claim to symbols, which symbolise their group affiliation, thereby validating their social identity. Class, age, disability, race, occupational status, and ethnicity have been established as primary social determinants affecting people's lived experiences. Any combination of these places people in relation to others, and this positioning is used to infer a power relationship in their interactions. The impression the physical body projects, and the impression created through the adornment of identity-establishing consumables, places the body as the pivotal point for symbolic control. At this point, Foucault's work on technologies of power and docility intersects with the interactionist's concept of symbolic control.

From Foucault's work on the body, there are two central issues to be discussed which can extend the work done by the interactionists (See Foucault, 1980; Kirk, 1994; Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 1985). Firstly, there is Foucault's work on discipline and the docile body which points to the way social power is used to determine a normative body image for subjects to achieve, and the processes used to imply abnormality and resistance (Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 1985). Secondly, there is his work on the power of the overseer's gaze, and other technologies of power that are used to promote and maintain transformations toward sanctioned normative images (Smart, 1985). In this case, fatness becomes a symbolic determinant which constitutes subjects as unhealthy and abnormal, and creates a need for them to change their body image. However, thinness is also becomes a symbolic determinant which constitutes subjects as unhealthy, and in need of letting-go of their controlling, yet socially-condoned, identities.

Foucault's (1980) analysis of power suggests it is an elusive, complex system of exchanges and interactions. Prisons, schools, and mental hospitals are three of the environments he analyses. His work incorporates a subliminal element. The symbolism associated with surveillance are meant to reinforce conformity to social standards. The watched come to act in ways that the watcher prescribes utilising technologies of power where surveillance is concerned (See Foucault, 1980; Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 1985). It is evident that Foucault was interested in the West's preoccupation with surveillance of its

subjects, and the implications of surveillance when discussing social control, discipline and punishment (See Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 1985).

Foucault's conceptualisation of power is 'neither as an institution nor a structure but as a complex strategical situation, as a multiplicity of force relations, where there is power, there is resistance' (Smart, 1985, p. 77). State surveillance, through technologies of power, includes the power to observe, the power to hear, and the power to inform. This literally means the power to observe what subjects are doing, the power to hear what subjects are saying, and the power to tell subjects who they are and what they should be doing. The aim is to maintain a degree of social control through the subjective internalised fear of discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1980). There are a myriad of ways the State can achieve this, but primarily it rests on the ability of the State to influence subjects to watch, hear, and speak on its behalf and in accordance with known social norms (Rabinow, 1984), producing a 'systematic homogenization of thought' (Murphy, 1994).

For Foucault (1980) the body is an entity subjected to disciplinary power. In his analysis, he suggests that disciplinary power directed towards the body ultimately produces what he termed 'docile bodies' (Rabinow, 1984). Docile bodies for Foucault (1980) are 'bodies that conform to imposed transformations, improvements, conform to regulations, constraints, prohibitions and obligations imposed upon ... [them]' (p. 180). Foucault locates the mechanisms of power for the production of docile bodies in the State's ability to coerce its subjects to comply with a normative standard.

The evidence of the docile body's existence is found in those institutions where compliance of the subject is enforced. This is often achieved through constructing an environment where the subject internalises the feeling of being continually watched for non-compliance to the norm, thereby performing docility. Non-compliance to presenting a normative standard would then result in forms of institutional punishment (Foucault, 1980; Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 1985). For Foucault, power and resistance emerge together (Smart, 1985). In the context of this research, as the state attempts to condition subjects in

certain health practices, at the same time, there will be resistance to the conditioning message. However, I must make it clear that docility does not necessarily imply subjugation of the body, but rather the following of habitual practices that meet required institutional ends.

Foucault, using Bentham's work on the Panopticon (Foucault, 1980, p. 146), refers to the importance and power of the overseer's gaze. Bentham, according to Foucault, is the mastermind behind contemporary, technological, observational devices (p. 148). Today, his ideas are embodied in the concept of creating illusionary surveillance. In this context, Bentham relies heavily on the sense of sight, and the fear of being watched, in order to establish control and conformity to a normative standard. However, Foucault (1980) was mindful to state that 'the procedures of power that are at work in modern societies are much more numerous, diverse and rich. It would be wrong to say that the principle of visibility governs all technologies of power used since the nineteenth century' (p. 148).

In the production of docile bodies there is an assumption that individuals will co-operate with the mechanisms of power that disseminate scientific information in regards to the care, maintenance and presentation of the body and bodily parts (Rabinow, 1984). In this scenario, there would be a normalising judgement which imposes a body-homogeneity (p. 196). Therefore, cultural, racial and other bodily differences become deconstructed and fused, as the imposed homocentric ideal becomes a reality. In this example, bodies are seen in terms of their ability to function within socially prescribed ideals. It follows that normality is socially observed with reference to the body's ability to reflect and perform to these ideals. The term abnormality is then attached to those bodies which fail to produce and function within idealised normalising parameters. Therefore, homocentric, idealised body-images become the benchmark for comparing normality with abnormality. The docile body exists as praxis of the State's ability to perpetuate a normative image by rendering the body to institutional discipline (Foucault, 1980). In this study, the impact of the homocentric ideal is discussed with reference to men's bodyweight, their sense of self and expressed identities.

Currently, social institutions employ technologies of power to maintain control, stability and security. Their power flows through and manifests itself in the way the individual comes to internalise their messages. The message influences the way people look upon, hear and speak to others. The State has to rely on the individual to observe, speak and hear on its behalf. This requires the individual to be indoctrinated into, and be reflective of, socially condoned ideals. In Foucault's words:

The 18th century ensured the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions. By such means power, even when faced with ruling a multiplicity of men, could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one (1980: 151-152).

Foucault stated that the gaze or 'hierarchical observation' relied on 'eyes that must see without being seen' (Rabinow, 1984, p. 189). Rabinow goes further and suggests that Foucault saw that the ideal for the State was to be reliant on 'each gaze ... [forming] a part of the overall functioning of power' (p. 189). That is, that each person would look upon the other as if the State were looking upon them. The visual image is of a series of eyes gazing in judgement, and in the process instilling fear which is manifest in the belief that authorities watch everyone continuously. No one can escape State and institutional surveillance. This form of hierarchical observation relies on the State's ability to indoctrinate each member to reflect its ideological position. Each member of society then acts as if the State is continually observing them, and in conjunction acts on behalf of the State. The result is that each member becomes part of the machinery of power. The watcher becomes the watched. The individual becomes the social. The distinction between the private and the public collapses. The ideal is that individuals eventually become their own overseers in all interactive and non-interactive settings (Foucault, 1980, pp. 155-162). The individual becomes self-regulating. The extent to which men in this study were influenced by the overseers' gaze to lose weight and embody a thinner identity is discussed with reference to the power of the social other to direct action. This study also reveals the resistance tactics employed by individuals to escape observation.



## Summary

To a significant degree, people judge others based on their physical appearance and body size (Bourdieu, 1977, 1978, 1984; Goffman, 1963a; Hamachek, 1971; Lasch 1979; Shilling & Meller, 1996; Sartore, 1998; Thone, 1997). The judgements a person makes of another form a framework, which, in turn, is based on pre-conceived ideas of what their appearance and body image symbolically convey. When interacting, people use frameworks transposed onto the other (Goffman, 1963; Lenney, 1999; Lenney & Sercombe 2002; Sartore, 1998). During any interaction, regardless of contact, the other's personality, likes and dislikes are created to form an encompassing picture. It is inconceivable for us not to judge others by their appearances; and in so doing, to attach a set of behaviours and characteristics to them. Body image is seen as a projection onto others of our self and social worth (Chemin, 1983; Featherstone & Turner, 1995; Lenney, 1999).

In the case of body-image, one's life can be consumed with projecting a likeable public and private image, or at least projecting an image that does not draw stigmatised attention towards it. This means subjects need to be vigilant about their embodied performances and their symbolic expression of self through identities to social observers. However, where there is a need to protect oneself from harm, there is a need to hide any visible signs of difference that may result in stigmatisation or conflict (Goffman, 1961, 1963a, 1967; Oliver, 1996; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). In some cases, this cannot be done. For example, skin colour, in most cases, cannot be hidden, nor can the loss of mobility, or a limb (unless a prosthetic is used). In people's daily interactions, the body is used as an object to express themselves and to communicate to others their self concept and acceptance of social norms governing behaviour (Sartore, 1998). People use outward appearance, and a multitude of accessories to convey to the external world who they are, who they want to be, who they are pretending to be, or to which group they belong (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991; Giddens, 1991). The same applies to people observing others; they are using the same symbols to locate the person under scrutiny.

The concept of self forms the foundation for interactionist analysis. The most publicised explanation for this construct is that of Cooley (1964, 1983). Cooley's self is a self constructed through imagination. The subject observes the reflected responses of others directed toward them and constructs meaning by imagining what the look means. In this context, the theory of symbolic interactionism deals with the symbolic meaning attached to individual and group difference. Both Cooley (1964) and Mead (1934) are proponents of this theoretical tradition. At its core, symbolic interactionism seeks to explain how people form self-constructs and social identities. The theory of self and social construction refers to the meaning subjects place on their daily interactions and experiences as they occur. This is often within a socially gendered context where role theory is concerned (Brown, 1979; Connell, 1979, 1995; Van Krieken, et al, 2000). This study incorporates the core of these theoretical perspectives to understand the symbolic construction of identity associated with male weight-loss and its implications for interpersonal relationships.

It is evident that there are social codes governing any social behaviour. These are dependent on the physical environment, class or social affiliations, and the level of acquaintance between individuals. Becker (1963) writes that 'social rules define situations and the kinds of behaviour appropriate to them' (p.1). Actions within an environment can be right, wrong or misinterpreted. Those who misinterpret the actions of others can label the other as being different or as Becker suggests 'outsiders' (p.1). The right action, when produced by an individual, can render them invisible to observers. In contrast, the wrong action can make the individual visible, and open to criticism. This works differently given the environment and context. For example, in competitive sports the skill level of an action can render the individual overtly visible compared to the skill levels of other players. The key point for this study is whether weight gain or loss affected the visibility of participants in their social worlds, and how they interpreted the mirrored responses to their different bodyweights.

## Chapter 4

**Try this on for size:**

**A literature review of fatness, thinness,  
masculine-selves and socio-cultural identities.**

## Introduction

The extent to which men are their bodies is explored in this literature review. In terms of bodyweight, fatness, and thinness, men have been, generally, marginalized in academic literature. Therefore, this review incorporates an historical account of the body which maps the way the masculine body has been socially read in terms of self and social identity. The decision to include other selected topics hinged on their importance to inform me about ways of researching the male body in the context of body image and bodyweight. Hence there are sections on fatness and thinness, bodyweight, identity construction, health and responsibility. The question of whose responsibility bodyweight should be is outlined using an ideological framework that distinguishes between positive and negative freedoms (Germov, 2002a; Heywood, 1992).

This review also features the impact of capitalism on identity, and matters pertaining to masculine identity in relation to sport and sex, and the connection between identity construction and social behaviour. In brief, this literature review reflects the claim of social interactionists theories that one's self, as projected through multiple identities, is read subjectively, and informed symbolically. Lastly, there is a section on how difference is constructed through body form. The review suggests that sensing difference is a process of survival that pertains to knowing where one is likely to be socially included or excluded. The literature on which this chapter draws indicates the eclectic nature of research on male bodies.

The body is the means for all human expression. It is also the site for inclusion and exclusion, dependent on its observable form. If life is about social relationships (Sullivan cited in Muss, 1996), and people acquire a sense of who they are through the reflected responses of others (Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934), there is a need to understand the meaning given to certain body forms, and how these meanings are interpreted by individuals. For the interactionist, this happens at the interpersonal level.

However, at the structural level, bodies inform (those observing), who subjects are, and

importantly, where the subject belongs. Body form can indicate nationality, class, and cultural affiliation (Bourdieu, 1984). In the context of this study, I am researching how fat and thin bodies are included or excluded in the social world. At a structural level, every society imposes certain body forms as being acceptable or abhorrent, and to an extent asserts control over people through the regulation of their bodies (Foucault, 1980; Goffman, 1969).

The body as a site for regulation is one of the premises underpinning this literature review. The other premise refers to the individual interpretations given to body form in terms of a masculine identity. It is assumed that in an image-conscious society, masculine identities are tied to body images that transcend traditional conceptions where masculine bodies were foremost muscular and working public bodies (Buchbinder, 1994; Jefferson, 1998; Starke & Cartwright, 2001; West, 2000).

## Historical overview of the body and self

The fragmentation of the social world enables discussion of many identities and, in this context, many bodies. To provide an account on the historical developments and accounts of the body would mean to report on the range of social determinants affecting it. Social determinants such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, disability and class have and do influence how individuals experience themselves through their bodies when contextualised to different social groups (Becker, 1963; Bulbeck, 1993). This section provides a brief, historical view of social constructions of the body and the impact of these on one's sense of self.

The body is a carrier of social signs (Ferguson, 1997a). Its construction is both fluid and reflective of the historical and cultural context within which it finds itself. Ferguson in *Me and my shadows* (1997a, 1997b) describes the historic monistic and dualistic journey of the body and soul in Western culture. During the medieval period, the body came to signify the hierarchical order of the social world. Symbolically it presented the

hierarchical structure of the universe. The head represented higher intelligence and controlled the lower portions of the body. This metaphor also reflected the social hierarchy at the time (1997a, pp. 22-23). One's sense of self was reflected in the social whole. At this time, it was an open-bodied self (Lupton, 1998). This meant that dependent on one's position in a feudal society certain bodies were open to all, whilst others were closed to some. Under these conditions, the term self referred more to an organic group affiliation than it did to any notion of individuality. Individuality was at this time a foreign concept (Heywood, 1992, 1998; Sercombe, 1996).

From the Renaissance, the body took on a mechanistic metaphor. It could be self-regulating and was observed as an object in space and time. The concept of individuality and subjectivity began to be explored in relation to the body. It was a body that could choose to conform to social standards and thus reflect the economic tradition of capitalism (Ferguson, 1997b, pp. 1-6). As the secularisation of the modern, Western world took place, rationality and scientific observation came to speak of the body, as consisting of mind and self, rather than a body and soul (Featherstone, 1991; Shaffer, 1971; Zemach, 1992).

Under these conditions, the open-bodied self gave way to a closed-bodied self. The closed-bodied self refers to the individual being educated about their physical state of embodiment. The State, or those in authority, start to impose regulations for embodied social behaviour (Lupton, 1998; Shilling, 1993). At this time, the body is closed to most unless there is an overt power relationship. Certain people, in this case, the aristocracy, monarchies, or those with wealth, still had access to bodies of those of less social standing. In addition to the social complexities emerging, there were also social distinctions made between male and female bodies.

Historically, the female body has been accorded greater attachment with the natural order of the world. Women had the power over life. Their primary function, it was thought, should be that of reproduction and care (Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1982). The opposite was the case for men. Men were attributed with greater intelligence and strength. This meant

their bodies were public, working bodies. Their role should be that of provider, overseer and protector (Jefferson, 1998; West, 2000). Hence, the social world became divided along gender lines. A female's sense of self was defined by her nurturing and sexual roles in the private sphere, and a male's sense of self was defined by his aggressive and dominant roles in the public domain (Bulbeck, 1993; Seidler, 1998).

Drawing these concepts together, women were assigned to the developing private sphere, and their sense of selves were located in their bodies. A man's sense of self was dominant in, and reflective of, the emerging public sphere. As such, it was predominantly located in the mind (Bordo, 1993; Seidler, 1998). Masculine selves have been constructed through their embodiment of public lives. 'Men [were] more active in public arenas [and] their public image ... [formed] a large part of their private image [or self-concept]' (Oelberg, 1987, p.190). In other words, male identities were tied to their occupations and their bodies reflected this relationship.

The boundaries became set and traditional gender roles were established. This differs based on geographic location, levels of technology, and whether nation-States still had frontier lines. There were times and events which meant things changed a little, in particular during times of famine and war, but on the whole, women defined themselves in relation to their husbands, and the care of others, whilst men defined themselves in relation to the work they did, and the income they received (Orbach, 1982).

Undermining such functionalist constructions of society was Marx and Engels' work on class (1967). Social enquiry moved from an overtly functionalised view of society to embrace a critique including issues of diversity and equity. The term 'class' was used to describe the social stratification that occurred through income differentiation, access to economic resources and the means of production (Berger, 1973; Bulbeck, 1993). A person's sense of self was now contingent upon reflecting one's gender and class position in addition to national affiliation. At this time, the body came to reinforce this stratification and could symbolise social position. Plumpness indicated wealth. 'Bulging

stomachs ... were symbols of bourgeois success and an outward manifestation of ... accumulated wealth' (Bordo, 1993, p. 191).

In the middle part of the twentieth century, along with class analysis, feminism challenged the rigidity of the modernising social world (de Beauvoir, 1949). Biological essentialism may have provided ways to conceptualise the roles affiliated with masculine and feminine bodies, but these were challenged in terms of legitimating the oppression of women (Heyes, 2000). Traditional gender roles were questioned and redrawn, adding strength to the debate for dismantling the private/public divide, and allowing women permanent access to the market place (Crowley, 1992). Yet, at this time, industrialisation of the West was changing the relationship between people and the production of goods, and between people and consumables (Boecko, 1992). Social inquiry investigated gender specific circumstances in both the public and private domains. In response, headway was made in gaining equality for women in the workplace, but the objectification of the female body, in both spheres, was another matter (Wolf, 1991).

Equality for women meant opportunities for employment. However, equality between women for employment in certain areas was another matter. There were historical continuities which meant that being employed based on judgments and perceptions of attractiveness was something some women had to endure. The value attached to attractive and sexy bodies meant some women were intellectually devalued. As yet, men were not subject to this type of discrimination. Fat men could find lucrative employment (Bordo, 1993). Fat women endured bodyweight discrimination, and were guided by the capitalist market-place towards bodywork to enhance their employment chances (Bulbeck, 1993; Wolf, 1991). Bodywork, in this context, refers to improving the body with consumables, and using services which profit from fitness, and beautifying the body.

Women are now more likely to be economically independent of men (Bordo, 1999). Men are no longer validated by their ability to provide economic stability, or protection for their families. At this point in time, the protector role has become less significant. The armed forces, police and security guards perform the protector roles that were



traditionally the role of the husband, and local men. These services now employ both men and women. As such, men can no longer look to traditional occupational or social roles to confirm their masculine identity, or sense of self (Langer, 1996).

The cumulative effects of the historical developments in gender relations have culminated in a growing concern with masculinity, and what it means to be a man in the Western world. As Pow (2000) indicates, using Faludi's work, women no longer need men for emotional or financial support. Masculinity has often been defined through the male's ability to provide and protect (Bulbeck, 1993). If these are no longer pertinent to the construction of masculinity in the contemporary Western world, where do men fit in? How do they internalise and express their masculinity? What follows are several ways for interpreting the lived experiences of men in relation to bodywork, bodyweight and masculinity. This review suggests there has been a broadening of the masculine identity,

Masculine identities available today have come to rest as much on how a man looks, as on his ability to provide for and protect his partner and family (Monaghan, 1999; Shilling, 1993). The significance of the body cannot be underestimated in modern constructions of masculinity, or a masculine sense of self, and it is these that the present study seeks to explore in the specific context of thinness and fatness.

### **The body and social behaviour**

The body reflects both cultural determination, and changing attitudes (Epstein & Straub, 1991). Shilling (1993), points to the changes in Western culture which saw the body become subject to prohibitions, morality, and good behaviour. Spontaneity, acting on emotional impulses, came to be seen as intrinsically linked to the natural world of animal drives. Regulation of the body was necessary if civilised bodies, and 'individualised subjectivities', were to be produced (cited in Lupton, 2000, p. 213; Shilling, 1993). There was a need to separate the human from the animal, and the conscious from the instinctive. Or at least, there was a need to distinguish between those humans capable of changing their assumed, instinctive, animalistic drives, and those who

were not. For example, Mennell uses Elias's work to suggest gluttony and other dietary techniques were observed through concepts of social decorum and not health (Lupton, 2000, p. 214). Individuals had to learn to control their desires and emotional impulses by being aware of them. Consciousness was seen to be the answer. Controlling the body in this way meant the individual expressed a desire to conform to social standards aimed at improving the social world (Shilling, 1993).

Those of wealth sought to set themselves apart, materially, from the poor. This was achieved through creating physical divisions in housing, and through the ownership of material goods and manipulating resources (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1980). At a personal level, norms of appropriate behaviour for the body came to be based upon one's gender and social position. This included what to wear, how the body ought to perform and behave, and, in terms of nudity, how much of the body should be displayed. The language being used here indicates ownership of the body and bodies, and confirms Foucault's analysis of bodies subject to a process of social control (Foucault, 1980). Shilling's description of Elias's work explains the development of a distinct social aristocratic class. Inclusion and exclusion transcended, but included, material wealth. Codes of behaviour separated the haves from the have-nots. The visible, physical body became the site for social control and class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Refusal to abide by the new codes of behaviour resulted in punishment or exclusion from, in this case, the royal court (Shilling, 1993, p. 153). Embodiment was slowly emerging as an issue for social control which would require subjective acceptance and implementation.

Shilling contends body functions have been subjected to the progressive rationale that civilised bodies are bodies that behave according to a set of moral values (1993, p. 163). The term 'civilised bodies' was first coined by Elias to refer to the way the body was transformed from one which acted spontaneously, to one which acted within a set of regulations. Bodily functions needed to be hidden. The body needed to be presented in a pleasing manner. This form of regulation, as a consequence of progression, has seen the visual physical body now subjected to regulatory control. The legacy of these regulations has seen the development of self control, and self denial, in terms of controlling the self

from physical expression. There is now a reliance on the eye and ear to access desirable bodies. Before moral regulations came to be enforced, objects of desire were readily touched without consent (Shilling, 1993, p. 165). Today there are prohibitions in place that prevent social nudity. Women and men have to comply to these laws or risk possible prosecution. There also seems to be a social convention implying that certain body images, or bodies of certain sizes, should not be exposed on the premise that they are considered morally ugly (Erdman, 1994). One of the most pervasive concepts underpinning the attractive appeal of bodies is that of bodyweight (fatness and thinness).

Although Elias concentrates on body gestures and behaviour, the symbolic significance of inclusion and exclusion cannot be dismissed. A person's success or failure, in the context of acceptance, rests on presenting the right action, at the right time, to the right person or group of people. Becker deals with this construct and confirms that to display inappropriate behaviour in certain situations can lead to labels of deviancy being placed on the individual or group of individuals displaying the same behaviour (Becker, 1963). For this study, the significance of Elias's work rests in the construction of acceptable bodies based on acceptable behaviour and form. Acceptable bodies, in this case, are defined by bodyweight. Currently, the message from the media is that to be thin is acceptable and to be fat is not (Callaghan, 2000; Safe, 2000).

## Health implications

### **Introduction**

Contemporary Australian analyses about an obesity epidemic and numerous health campaigns to reduce weight, indicate that discourse about weight is generally couched in health terms (Safe, 2000). The originality of this thesis is that it extends the frame of reference to the implications of body weight in self construction, and when socially interacting. Nonetheless, issues of health were noted by primary and secondary participants. It is therefore important to explore the health implications of weight gain and loss for respondents in this study.

For some, being fat or thin is a health issue (O'Connor, 1999; Safe, 2000; Watts, 2001). This section outlines the tension in the literature concerning health and the body. It reflects the ideological tension between the individual and society (Heywood, 2003, pp. 25-36, 107-111), which, in turn, reflects the debate about whose responsibility it is for maintaining a healthy body or healthy bodies (Egger, Spark & Lawson, 1990; Hetzel & McMichael, 1987; Callaghan, 2000). In the final analysis discourses on health and the individual, refer to the centrality of choices in relation to sense of self and ideal body form, yet the two are often in conflict, as subjective selves are constructed through socialising practices, and socialising practices can direct behaviour at a subliminal level (Lupton, 1995; Foucault, 1980). In this context, ideal body form is no more than a socially-constructed, illusionary concept inscribed with pervasive social value and power to direct subjective behaviour and projection of self.

### **Healthy bodies**

For men, the ideal body form has always been associated with strength, muscles and form (Buchbinder, 1994; Jefferson, 1998; Sparkes, 1999). This association is under revision as authors like Bordo (1999) deconstruct the emphasis on strength and suggest the ideal male form is now lean, toned and sexually desirable similar to the social construction of the ideal female form (Bordo, 1993, 1999a). This type of body image requires more weight control and less muscular definition. As a consequence there is an emphasis on controlling bodyweight and less importance attached to body building techniques. Controlling bodyweight often means restricting or limiting food intake. Taken to the extreme, restricting food to the body can cause significant weight loss and the effect on the body can be alarming. This practice has been observed as being oppressive to women and women are known to lose weight in unhealthy and damaging ways (Bordo, 1993).

There is a small amount of published evidence to suggest that men also diet in unhealthy ways (Drummond, 2002; East, 1998; Pattison, 1998; Paxton, 1998; Safe, 2000; Innanen, 1999) and that men mainly view dieting as a feminine practice (Brownmiller cited in

Grogan, 1999, p. 68; Drummond, 2002). However, other authors refer to men's dieting practices as within normal behavioural limits when contrasted with women (Chaudhary cited in Grogan, 1999, p. 68). Men have been largely invisible in discussions of dieting processes. This study seeks to add to the limited information available on men's dieting practices and the perceived impact of these practices on their overall health.

The issue of who has the responsibility for 'health' and the way 'health' is constructed differs according to modern and post-modern critiques (See Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Lupton, 1995). The literature in this section reflects the medical and public health message that health needs to be dealt with at both the individual behavioural level and the social structural level. Most researchers in this area would locate themselves at either end of the spectrum. For example, Lupton (1995) explores the public health rhetoric and the dualistic tension between State interference and individual empowerment. A definition of public health from a social perspective explains that public health is 'a form of medicine, social medicine which directs its professional attention towards the health of populations, aggregated bodies, instead of individual bodies' (p. 2). In this definition, the individual is lost to the social. At the structural level, the changes that need to occur lie in the provision of health services to those in need and the implementation of policy that establishes the liability of public health organisations to provide a service to those who are forced to live unhealthy lives based on a range of social determinants (See Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Egger, Spark & Lawson, 1990; Hetzel & McMichael, 1987). For example, the working class are said to have poorer diets because of their lower incomes and poorer health arising from the inequalities that prevent them from having access to healthy alternatives (Germov, 2002a).

At the other end of the spectrum, the individual is seen as the primary focus of health promotion. This necessitates developing strategies to assist people to change their behaviour to reflect what is considered healthy. This may mean changing their diets, or exercise regimes, and is often presented as a lifestyle decision (Crawford, 2000). The onus is on the individual to take responsibility for their health, and if wrong decisions are

taken in the quest for improved health then individuals have no one to blame but themselves. The argument centres on freedom of choice, and on the individual to live their lives free from social interference. The criticism of this position is that it is prone to victim blaming and the discourse 'attracts attention away from the structural, political and economic causes of ill health such as unsafe working conditions and environmental health hazards' (Lupton, 1995, p. 3). The tension between the individual and the social in public health discourse is juxtaposed to the current, political ideological climate where the same tension exists between negative and positive freedoms, and the private and public spheres of social life (Germov, 2002b; Heywood, 2003).

In the context of bodyweight, healthy populations are those free from obesity. From both a bio-medical and public health perspective, people who are overweight are at risk of hypertension, diabetes and coronary artery disease (Ogden, 1992). In short, people die from the consequences of being over-weight. People can deal with these life-threatening concerns by losing weight usually in the form of controlled, or most commonly uncontrolled diets (Cousens, 1992; Laura & Dutton, 1994; National Health & Medical Research Council, 1997).

However, dieting in itself can become a health risk and over-shadow the health risks it is believed to be addressing. This not only refers to the negative health effects on the body through excessive food restriction, but also to the obsession with the practice (Drummond, 2002; Lupton, 2000; Paxton, 1998). Therefore, the central issue of concern lies in the processes that people use to lose weight. In general, it is agreed that people need to eat less processed food, and eat more foods containing less fat, and exercise more (Cousens, 1992; Egger & Spark, 1990). By eating healthy foods, and finding time for thirty minutes of exercise, people can reduce the health risks associated with being overweight. This process requires individuals to change their behaviour and lifestyle. However, in this model, social responsibility for the availability of fatty foods is not addressed, nor is the expense attached to exercising, nor the control over negative social looks and comments directed at the visual state of the fat body.

Is being over-weight an individual problem or a social problem? For society, those members who are over-weight run the risk of experiencing the associated health risks. It then follows that people who are overweight may require additional care. These people and the care they require become a burden on the tax purse. The burden includes the provision of health services for dealing with the health risks of obesity, and lost revenue from the market place due to ill health (Hetzel & McMichael, 1987). What appears at first an individual problem has a very social dimension. The conventional way to reduce health risks associated with being overweight, and to reduce health expenditure, is for individuals to reduce bodyweight to a medically, or socially agreed, normative measure which will change depending on the criteria used. Normative bodyweight under these conditions has implications for both the individual and the social.

There is, of course, a contradiction. Whilst there is a need to provide health services for people who are overweight and ensure the market place recoups losses in revenue, there is an abundance of people wanting to change their body shape. Reducing weight is big business. In America the body shaping industry was estimated at 10 billion dollars annually in the early nineties (Glassner, 1995). In short, people are encouraged to reach a normative weight standard to reduce public spending on health, and the market place profits from fat unhealthy bodies.

In general, a person's health risk is determined using the ratio between their bodyweight and height (Odgen, 1992; Packer, 1989). The concern is that the criteria for gauging a person's bodyweight is imposed by professionals who use a standardised body form or weight for different aged groups in the population. In general, they are standards that most cannot achieve. Failure to meet these standards brings the individual or group under the surveillance of the general practitioner (Nettleton & Bunton, 1995).

The power of the medical gaze to constitute subjects in this manner is one of the dimensions Foucault described in his term 'bio-power' (Lupton, 1995, p. 6). The medical professional giving expert advice disempowers patients as they are placed on the sick list, or constructed as diseased/abnormal. This view does not deal with the structural issues of

providing healthy food alternatives for low-income families, and for schoolchildren, or limiting the availability of weight-producing foods like sugar and certain fats. Individuals are again the target and are blamed for their weight problems.

Imposing standardised bodyweights is in the interest of producing healthier bodies, and decreasing the mortality rate of those at risk. There are several ways of doing this. Firstly, the medical profession can, as it has, set a measurement for what it believes is a normative bodyweight against a person's height. This method relies on professional evaluation and research. Secondly, the electronic media can construct an ideal look based on the cultural acceptance of what body image is attractive and desirable. This method relies on cultural acceptance of the image, and requires social support (Callaghan, 2000; Paxton, 1998; Monaghan & O'Connor, 1999; Odgen, 1992; Watts, 2001). In both these instances the ideal healthy weight, or look, is not achievable for many people.

Feminists have attacked the sexy images of women displayed in the media and the imposed weight measurements of professionals. Although these images suggest that woman should look good, sexy and attractive for men, in terms of health, these writers have highlighted the negative and dangerous affects these images have when influencing the diets of women to reach the elusive ideal body (Bordo, 1993; Chermín, 1983). The extent to which being overweight affects a person's health is constantly under review (Chermín, 1983; Bordo, 1993; Odgen, 1992). Chermín (1983) reports that the Harvard Medical School believes that 'being thin is a cosmetic rather than a health goal' (p. 31). Valetine (1994), drawing on the work of Bordo, (1989), Edgley & Brisett (1990), Freedman, (1986), Glassner, (1988), Turner (1984), and Wolf (1991), concludes that women who accept this ideal are trapped. The issue is that the ideal changes and women are caught in a game where they have no control and are constantly battling their own body form trying to change what is often unchangeable unless they resort to surgery (Glassner, 1995). In the context of this study it is not readily apparent, from the literature, whether men suffer the same fate: that is, battling to reduce bodyweight to reach an idealised attractive body form, or mass.



What is agreed is that a diet based on reduction and starvation is potentially more dangerous and unhealthy than being overweight (Sartore, 1998). The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in 1997 reported that the causes of excess body fat are based on inherited characteristics, lifestyle, diet, activity and psychological factors (p. 3). This is in conjunction with the quantity of food intake, cultural expression of body size, cultural background and family dynamics (p. 65). The NHMRC concludes that 'no single or simple cause has been isolated' for excessive weight problems faced by individuals (p. 65).

Being thin has health risks. The skeletal look has been criticised as being unhealthy. Models are prone to this type of criticism under the surveillance of some fashion editors who want to promote a more healthy, realistic look, (whilst other fashion editors may prefer the look and therefore promote it), and by feminist researchers and the news media. Feminist researchers in the areas of dieting, consumerism, and body-image, have indicated that women are prone to anorexia and bulimia when dieting to reach an ideal weight (Bordo, 1993; Chermín, 1983; O'gden, 1992; Orbach, 1982; Thone, 1997).

The practice of dieting, for some, leads to an unhealthy control of the body, and denial of certain food items. As weight is shed the body looks and feels healthier, but the point at which the body looks and feels unhealthy is arbitrary for the individual. What the individual characterises as looking good, may have been achieved, and maintained through dangerous food restriction and starvation. Underpinning the concept of dieting to lose weight is the notion of reward through control. Self-control becomes the pinnacle of achievement. This concept has been carried over from the protestant work ethic, and the imperative to control one's self from indulging in sins of the flesh (Lupton, 1995). Delayed gratification underpins most Western concepts of growth. One has to plan, save and go without if one wishes to succeed. The self under these conditions is ultimately held accountable for its state of health (Crawford, 2000). In a secular and post-Enlightenment environment 'health promotion relies upon the model of the rational, unified self, consciously making decisions about one's conduct in everyday life in the quest for self-improvement and social success and integration ...' (Lupton, 1995, pp. 8-

9). The emphasis, thus far, has been on the individual to lose weight through rational choices which can be made in accordance with State-endorsed information (Crawford, 2000). The key to this debate is the concept of choice.

The issue of control and controlling bodyweight reflects the ideological tension in 'whose problem is it'? Currently liberalism dominates the ideological platform in the West. A core tenet in liberalism is choice. Yet there is a dilemma in liberalism that pertains to the issues of choice, control, and freedom from control. The ability a person has to choose a lifestyle or path without interference from the State lies at the heart of the contradictions in classical and modern state liberalism (Heywood, 1992, 1998). Lupton, like most authors in this field, does not make the correct distinction between the classical and modern state divide in liberalism, and instead confuses classical liberalism with conservatism as a moderate form of Fascism (1995, pp. 2-5).

The ideological divide in liberalism refers to the concepts of negative and positive freedom (Heywood, 1996, 1998, 2003). Negative freedom is freedom from interference. Positive freedom is freedom to intervene where necessary and where individuals are observed to make decisions not in their interest or the interests of others. Positive freedom, by definition, implies that a power relationship exists for the good of people, and their protection. As Heywood writes 'Classical liberals and the new right subscribe to *egoistical* individualism, which places emphasis on self-interestedness and self-reliance. Modern liberals, in contrast, have advanced a *developmental* form of individualism that prioritizes human flourishing over the quest for interest satisfaction' (2003, p. 30). In the context of food, diet and weight control, the question from the modern side is, 'To what extent should the State intervene to restrict choices when it comes to food available in the market place'? If it is known that a high fat, high sugar diet produces levels of obesity then should the State intervene to restrict the sale of such foods as it does, for example, with alcohol and tobacco? Or should the State make available adequate health care for the poor decisions it believes some individuals will make? This reflects the modern liberal premise that individuals do not always know what is best for them, and often act in irrational, rather than rational ways. In brief, people require protection from themselves

in certain instances (Heywood, 1992, 1998; Sercombe, 1996). The other way to tackle the problem is to disseminate health information and make it a requirement that food producers make available the nutritional content of their produce. This notion is predicated on the belief that people will make the correct decision and refrain from purchasing fattening foods. Therefore, the State has a responsibility to a degree. The 'degree' becomes the stumbling block as they argue about the 'degree' of the intervention, and the cost involved to implement it. This would include calculations on both cost to provide the intervention and the cost to the State from lost tax revenue on some food items.

In contrast, the classical liberal has a different view on choice, rationality and intervention. They construe any form of intervention in the private and public lives of citizens as an insult to their ability to make rational choices, and an intrusion on their freedom to pursue their subjective concept of happiness. Their belief is in negative freedom, freedom from all interference, unless dictated by law and extreme hardship (Heywood, 1992, 1998, 2003; Sercombe, 1996). Therefore, the individual should be able to choose what they wish to eat without interference from the State, or others, regardless of the health risks involved. If the choice to eat unhealthy foods results in heart failure, or life threatening illnesses, then the individual has chosen this through their life choices. This puts the responsibility on the individual to take care of him or herself and to expect no assistance from the State for provision of health care services, except in the form of charity. The core of the debate between the two sides of liberalism is about the ability of the individual to make the rational choice, and the level of intervention required to promote healthy eating choices to reduce illness and premature death.

What am I responsible for? How much responsibility should the individual and State share to achieve a better, healthier society, and whose concept of a better and healthier society should be adopted? (Glassner, 1995). To date, the way to resolve this issue is to deliver harm-minimisation information to the public and leave the rest up to them. When a disease or behaviour is known to be life-threatening, harmful to self and others, then information needs to be disseminated to the public. The public needs to know how to

reduce the health risks associated with, in this case, eating unhealthy and fattening foods leading to obesity. This incorporates gathering information from scientific and sociological inquiry and formulating discussion on the results. The information is then disseminated through various forms of media to reach a maximised audience (See Bunton et al, 1995; Egger, Spark & Lawson, 1990; Hetzel & McMichael, 1987; O'Dowd & Jewell, 1998).

Contextualised to eating habits, the information disseminated reflects the benefits that can be gained from eating what are considered to be healthy foods (taken that information changes to reflect new information and changing cultural beliefs), and the negatives associated with eating unhealthy foods. Harm minimisation is a tool used by modern State liberals to side-step the classical 'hands off' approach (Heywood, 2003). However, the divide between negative and positive freedoms goes unresolved, and the subject is left to ponder the correct path to follow. As Lupton suggests, rather than focus on resolving this tension it is better to map out the dynamic interplay between power, the symbolic, the individual (the self), and the social (1995, pp. 4-5). In this interplay it is clear that 'healthiness has replaced Godliness as a yardstick of accomplishment and proper living' (Lupton, 1995, p. 4). Rightly or wrongly, the continuation of this is that thinness has become the only symbolic 'visible testimony to ... good health' (Robin, 1992, p. 18). Being over-weight is observed as risky business and it symbolises ill-health and poor lifestyle choices that are not consistent with the good health information available (Lupton, 2000). This works at both the social and individual level.

What seems to be missing from the literature on weight control, subjectivity and public health, is the impact of emotional issues on the individual, and how emotional tension affects a person's health, and their ability to make rational choices under emotional stresses and emotional environmental conditions (Schilder, 1950). Issues such as low self-esteem, negative self-concepts, stress, depression and anxiety over one's body image have received considerable attention from a wide range of authors (Cousens, 1992; Drummond, 2001, 2002; Pattison, 1998; Paxton, 1998). In these states, the individual

may make unhealthy choices and either restrict their food intake or over-indulge in foods to compensate for their emotional turmoil.

The current ideological climate suggests that emotions need to be controlled, contained and channeled through rationality. The body seems caught between two forces, one suggesting self-control and the other suggesting self-expression. The contradiction is also observed between presenting a likeable public image which symbolically conveys control, and letting it all hang out as one privately indulges in the consumer delights now available (Bordo, 1993). This study seeks to build a bridge between the two sides, and, in doing so, establishes that bodyweight has severe implications for men in relation to their embodied well-being. This research is not contesting that there are health reasons why some people should lose weight. Rather, it argues that the question of health, in relation to weight, fails to address the epidemic concern with being thin and the need to eradicate fat. What is missing from the literature is an explanation of men's self and social concept in relation to their body image and weight gain and loss. This research seeks to understand what symbolic meanings are given to the masculine constructions of thinness and fatness.

### **Thinness and fatness**

In many traditional cultures, a person's bodyweight symbolised the abundance or scarcity of food resources. According to Brown and Konner (Cited in Spring, Pingitoe, Bruckner & Penava, 1994) thinness in subsistence economies is viewed as 'an indication of starvation and illness', and fatness, for some, is revered as it means survival and resilience (p. 55). The Western preoccupation with body fat goes beyond health and survival, as Lupton notes (2000). A person's bodyweight in the West symbolically indicates not only their state of control, but also their self worth and social value (Bordo, 1993; Chemin, 1983). Hence, in the West, fatness and thinness evoke different emotions (Hills & Wahlqvist, 1994; Lupton, 2000, 1998), and are both associated with desirable and undesirable traits.

Currently, the symbolism of fatness has been equated with a loss of self-control and the uncivilised subject. '...tight control over body size is understood to be both a mark of a civilised person and a route to physical attractiveness, apparent loss of control over eating, leading to overweight, and obesity is viewed as a material embodiment of one's laziness and inability to control one's desires' (Lupton, 2000, p. 214). There appears to be a devaluation of fatness, whilst the positive symbolic associations attached to thinness reflect a more aggressive, competitive and individualistic outlook. 'Being thin is [symbolically] associated with success, attractiveness, sexuality and self-control' (Ogden, 1992, p. vi). In today's environment, one's ability to survive is based on ability and adaptability (Ogden, 1992).

Bigger is no longer better. Good things come in small packages, and space conservation is at a premium. Fat people take up more space than thin people. Machinery and business practices are built and organized around the central theme of efficiency. Industries, if they are to survive, need to be streamlined and efficient. These concepts are reflected in perceptions of human, biological machines; bodies are 'to be as efficient, as effective, as economical and as beautiful as the sleek new machines, [in] the rationalised workforce' (Sartore, 1998, p. 72).

The economical, sleek, efficient look reflects people who like themselves. They take up less space and appear (based on their body size) to be in control (Ogden, 1992; Sartore, 1998). This outlook implies that people should identify with the changes undertaken in industrial re-development. However, this identification can have dire consequences for people's health as they try to mimic the sleekness and efficiency of manufactured machines. Yet it appears employment opportunities are more favorable if candidates appear to be more self-contained, and visibly in control of their bodies (Turner, 1991). The freedom to shop around for better working conditions is enhanced by being physically appealing [attractive] (Turner, 1991, p. 164). Thinness has come to reflect willpower and this indicates confidence to succeed (Ogden, 1992).

The terms 'stream lining', and 'cutting away the fat', describe the industrial practice of shedding people and making the workforce more flexible. The practice is not only about shedding people, who are expendable, but looking at the business structure and simplifying its practices in an attempt to cut down on wasteful practices and to improve profit margins. These same symbolic associations are made to people who are overweight. A person who is overweight is seen as being indulgent and a burden on social resources that could be distributed, or utilised by a number of other people, rather than one person (McBride, 1989). Conservation and restraint are the keys to prospective success and a stable sustainable environment.

Professionals, working with both fat and thin people, use positive symbolic representations to challenge the prejudices leveled at fatness (Brown, 1989; Chrisler, 1989; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1995; Tenzer, 1989; Thone, 1997; Goodman, 1989). People who fall into the fat category are persuaded to embody the positive qualities, such as, strength, security, and stability, and to ignore the negative: lazy, wasteful, and undisciplined (McBride, 1989). It is interesting to note that reflective practices on body image tend to ignore the pressure thin people endure, and the victimisation they receive from others who are overweight. However, for people who are thin, the negative qualities associated with fatness seem to dominate its cultural representation (Bordo, 1993). The fight to value fatness, and promote its positive qualities are hampered by media representations which continually focus on its negative associations. The message suggests that being overweight is socially unacceptable, and sexually undesirable and ultimately leads to unhappiness. People who are fat miss out on the fun thin people have (Laura & Dutton, 1994). Thin people profit more when reaching a normative body image than fat people do from their over-sized body. Thinness is constructed as the answer to all social and interpersonal woes. This can include health problems, but, specifically, thin means attractive, and being attractive means social and interpersonal success. This is the same for both women and men (Laura & Dutton, 1994).

Thinness has become the dominant view of normality (Bordo, 1993; Ogden, 1992; Thone, 1997). Thinness brings rewards. The extent to which a reward-based weight

reduction process affects individuals is of concern to social researchers explaining the social construction of weight loss (Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1983; Drummond, 2002; Wolf, 1991). In this research, such questions may lead to an encompassing picture of the reasons and expectations participants constructed, prior to, during, and after weight loss. If thinness is a priority for men then there needs to be concern about the ways in which this is expressed through the consumption of goods to reflect a self and social construct based on fitting the size and shapes available on the market. Thinness may be rewarded through the range of consumer items available to thin men and the message attached to them.

### Consumerism, image and distinction

So far, the literature review has focused on discussion of the body in the context of health, looks, and history, all of which provide a background for discussion of individual and social constructions of different bodies. Constructing difference is a process of survival. Identity construction, by definition, requires difference in order to exist. As de-Beauvoir (1949) explained, a person or group cannot set them themselves apart without automatically setting up the 'other' in opposition. Forming identities is about knowing oneself in comparison to others. The comparisons made are sometimes limiting, confusing and hostile. Exactly how men construct their place in the world in relation to their body image is the focus of this study.

In the West, most people meet their needs through consumerism rather than production (Langer, 1996, p. 57). The body, in particular, has become a site rich with consumer potential (p. 64). With the growth of capitalism, and commodity markets, consumables are now tied to individual and group distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). The work of Bourdieu suggests that 'status and class groups differentiate themselves from one another' through consumption (Bocock, 1992, p. 146). Bourdieu plays with the concepts of 'distinction' and 'taste' using them as analytical tools to explain difference between groups. However, this analysis is unable to deal with individual taste, and Bourdieu found that within his



defined status and class groups tastes varied (Bocock, 1992, p. 147). The work of Baudrillard offers a compelling theoretical framework on consumption.

Consumption for Baudrillard is no longer seen as an action induced by advertising upon a passive audience, which belongs to a specific social class or life-stage, but an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identity (Bocock, 1992, p. 149). Baudrillard's work emphasises the trend in describing consumers as seeking identities, rather than being passive recipients of the latest trend. Thompson's (1997) critique of the 'mass-ness' of mass media leads to the similar conclusion that the individual is active in pursuing an identity. Not wishing to overstate or polarise the claims of theorists, at this point, it is possible to characterise people as being either active or passive in developing identities based on media representations, or a subjective, desired look. Individual taste, as Bourdieu has theorised, acts as a buffer between the conceptualisations of class, status and identity in the modern world (1984). However, identities are constructed within shared social understandings (Smith, 1990). Hence, the desire for a normative body, which may indicate subjective social mobility, based on looking the part. Being accepted in any environment means conforming to standards socially set (Jung, 1956).

In a consumer culture, the body is the visual testimony of group affiliation. This makes people conscious not only of their external appearance, but also of the external appearances of others. Judgments are made based on what is seen. What is seen is categorised and leads to the construction of stereotypes (Featherstone, 1991; Gollman, 1963a). Scrutiny and judgment occurs through daily meetings, photographs of the past, video recordings and other visual media that display how the body used to be. These act as signifiers of how the body is being used today. The body is objectified as something that can be changed. In some cases, change is insisted upon (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Oliver, 1996).

To be objectified is to be placed in a passive role, to be a subject is to be active in self-construction, and de-construction, albeit at times through a mediator (Rabinow, 1984).

Foucault describes 'subjectification as the way in which a human being turns himself or herself into a subject' (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 1984). People actively construct themselves in terms of what is acceptable and what is tolerated. Positions of superiority, and inferiority, are imposed using self-concepts, and the conceptions of the other (de Beauvoir, 1949; Rabinow, 1984; Said, 1978).

Individuals move, and are placed, into these positions based upon cultural beliefs, values and attitudes about what is, and what is not, acceptable. The objectification of the body allows those who have a need to regulate, prohibit and obligate the body to conditions that Foucault saw as producing 'docile bodies' (Rabinow, 1984, pp. 180-182). In an attempt to normalise conditions, the State or other social governing body first needs to normalise the subject (Rabinow, 1984, pp. 20-21). In this instance, the person is subjected to bio-power. Bio-power, a term coined by Foucault, describes the desire to regulate the body. The body is not approached directly in its biological form, but as an object to be manipulated and controlled. Knowledge of the body is used to enforce practices that regulate it over time (Shilling, 1993). This is achieved by training the body, standardising its actions over time, and controlling the space it occupies (Shilling, 1993; Crossley, 1996). The process produces mechanistic functioning bodies, with mechanistic functioning minds (Laing, 1967).

How conscious are people of the surveillance to which they are exposed? How conscious are people of the way they have been conditioned in their self-construct by the knowledge and power of those in social institutions that regulate what they do to their bodies and the meaning placed on body form and behaviour? Are people, in fact, no more than automated bodies governed by automated minds? At the micro level, in their daily interactions, people are exposed to constant scrutiny, and an imposed normative standard which embodies health (Berger, 1973; Sarup, 1989). In this context, subjects are objects that act as mirrors, yet they are mirrors that have been exposed to the values of the culture they inhabit (Cumming, 1968; Lasch, 1979). Therefore, body form is being culturally manufactured to visually represent healthy bodies and correspondingly healthy identities.

However, the traditional hook on which men hang their identities has been removed and discarded (Monaghan, 1999; Shilling, 1993). Masculine identity is now located in a consumer-driven image that reflects desirability (Barthel, 1992; Brown, 2000; Mort, 1988). The visual message is that thinness is rewarded more than fatness. If the Western preoccupation with appearance is anything to go by, then people constantly need to “look good”. Individuals become their own publicity machines and their bodies are the primary platforms for display (Lasch, 1979). A consumer culture, by definition, allows for the construction of multiple identities. There is an argument to suggest that in a consumer culture most people are image conscious, and use consumer items to convey their social group allegiance (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Consumer items have transcended human need (Bocock, 1992).

It appears that consumer items are now signifiers indicating to others whether a person is friend or foe. This may be an over-statement, to suggest alienation or allegiance based on symbolic difference calls into question why some groups are comprised of mixed identities. The content of alienation and allegiance may extend more to values and beliefs than just to costume. However, identifying with media-produced images can produce a feeling of acceptance and social worth, or conversely feelings of isolation and low self worth (Baudrillard, 1992; Grogan, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). There is considerable proliferation of media material creating the illusion that thinness aligns with success and high levels of self esteem, and fatness aligns with unhappiness and low levels of self-esteem (Bordo, 1999; Callaghan, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Safe, 2000; Watts, 2001). Today, the information is as pertinent to men as it is to women. The extent to which media-fed identities affected participants forms part of the analysis in this thesis.

## Masculine identities, body-image, sport and sex

The socialisation of boys into men, in a sporting context, starts at school (Connell, 1983; Drummond, 2001). In the sporting domain masculinity equals muscularity (Gagnon, 1974; Glassner, 1992; Wacquant, 1995). Male power is literally observed as boys team-up, and compete in the combative, contact, team sports on offer. In Australia, school boys are encouraged to play team sports like Australian rules football, hockey, rugby league and union, and English soccer, or to take up other manly, solitary, sporting pursuits, such as Australian Iron man events, or body building. These sports are primarily the sports in which men are observed and researched (Connell, 1983, 1990; Drummond, 2001; Messner, 1994). Combative, contact sports teach boys to take up space with their bodies, and to shape their bodies to be used as weapons against their opponents, and ironically against themselves (Connell, 1983; Drummond, 2001; Messner, 1992, 1994). The occupation of space, bulging muscles, endurance, stamina, aggression and violence are all symbolic associations projected onto sporting men (Connell, 1983, 1990; Glassner, 1992). To some extent, to be an ideal man is to incorporate these qualities. The 'no pain no gain' aphorism sums this up.

The athletic body is central to studying men in sports. The shaping of the male sporting body requires self-control, self-discipline, self-denial and social control. Self control refers to the way sportsmen learn to focus internally on their bodies' ability. Skill and ability are the manifestations of self-control (Connell, 1983). Self-discipline refers to the way sportsmen train. Training for most requires dedication and daily routines that must be adhered to without question (Connell, 1990). Sportsmen have to deny themselves certain foods, and certain pleasures and emotions if they are to remain in shape, in control and focused on winning (Connell, 1990; Messner, 1994).

These practices occur under the auspices of a coach, or coaching staff. Sportsmen are scrutinised by their coaches and are severely punished or dressed down should they stray from the daily training routine or diet. Sportsmen have often commented on this aspect of

control (Jefferson, 1998), but have also alluded to wider controlling mechanisms such as the reaction from fans and the media should they fail to perform to expected levels, and the need to secure scholarships and sexual intimacy by shaping their working class bodies into athletic performing bodies (Sabo, 1994).

The sporting athletic body has become a desirable body shape for most men. It is characterised by the mesomorph body type (Sparkes, 1999; Tinning, 1990). There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the athletic body symbolically conveys traditional masculine characteristics. Power, strength and dominance have become undeniably masculine characteristics projected onto male bodies (Connell, 1990, 1995). The mesomorph body type embodies this projection. Tinning concludes that the mesomorph as a muscular body type exudes all of these characteristics, along with several others, such as, 'assertiveness, physical courage ...and indifferences to pain' (Whiting et al, cited in Tinning, 1990, p. 24). Tinning goes on to suggest that the shape of the male mesomorph is slim, muscular and essentially fat free (pp. 25-27).

Authors agree that the overly male muscular look is being replaced with a slimmer, faster yet still toned model (Cohen, 1997; Drummond, 2001; Glassner, 1992; Thompson, 1997). The significance of sport as one of the last male domains of identity construction is examined in this study, as is the significance of the mesomorph ideal to direct male body shaping through physical activity and weight loss practices (Drummond, 2001).

Secondly, the athletic body has become aesthetically desirable and pleasing to watch in action (Cashmore, 1998; Hargreaves, 1987). It has come to symbolise male sexual power, and male eroticism (Barthel, 1992; Hargreaves, 1987; Parker, 1996). The muscular body is both a power and pleasure symbol. This body type is observed to be more attractive, and sexually more aggressive than other body types (Tinning, 1990). It is the strength this body type conveys which seems to suggest its sexual prowess. However, male sexual performance has little to do with body strength. On the contrary, men's sexuality has often been symbolised by the genitals, especially the penis (Dyer, 1985). Yet there still exists a sexual symbolic connection between well defined muscles and sexual

performance. It may be that a well defined body symbolises the sexually desirable qualities of endurance, stamina and virility, forming a body = muscle = sex triplex.

Athletic male bodies can therefore be symbolic of performing sexual machines. As such, there are sexual expectations projected onto them which will frame the male as sexually capable. Masculinity, in this context, is bound up in one's ability to perform to these expectations. Failure to do so means failing at being a man. However, as Connell (1990), and Messner (1992), suggest, sexual performance does not equate to sexual intimacy. In the scenario where men's bodies are sexually objectified the person is forgotten as the body assumes primary position.

Masculine bodies that are tuned for sexual performance are thought to perpetuate other symbolic characteristics. In particular, this means that men learn to be sexually active 'in terms of power and conquest' (Seidler, 1989). How men learn to be on the sporting field is then transferred into the bedroom and onto their interpersonal relationships. The female body becomes something to be conquered, controlled, and subordinated to men (Connell, 1990; Wolf, 1991). In their intimate relationships, there is a need for men to suppress their intimate emotional experiences. The well-defined masculine body is socially constructed to symbolise control over one's emotions (Drummond, 2001; Seidler, 1989). In this context, some men adopt a muscular body shape as a means projecting self-control over their feminine or softer emotions. These are emotions that would otherwise bring them undone and undermine their claim to be men (Messner, 1992; Rubin, 1992; Seidler, 1989; Sparkes, 1999). The symbolic associations attached to aesthetically pleasing bodies is of concern and forms part of the discussion chapter of this thesis. The extent to which men conform to the idealised desirable body shape as a means to sell themselves sexually is discussed in terms of weight gain and loss. It is assumed that 'it's hard to have much success on the singles scene when you are out of shape' (Glassner, 1992, p. 292).

Men are socially expected to participate in sports and sex as an initiation rite (Connell, 1983). Those who fail to participate in these rites to the best of their abilities often come away feeling inadequate and have low self-esteem issues later on in life (Glassner, 1992).

At the other end of the spectrum, those men who identify fully with their sporting and sexual identities can become obsessive about their bodies (Drummond, 2001). As Drummond contends, within a health framework, boys who fail at sports are less likely to take up physical activity as a means to better health, and those who become obsessed with their sporting bodies may use dieting practices that are in themselves unhealthy (2001, p. 62). The extent to which men in this study identified with either of these scenarios is discussed.

However, the problem exists that in sports, certain playing positions require certain body shapes. All team sports incorporate a range of body types and shapes. In rugby union the forward pack is heavier and more cumbersome than the back-line. In Australian rules football the ruckmen are larger than most other players, and are therefore generally slower. Men in the defensive line are normally bulkier than those playing in the mid-field or forward line as these positions require more speed and agility. And this can all change as strategies for winning and beating other teams are developed perhaps calling for a different body shape and type which embodies different skills and abilities. It is therefore pertinent to suggest that male sporting bodies are socially manufactured to perform to socially sanctioned performance roles that change over time. Sporting capitalism, that is profit driven sports, has come to dominate the way sporting identities and bodies are manufactured (Connell, 1990; Drummond, 2001; Sabo, 1994). The sporting male body is today as much the product of the capitalist, and consumer, economy as it is the requirement to perform a certain role within a team, or solo sport.

The argument can also be extended to the aesthetically pleasing male body which today is shaped by advertisements implying virility, and more importantly, desirability (Bordo, 1999; Hargreaves, 1987). The symbolic message aligns the toned body with sexual gratification. Attention is to be paid to how the man looks rather than who the man is. In stark contrast to this, Rubin (1992) suggests that women want men to be emotionally sensitive. There seems to be a social message that implies men cannot be emotionally sensitive if they have well defined musculature. Or perhaps as the object of sexual desire there is no need for them to be emotionally sensitive, or connected to their sexual

partners. Men's inability to be emotionally connected is normally constructed as some hang-over from the enlightenment rather than anything to do with any 'essential' male quality. The scientific method established the dualistic divide between rational men and emotional women (Heyes, 2000; Seidler, 1989). Seidler evokes the machine metaphor to suggest that men have learnt 'to treat the body as a machine ... [thereby] establishing a division between male sexuality and emotionality' (1989, p. 44). Advertisers seem to perpetuate this distinction and associate the physical male body with desirable sexual attraction (Bordo, 1999; Hargreaves, 1987; Parker, 1996).

It would appear that men are either sexual, sporting dynamos and emotionally inept, or emotionally sensitive and at risk of being observed as falling outside of hegemonic masculine practices (Connell, 1983, 1990). This study cannot address the questions of how men should look for their partners, or whether men should, or should not be, socialised into combative sports. However, this study is in a position to discuss what men believe they should look like, and whether the way their body looks is implicit in their ability to be emotionally connected to their sexual and sporting selves.

### Constructing Difference

Difference permeates the social world. Social stratification occurs along a range of social and biological dimensions. Today, gender, disability, class, race, ethnicity, and age are means to include or exclude individuals from group affiliation (Balbeck, 1993; Oliver, 1996). These upper level constructions are symbolic of the way human beings see themselves as distinct from each other both individually and within their numerous social groups, however they are defined, whether they be national, cultural, sporting, or social identities. This section discusses the social construction of social hierarchies using a range of determinants to imply one's difference to the other. The discussion suggests that aesthetic appeal has become a powerful determinant when socially locating individuals (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991).



The visual sense is the most discriminating. Goffman (1963) takes up this point in *Stigma*. People are taught to use visual differences as a means for interpersonal survival and as a means of placing people into a subjective social hierarchy. Firstly, there is body form, and image. The observed other is compared to the observer. Based on the subjective parameters used, the observed may be included or excluded from the observer's social group. For example, a person with a visible disability or deformity may be observed to be different to those who are not visibly disabled or deformed. Thus, based on a visual testimony, the disabled person can be excluded, or viewed as overly dependent on non-disabled persons (Lenney & Sercombe, 2002; Morris, 1991). Disability as a determinant for group exclusion is extended to other social determinants like class, race, ethnicity, gender and age. In general, people are discriminated against using a range of observable determinants that hold subjective and social meaning (Becker, 1963; Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1963a, 1974).

Therefore, what occurs in a social interaction is that the individual will utilise imagined subjective, social and ideological symbolic frameworks as a means to direct their inclusion or exclusion of others (Goffman, 1974; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002; Sercombe, 1996; Taylor & Bodgan, 1989; Tyler, 1974). The primary frameworks used to segregate others from interpersonal, group and social inclusion refer mostly to gender, class, race, ethnicity and social status or value. Human beings rank each other based on social constructions implying inferiority and superiority, thereby establishing order, stability and control.

De Beauvoir's (1949) work on othering explains how these social divisions occur. The theory of 'othering' refers to the construction of opposites and unknowns so that the group that constructs the 'other' has a reference to who they are, and who they are not. This construction of difference is used as a negative tool to maintain a status quo that permits and perpetuates segregation, exclusion, isolation and oppression (de Beauvoir, 1949; Gatens, 1996; Oliver, 1996). However, in a positive light, difference constructed in this way informs policy development and service delivery (See Pease & Camilleri, 2001; Jones & May, 1992). de Beauvoir's 'othering' theory transcends feminism to inform our

understanding of the construction of dominant groups who struggle for power, social control and order. 'Othering' traverses the extremes between the individual and the group. Thus, females are constructed as opposite to men, by men, and their qualities are those that men do not have. 'It is that no group ever sets itself up as the one without at once setting up the other over against itself' (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 17). In the context of this study, bodyweight may be used to imply social positioning where thin men 'other' fat men, and vice versa.

Said's (1978), notion of 'othering' builds on De Beauvoir's observations to create the concept of stereotyping. For Said, the process of 'othering' refers to dominant groups creating stereotypes as a reference point for the unknown. Cultural and social determinants are used as upper-level constructions to imply difference along stereotypical lines. For example, the working class stereotypically have poorer diets than the middle or upper classes (Gernov, 2002a). Stereotypes act to consolidate data. The problem is that, in the process, individuality is lost as people are placed into groups based on a range of variables. Individual identity is replaced with group identity and interactions occur using stereotypical frameworks projected onto people that bear no resemblance to who the person is, or believes themselves to be, unless they identify with the stereotype being used. Stereotypes act to maintain social hierarchies based on imaginary constructs (Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 97).

Stereotyping is a theory based on myth. According to Sullivan, stereotypes refer to: 'inadequate and often inappropriate mental pictures of groups of people that are not based on observation, experience, analysis or validation. Stereotypes include prejudiced attitudes; they foster intolerance, fear, hatred, aversion and revulsion towards an alleged class of people. [Stereotyping people tends to] ignore individual differences' (Cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 97).

Negative stereotypes, when attached to people, often refer to, and embellish, their deficiencies. Accordingly, highlighting a person's cultural and social deficiencies gives rise to prejudicial attitudes that become part of oral and written histories. Cumulative past

histories become the foundations for social division and exclusion (Bulbeck, 1993; Jenkins, 1992). The issue is that identities are tied to and developed from cumulative histories. The individual is ultimately observed to be tied to these restrictive social identities. Cumulative past histories framing individuals are projected with the aim of socially locating them in reference to the observer. These projections remain static unless challenged. Transferring this line of discussion to body image suggests that being fat or thin establishes an intra-personal history that, when changed, may affect the way a person is socially constructed. The problem arises where projections of difference fail to address and include subjective identity formations often expressed through verbal language, and the visually symbolic.

Symbolically, all human beings use a form of language to communicate (Peterson, 1989). Language in identity construction has received a great deal of attention in the postmodern world. In this the work of Foucault (Cited in Rabinow 1984), Bourdieu, (1992) and Weedon (1997) are central. Social formation is a process of finding the right sort of language to describe your social and subjective self to others. Therefore, the subject is active in their social and self formations. In this manner, subjects are able to counter negative projections framing their identities, with verbal testimonies of who they are and who they are aligned with. This may not necessarily deter the observer from projecting negative or positive identities.

Language can socially define a person without their awareness that this is happening (Foucault, 1980; Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). In this way, the subject becomes passive in the process of social construction where the projections of stereotypes are concerned (Jenkins, 1992; Rabinow, 1984). Foucault (1980) and Bourdieu (1991) play with the ways in which individuals have a sense of themselves, yet are at the same time constrained by either those in power over them, which is Foucault's position, or through their social class position. Either way it seems the power to ascribe identities is central to the social construction of reality. Ascription of identities is normally achieved through professional observation, as described by Foucault (Foucault, 1980; Rabinow, 1984), and social class, as discussed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 1992), or observable

phenomena distinguishing the person's group affiliation and stigmatised difference (Goffman, 1963a). A person can be framed by the choices they make to describe their self, but their social identity is also framed by how others observe and construct their identity based on the interpersonal relationship between them, and in comparison with the observer's own identity and self construction.

Essentially, this study uses such an analysis to discuss the power of identity ascription as experienced by men with differing amounts of bodyweight. Social identity manifests itself in division, and division perpetuates difference. In brief, when people take on an identity, they automatically 'other' people who do not share a similar identity. In this study, the distinctions and divisions are based on difference in looks, bodyweight, clothes and status, or any other determinant used to establish difference between groups of people in a social context where bodyweight affects their social construction. Social distinction is informed through both observable and non-observable phenomena. The self-concept that is formed through the processes of distinction reinforces itself by interpreting messages to substantiate internal beliefs about self-identity. People look and listen for commonalities, or differences in an attempt to discern their allegiance or alienation to one another.

It is the comparative nature of language that allows difference to be constructed. Language offers a means of projecting and accepting social identities. Listening to the other in any interaction provides abundant clues to their group allegiance. The information gleaned from listening may indicate likes and dislikes, or may frame the person in a particular way. It is in language that the power of the symbolic is truly evident (Mead, 1934). A person's social concept is substantiated through their use of metaphor. According to Lacan 'it is language that constitutes us as a subject' (Cited in Sarup, 1989, p. 7). Yet, one can never be certain of the meaning attached to the language the other uses when defining their social self. Language as a form of descriptive communication lacks total consensus (Sarup, 1989). The words 'fat' and 'thin' have many connotations dependent on the context used, and the preference implied. I may say that my father is fat, and thus instantly imply a set of characteristics that are socially associated with

fatness and the stereotypes that are associated with fat men. My father's social identity has been framed without any input from him. Therefore, 'the subject is nothing more than the combination of signifiers' (Miller, 1991, p. 33). The meaning attached to subjective metaphors needs to be clarified and understood in socially shared language when constructing social identities. The context shaping the construction of subjective metaphors needs to be up-front and visible. Otherwise, the meaning is open for misinterpretation.

People deal with difference through constructing belief systems based upon cultural, social and lived experiences (Lenney & Scramble, 2001; Goffman, 1963a). To maintain this fragmentation of the social world, people differentiate themselves from others using symbols pertinent to them, and that exclude others (Becker, 1963). A relationship then develops that is determined by the symbols each group uses. The dominant group establishes a norm based on the symbolic. The norm is upheld as a benchmark for group assimilation. However, some people resist assimilation, and some simply do not have the ability to assimilate. These people are segregated from the dominant group. They are viewed as different and separate from the norm. Their difference is often not embraced, but stigmatised (Brown & Smith, 1989; Goffman, 1963a; Oliver, 1992). However, changes do occur and the parameters of normalisation change as attitudes and behaviour change.

In and out-groups are formed through stigmatisation, stereotyping, and internalised fear (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963a; Pedersen & Walker, 2000). Relationships that develop are determined by the symbolic. Bourdieu's work on social closure describes how status and class groups use their capital to differentiate themselves from those with less, or no, capital. This implies distinction and the need to maintain distinction between groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1969). In Bourdieu's work, the distinction is maintained using food, clothes and material items. Characteristics such as speech and deportment are also used to distinguish between status and class groups (Bourdieu, 1984). In the context of this research, fat and thin men may be conscious of visible and invisible distinctions to their group allocation as they lose weight. It is a large leap from here to suggest that thin

people seek to exclude fat people based on their size. However, there may be more to be gained from being thin than being fat. The extent to which this is the case forms part of the subject matter of this study.

Socially, and individually, body form can be judged using a sliding scale based on aesthetic appeal. At one end there is attractive, and at the other unattractive. People slide between these two positions based on a range of variables, of which bodyweight is one. The placement is both subjective and objective. I can place myself on the scale, and can be placed on the scale. However, due to the ambiguity of these terms each person is capable of being at each end at the same time. The same person can be seen as both attractive and unattractive based on contextual parameters and the subjective/objective divide. Unattractiveness and attractiveness, are socially constructed terms laden with symbolic meaning. In this construction a host of other behaviours and characteristics are imposed on individuals as they fall into these categories. Onlookers interpret and construct frameworks from the impressions they receive, about who the individual is, based on the size, shape, colour, contours and mobility of the other's body (Goffman, 1974; Oliver, 1996; Pisk, 1975). Body form is the first observable distinction of one's difference. In addition, body form becomes inscribed with social meaning with the intention to make people distinct and in need of control (Bourdieu, 1984).

Surveillance of difference gives rise to the need to establish processes of control, especially where difference is constructed for the purpose of segregation. Protective measures are required for those constructed as different to the norm (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1980), as in the case of equal opportunity, and anti-discrimination legislation. Similarly, those who are represented as different may need to be controlled by those in power, as in the case of apartheid legislation in South Africa. This form of legitimate, institutional control, describes the power relations that result in one group 'imposing its rule upon [another group] or persecuting it' (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 17). Gatens (1996) emphasises this by describing the construction of difference as the process of marking bodies and investing them with visible differences. There is a need for people to be recognised as being different (p. 71).

Visual markings of difference make surveillance easier. De Beauvoir takes the position that 'there is no biological basis for the separation of humanity' (cited Gatens, 1996, p. 95). However, it is naïve to assume that stability comes from unity. Order arises out of division (Jenkins, 1992). To be human is not enough as a category of distinction. It has been observed that people need to see themselves as different and distinct from and to others (Bourdieu, 1991). Herein lies a paradox: people strive to be different, and yet want to be equal. How do these issues of power and control apply to men experiencing weight gain or loss? The social significance of control and surveillance, if they exist, are issues to be explored in this study.

In an increasingly fragmented social world it seems plausible to suggest that people avoid difference and tend to remain within a social circle with those who are known, or those who give them what they want, or need (Sullivan cited in Muss, 1996; Tyler, 1974, Williams & Gardener, 1989). This statement reflects Sullivan's assertion that a person's life is spent finding and sustaining comfortable interpersonal relationships (Cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 84). This position is influenced by the work of Mead (1934), who theorises that the individual can only become self-realised in their interactions with other individuals.

However, the process of becoming self-realised, or self-conscious as Mead (1934) asserts, requires the ability to act towards oneself, as one would act towards other selves. It seems Mead is discussing the term empathy. To have empathy is to consider the plight of another as if it were your plight. Mead writes in an idealized fashion. His version of social life is one in which people are mindful of what they say to others, and refrain from saying something that would emotionally injure them. Both Mead and Sullivan speak of having a communal understanding of social life. In this sense people come to share beliefs and act upon them. Communication of these beliefs, and acceptance of them, is part of belonging to a social community. Therefore, being part of a social community requires learning sanctioned common beliefs (Berger & Luckman, 1973). It follows that common beliefs act as a means to recognise sameness. The central issue of this study is the degree to which bodyweight acts as a determinant of inclusion or

exclusion from any social group. The pervasive belief that fitness is unhealthy and thinness is healthy may act as a means to divide the good from the bad, or the inferior from the superior.

### **Summary of literature review**

An historic account of the body in Western culture emphasises its fragmentation, and redefinition. The body has been dissected, examined, and documented. The fragmentation of the body mirrors the fragmentation of the social world. This visual framework allows for marked differentiation. People can set themselves apart based on the cut of their cloth, the styles they employ, and disposition of the body. The body can be used as the visual construction of identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1991). How people construct themselves is in direct relation to what they want to project. However, this projection may be a mask hiding a self-concept that is in opposition to the constructed cultural standard (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1987; Giddens, 1991; Rogers, 1956). The subject under surveillance is objectified. The dilemma facing people today is to fit in, yet to be distinct.

The literature review suggests there are several ways to interpret the lived experiences of men losing weight. Firstly, thinness can indicate a desire to associate with a status group that enjoys unconstrained hedonistic pleasure. Men who lose weight will look good and be more attractive to potential sexual partners (Laura & Dutton, 1994; Glassner, 1992). Secondly, and in contrast, men who control their bodyweight to look healthy have a better chance of being employed in a higher income bracket. The male body, after weight loss, will function more efficiently, and this will benefit society (Featherstone, 1991). These experiences all have a common theme: resisting fattening food. When fat one has to control the types of foods eaten, before reaping the economic and sexual rewards. This means prohibiting certain foods and substances, and developing the motivation to be thin (Hills & Wahlqvist, 1994; Laura & Dutton, 1994; Lupton, 1995). There has to be restraint before experiencing the pleasures associated with thinness. The extent to which these



interpretations reflect the lived experiences of men losing weight lies at the heart of this thesis.

Traditionally, cultural norms to do with physical power and dominance have informed the construction of masculine identities (Bordo, 1993; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987; Connell, 1983, 1990; Jefferson, 1998). In general, normative behaviours in Western societies imply that men should dominate, yet protect women (Buchbinder, 1994). The term hegemonic masculinity, describes a limited set of parameters for the social construction of a male identity (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987; Connell, 1983, 1995). Social change has included the ascendancy of Gay rights, and recognition of man's nurturing role within the family, which have challenged the normative construct of masculinity. Social research (Buchbinder, 1994; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987; Hearn & Morgan, 1990) has explored this change and now speaks of *masculinities*, a term which embodies the diversity of men (Ochberg, 1987). This thesis contributes to the body of research by exploring, retrospectively, the construction of maleness. The issue is not about rethinking masculinity *per se*. Rather, it investigates the construction of normality, and how the cultural standard of a male's body is perceived and received by participants. At the core of this research, is the assumption that the body, to some degree, is used to project a socially constructed, masculine, self-image (Hearn & Morgan, 1990).

The body serves to project desired social images, which are learned through the socialisation process (Thompson & Heimberg, 1999). Messages from the visual media, advertising, class position, and status are influential in establishing the connection between body and image (Bocock, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984; Murphy, 1994; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Distinction, desirability and attractiveness are often linked to body disposition, and are reflected visually (Featherstone, 1991; Bourdieu, 1984). Popular culture influences the way people think about their bodies. The 1990's, for example, were characterised by fads in diets, low caloric foods, light alternatives and the struggle to find fat-free substitutes for junk food. This created a fat-conscious generation of eaters. There were constant reminders that over half the Western population was overweight (Hetzel & McMichael, 1987; Tenzer, 1989). The outcome was that thinness came to be highly

valued, and fatness was characterised as dangerous to one's health and social position. Little has changed (Callaghan, 2000; Saft, 2000).

In conclusion, this literature review has covered concepts emotional to an understanding of male self-constructs, social identities and bodyweight. The term social identity implies that it is something that can be physically constructed, or imposed. This means social identity is something an individual can create, whilst at the same time it can be created by the social other. In contrast, self-constructs cannot be objectively created. Self-constructs, by definition, are subjective constructions, albeit that they are socially informed.

The healthy-looking body has become a normative symbolic measurement for wellness in Western culture (Bordo, 1993). However, the healthy looking body is the result of social constructions produced by dominant social institutions. The symbolic display of a healthy looking body has the effect of producing desire in the observed: desire for the image that is itself desirable by others. Therefore, embodying the healthy desirable body provides the subject protection from negative looks and comments. Rightly, or wrongly, the healthy desirable look is today perpetuated as the social norm through technologies of power, and technologies of health (Foucault, 1980; Lupton, 1995). How this relates to fat Freddy and sexy Steve is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Fat Freddy and Sexy Steve

Ideal types and their reflections on  
fatness and thinness.

## **Introduction**

I have collated two result chapters. The first of these chapters reflects the design of this study which focused first on the fat experiences of participants and then on their experiences of being thinner. During the interview process it became evident that there were common experiences pertinent to primary participants with and without bodyweight, as defined here to mean body fat. This was also true for the secondary participants, as they observed the other's weight gain and loss. The "jolly fat man" was emerging as a dominant negative theme experienced by participants, and there was evidence to support themes of indulgence and restraint as participants moved between extremes of thinness and fatness. Food was being framed in similar ways and was appearing to be reflective of relative self-constructs.

As I listened to the interviews, two figures began to take form. These figures resembled upper-level constructions, stereotypical in their formation but nevertheless reflective of participants' lived experiences. Narrative methodologies would refer to these constructions as 'composite characterisations' (Zeller, 1995, p. 84). The two emerging figures can also be conceptualised as Weberian ideal types (Larson, 1973). The use of ideal types is contentious, given that they can be constructed to exclude more than they include (Larson, 1973; Trowler & Riley, 1984, p. 17).

Therefore, in the context of this research, the ideal type can be used to exaggerate either a negative or positive identity, dependent on the researcher's bias. In this way, phenomena under discussion can become accentuated and distorted. This is one of the criticisms made of ideal types. Yet ideal types are useful as baselines when comparisons between data need to be made, or when policy needs to be developed to deal with particular or specific social issues. Ideal types can make visible both the desirable and undesirable attributes of human beings (Larson, 1973, pp. 14-16). The uniqueness of this study is that two ideal types are presented as a means to map several embodied changes participants underwent as they gained and lost bodyweight. The structure of this chapter is, therefore, based on the two ideal types that emerged from the interviews.

Weber's view, as Larson recounts (1973), is to present an ideal type that is the imagined extreme. The ideal type does not exist, *per se*, but would exist under ideal circumstances: 'it is a method of magnifying phenomena in order to make their shape and composition more readily apparent' (p. 14). However, the method, whilst useful, has drawn criticism on two fronts. The first of these criticisms refers to the way the ideal type becomes the basis for stereotyping and stigmatizing individuals, based on the inclusion, and exclusion, of any number of attributes (Larson, 1973). The second reflects a more post-modern criticism in that the individual's voice becomes lost, and individuals are disempowered in the process (Zeller, 1995, p. 84). This research has taken several steps to address these issues.

Firstly, the issue of losing the individual's voice is addressed by presenting two results chapters. The seven's story is presented in chapter 6. The criticism of stereotyping may be countered by asserting that social life is embedded with stereotypes (Aronson, 1976) which is the very stuff of which these results are made. Aronson makes the following claim: 'Stereotyping is not necessarily an intentional act of abusiveness, however: it is frequently merely a way of simplifying our view of the world, and we all do it to some extent' (p. 175). In brief, stereotyping is an integral part of living, and as Aronson suggests, simplifies, a complex, symbolic social world. The issue is not whether stereotyping can be stopped or should be stopped, but to what extent stereotyping interferes with, or directs interpersonal interactions, or in the case of this study, the extent to which stereotypes are the basis for prejudice and symbolic stigma. For sociology, the focus should therefore be on highlighting the connections between individuals and their different individualised social worlds. As Larson explains, 'To many sociologists, it became increasingly evident that the study of interaction between individual and society should be the central concern of the discipline' (1973, p. 91). In the context of this study, I am presenting two ideal types that are at the same time juxtaposed with the uniqueness of the personal stories that are the foundations for their existence.

The ideal types are (symbolically) reflective of the polarised, vivid and contrasting extremes experienced by participants. Individual participants traveled between these two

ideals and then fell somewhere between them, occasionally visiting either, only to find themselves needing to turn around and head in the other direction. In most cases, participants indicated that *traveling between extremes* (emphasis added), was pertinent to their experience of weight gain and loss.

I have named the ideal types fat Freddy, and sexy Steve. Freddy reflects the participants with weight, and Steve reflects the participants when thinner. For me, the name, 'fat Freddy' conjures up visual images that assist the presentation of the data. A period of life spent in isolation and indulgence to fill his empty social void (to get a sense of this, notice by changing the tone-inflection on the word 'fat', and Freddy takes on numerous identities from soft, humorous and affectionate to lazy, slothful and unhealthy). In contrast, sexy Steve, as Freddy's ideal, reflects an energetic and enterprising person, who saunters through doors looking divine and ready for sex (As with Freddy, try changing the tone inflection on sexy, and Steve. This identity is desirable, and desired). Sexy Steve reflects the change participants underwent as they moved from of a life of isolation and avoidance, to a life where they could strut their stuff and be a cut above the rest, people in control of their weight, yet conforming to controlling mechanisms.

Each ideal type embodies aspects of each primary participant, but no one primary participant fully embodies either ideal type. In addition, naming the ideal types differently symbolically reflects the differences between the identities participants assumed as their bodyweight changed. The *italics* in this section indicate some of the words used by primary and secondary participants. I have refrained from identifying individual participants as the words or statements chosen reflect their shared experiences of weight loss and gain. The narrative is presented in the first person.

### Fat Freddy.

I was good at my job. I tended to work in jobs that were not overly physical. The acknowledgement of being fat was traumatic. I hated my body, and when I got depressed, I ate. My weight gain was due to emotional reactions to my environment and physically

neglecting myself. The weight crept on slowly. I stopped exercising. I became lazy and ate food that was easily accessible. I was attracted to, and consumed large quantities of, fast and fatty foods. *"The thing scaring me was the more I ate, the more I wanted to eat and I just wanted to get bigger and bigger, and not want to get bigger, but just had to eat all the time"*.

The type of foods I ate were unhealthy. My breakfast menu consisted of bread, cereals and lots of greasy foods high in fat. Before lunch, there was always the mid-morning snack. Again, I tended to go for the fatty and the filling. I drank a lot of dairy products. For lunch, it was nothing to eat a loaf of bread and a whole chicken. Other food items consisted of steak burger and chips, with a coke. Very rarely would I have something healthy. I sometimes had a salad roll just to make it look as if I was trying to control my eating habits and to lose weight. After lunch and before dinner there was the afternoon snack consisting of more fatty food, soft drink, and dairy products.

Dinner was an event not to be missed. I tended to over-do it and eat large meals at this time of day. I had a two, if not three, course meal. There was always a mountain of food. I was well catered for. The menu consisted of pizza, steak, salads, lasagna, sausages and lots of potatoes and the obligatory meat and three veggies. Then there was always dessert. I could eat all day. I was not engaged in any physical activities. I avoided situations that called for me to be physically active or sociable.

I did not see my weight gain. However, I acknowledged that my body was changing shape. I became adept at not looking at myself by avoiding mirrors and visual reflections of myself. My clothes shrank, as my waist expanded, but this did not prompt me to take any action. *"I realised on my pants I was popping buttons"*. I ignored the signs that indicated I was getting fatter. I realised that when I was stressed I turned to food and food became a comfort for me. I had no control over my eating, and saw eating what I liked as a way to let go and cut loose. I indulged due to a lack of self-control. I knew I was eating all the wrong foods and often at the wrong time of day. I went into hiding and created a cocoon for myself. This meant that the food I was eating was not being burned-off.

I was referred to as a garbage disposal. I was prone to being teased for my size when exposed to outdoor places like the swimming pool or beach. I only felt safe when alone, with other fat people, or with friends who accepted me without referring to my weight. I was the recipient of verbal reflections from others that had a damaging affect on me emotionally, mentally, and physically. I would often be constructed as clumsy and nonphysical. *"I couldn't bend down to do my shoe laces up, I was always getting depressed because of the way I was treated"*. I was judged by my size. I was viewed as weak and lazy, and it was often remarked that I had no self-respect. The contradiction being, that I was supposed to be happy and out-going all the time. I was socially framed as the joker. Taking on this role, I would always ridicule myself in front of others. In social circles, I felt pressured to maintain the jolly fat man façade. I came to hate my body. It was hideous. I was aware of denying the existence of my weight. Being large was symbolic of being macho. Being large was the natural thing for men.

The bigger you were, the better it was. Being fat also meant I could drink more beer. Being fat affected my health. I led a sedentary life style. I would get annoyed at having to do physical activities. Climbing stairs, playing sport, walking during the summer heat, and riding my pushbike all caused me some degree of difficulty. I would get out of breath very quickly. I could sustain a level of activity for short periods of time depending on the activity. I tended to gravitate towards indoor events like the cinema and dining out. Mostly, I isolated myself and read, or watched television.

My physical environment shrank. The seats at the cinema, in the car, and in the plane, and in general were too small for me. I avoided those garden seats made of plastic because they would collapse under my weight. I made sure I saw movies in those cinemas where the arms would come up making the seat a double one. Car seats often bent under my weight. *"I felt discriminated against"*. My social environments also shrank. I avoided those environments where I had to take off my clothes. I had no confidence exposing my body to others. I would refuse to undress if there was anyone around I felt attracted to. I would also refuse to undress in front of anyone who I felt would ridicule my body. I tried to get away with using a T-shirt to go swimming in. I did



not want others to see my body, I had to keep my body fat hidden as best I could. I remained covered-up where possible. It was a lot easier to have that size under clothes. I avoided out-door sports. I avoided the beach. *"I guess at a sub-conscious level I tended to stay away from those activities that brought my weight into my face"*. I did not want to be reminded I was fat.

*"I knew I was fat because I had fat clothes"*. People would look at me whilst shopping. My clothes shopping decreased, nothing ever fitted. I would wear clothes that fitted until they fell apart. I had to find fat clothes as my other clothes got smaller. Jeans were the worst thing. My bum would not fit into them. I had to buy the largest sizes I could find, and hope that they fitted me. The way people looked at me in shops made me feel awful. I was often served last and looked at by the staff. I felt I was discriminated against in shops because of my size. *"I realised that anybody feels they can comment if you're overweight, even if you do not know them"*. I did not dance. I had no coordination. I noticed I became more overtly body conscious with strangers than with friends. I did not want to put any effort into meeting people. My weight gave me an excuse not to do things. I did not want to attract attention to myself.

Being over-weight affected my sexual activities and the sexual concept of my self. Fat men cannot be sexual. Being fat meant having less sex. Potential sexual partners were simply not interested. I could tell by the way they looked at me that I was unattractive. I found there is an emphasis on having the right body image when out clubbing. As a big man, I became sexually invisible. I noticed that I could chat to women and men in nightclubs without any intervention from their partners. *"It was as if I was sexually safe"*. I was jealous of other male bodies. I wanted the trim look with the six-pack. I was surrounded by people dieting. Watching others diet made me feel inadequate. I had no desire, will, or discipline to diet. People often suggested ways to lose weight. However, when I compared myself to other fat people, I was always thinner than them. I tended to hang out with fat people so that diets were not discussed. In fact, weight would not be a topic for discussion because they had their own weight issues.

My weight gain was not a problem for me; it was everyone else's reaction to the weight that was the problem. I did not notice my weight gain until it was reflected back to me by friends and family, or until I accepted it as my reality. People who had not seen me for awhile commented on how fat I had become. I came to realise that, socially, I had let myself go. I woke up to my size. I felt lowered. I became very self-conscious. People said things without really listening to what they were saying. It was assumed that I over-ate and ate unhealthy foods, yet was happy. When you are fat, you have to act in an particular way. The verbal attacks on me were hurtful. Having a different body was akin to winning lotto: *"it would be a great idea if it ever happened"*.

### **Fat symbolism**

The symbolic representations of fatness taken from Freddy's story are as follows. Fat men are: self indulgent; selfish; socially devalued; over-eaters; greedy; invisible; unwelcome; visibly unhealthy; jolly; happy; unhappy; sexually unattractive; inadequate; different to thin men; overly self-conscious; under pressure to fit a thin ideal; out of control; safe; trust worthy; non-threatening; fun; lonely; inactive; sleazy; lacking in confidence; visual targets for bullying; non-competitive; passive; slow; lazy; fearful; withdrawn; unfit; weak; powerless; negative about their self and social image; traumatised; lacking in stamina and energy; taking pleasure from their size; in need of attention; and are symbolised by their desire for thinner sexual bodies.

### **Sexy Steve**

I had a goal and that was to lose weight. I approached weight loss using two strategies. Firstly, I would stop eating. Secondly, I would start exercising. To stop eating meant either reducing my meals, or replacing the unhealthy food I was eating with healthy food. There was no snacking in-between meals. There were no desserts, and definitely no chocolate or alcohol. I cut out all fast foods. I drank lots of water. I saw the weight coming off and that was enough to keep me going.

The second part to this story was the exercise regime I put in place. *"Walking became part of my life. I would walk everywhere"*. This would often transform into jogging or running. However, walking was the basic form of exercise I used to assist me in losing weight. Other activities like dancing and swimming were added to the physical activity list as the weight came off. After I had lost some weight, I started to venture out to social environments for exercise. This meant going to the gym. I would start with regular weekly visits, but this increased to going every day or at least three to five times a week. *"You have just got to exercise and eat healthy, and you will lose weight. It does not happen quickly"*. I did not experience any discrimination when thinner.

Food is very important when wanting to lose weight. I tried many diets. I looked around and found one that suited my lifestyle and me. I would rarely eat take-away foods, but these were not totally abandoned. I would eat meat, but it needed to be very lean. I aimed to be vegetarian, with a degree of success. I needed to be in control of what I ate. Eating less made me feel different. I began to see food in a different light. I would eat when I felt under-nourished. There is a lot of pleasure gained through losing weight. I felt the relationship between food and exercise was operating at a conscious level. If I exercised, I could eat what I liked, because I would burn the fat off. However, I was aware that, if I continued to exercise my body at the current rate it would not take long before it was depleted of needed nutrients. I needed to maintain these to prevent me from becoming ill. My body required me to look after it, in terms of what I was eating, for good health. Where excessive exercise regimes were in place, my energy reserves needed to be replenished. As I got thinner, I found that I wanted to lose more weight. I became obsessed with losing weight.

The most important exercise for me was walking. I would get up early in the morning and walk. There was always a routine to be followed. I would increase the distance as the weeks went by, and as my fitness level improved. The gym was idealised as the place to shape my body. I did not know what could be achieved, if anything. I wanted to improve the look of my body without the added strain of pushing my body too far. However, there were times when I pushed myself to exhaustion. I had no real idea of what I wanted to

achieve. I would know when I got there. *"My body is now a work in progress"*. I was conscious that I watched myself in the mirror. I was more prone to look at my body because I liked what I saw. Other leisure activities increased as I lost weight and had extra energy. I would love to dance if I went out clubbing. I could dance all night.

Swimming was big on my activity list, as was jumping into the spa. I went to pools and the beach more often. I had no problems with being seen now I had lost the weight. All these activities were possible because I could keep up with others. Prior to the weight loss, I would have had to take things slower, and what is the point of that? I would not have been able to keep up. It would have been a waste of time. I felt that *"exercising was not a chore. I had to do it because I felt that I needed to. I'd do my laps even if I did not want to"*. The irony in this is that I didn't see what was happening as I became obsessed with my body. I saw physical activity as fun and manageable when planned and made part of a daily routine. I had more energy and I felt athletic. Putting the concepts together, eating healthy food and exercising, *"I figure that so long as I can keep up my active lifestyle, and keep listening to what my body keeps telling me then I can basically eat what I want"*. However, there is no quick and easy way to lose weight.

There were subjective expectations attached to the weight loss process. I expected to look younger. I expected that I would look more sexually attractive. I expected to regain control of myself and of my body. There were also emotional, rational and physical changes. Physically, my stomach shrank. I had a relatively toned body based on subjective parameters, and I was comfortable with my body. This confidence allowed me to do certain things. I would strip off at every opportunity. I had a better body image and I was more comfortable with nudity. *"I was more accepting of my body image because I no longer needed to ignore it. I could flaunt it if I wanted to"*. I noticed that the weight loss was causing me to be vain. *"It was great to look physically better. I enjoyed looking at myself in the mirror. I had a little excess skin hanging around my middle, but I preferred that than rolls of fat"*. The reflection in the mirror was one way to map the weight loss process; the other was to jump on the scales at every opportunity.

People said I looked great with less weight. It got to a point, for me, that I needed to hear their comments. I was driven by their positive reinforcements. *"I needed to hear that the weight was coming off. I wanted to lose more weight so people would notice it. I found myself going to places for the attention I would get"*. This became a problem. I was losing too much weight, according to those observing me. Those around me were getting worried. I was apparently looking very sick. Some people thought I may have contracted AIDS, or was ill from cancer; others thought I had started using drugs again. It was repeatedly said that my body would not be able to withstand this sort of weight loss. My immune system would fail and I would get sick more easily. My ideal weight was not the ideal weight others thought I should be.

I knew that I needed to put on weight, but the problem was that I enjoyed getting the responses from others. People who had not seen me for a while were shocked and in some cases did not know who I was. I found this amusing, and I enjoyed their attention. They would ask me for tips on losing weight. I became the dieting guru. I told them what to eat and how to cook it. My body was shaping up. I had to work hard to get it to this point, and it was hard to explain this to those around me. *"It is a shame because you do things for yourself, for social reasons, and your friends cannot see it"*. I felt that some people around me were getting jealous of my weight-loss success. They even implied that my behaviour was changing and that I was getting more aggressive. I found it significant because I felt *"I had regained my social status. I felt empowered to be thinner. I noticed I was more assertive"*. However, friends were cutting me off and telling me that I was easier to control when fatter.

I felt that I was not discriminated against when thinner. I was high on life. *"It was a new me with a new life style"*. I no longer needed to isolate myself. Some of the expectations I had of my body were unrealistic. I was seeing normality as *"trim and fat free bodies. I got really centred on what I looked like"*. I had become more image conscious. I could wear clothes that were fitted and revealing. Shopping for clothes was now more enjoyable. I was able, for the first time, to experiment with different styles and fits. My thin wardrobe is a lot bigger than was my fat wardrobe. My wardrobe consists of

different sized clothes, and I am able to gauge my weight by clothes that fit me. I spend a lot more money on clothes these days. During the summer months, I would only wear shorts. My belts needed to have extra holes punched into them. Some clothes I bought, or those that were bought for me, were too big within weeks. The weight loss got to be that fast, that clothes would fit for a few weeks or a month, and then be too big. I would try the smallest size I could. I was able to borrow clothes for the first time.

I found that I tended to go up in weight as I got stressed. My belt and clothes became markers for my emotional well-being and weight. I knew by the fit of my clothes, whether I was putting on or losing weight. I realised that there were also clothes that were too small for me and when I could fit into these I realised that I had lost too much weight and I needed to put weight back on. I was thinner. I had a great looking body. I was more sociable. I went out more and wore clothes that looked great on me. The sexier body image gave me greater confidence. Others found me attractive and this increased my sex drive. *"I was no longer fat and sexually safe"*. I used to fantasise about having sex with others, and I am sure they fantasised about having sex with me.

Being thin meant my physical environment expanded. I had more space to move. I became egotistical in regards to space. I could fit into spaces that I could not have fitted into prior to losing weight. I would purposely seek out tighter spaces to see if I could fit into them, or squeeze through them. I found that I did not have to hold myself in. *"I found smaller spaces gave me a great opportunity to show off. It accentuated the fact that I was thinner"*. At work, I was often praised for losing weight, but scolded when seen to eat something unhealthy. *"My external self was reflective of my inner self"*. I felt normal being thin.

Being over-weight shows a lot about a person, though you can read a lot into it. They do not have a desire, or passion, to make more of themselves. I do not have to think about my weight now. I do avoid foods that are high in fat. I look at other fat people and think that they could do something about their weight if they wanted to. *"I hated being fat and if I were made fat again I would feel ripped off"*. However, *"I am also sick of having to*

*think about my weight all the time. The fatter you get, the harder it is. The body was the desired object". Masculinity for me is not defined through the body, but through my relationships and the work I do. I need to be able to provide for myself and be successful in what I do. Men who define themselves through their bodies are often too aggressive. There are no negatives to being thin. I felt the process of weight loss was extremely hard, and not something I would want to repeat. "I will never be fat again".*

### **Thin symbolism**

The symbolic representations of thinness take from Steve's story are as follows. Thin men are: in control; active; sexual predators; confident; healthy; unhealthy; insecure about their body size (image); competitive; good consumers; sociable; assertive; motivated; happy; body aware; socially mobile; fashion conscious; desirable to others; visible; attractive; inclusive of fat people; winners; dancers; risk-takers; secure; purposeful; serious about life; negative in their concept of self; valued on the sexual market; driven by will power (self-control); greater in status than fat men; resilient; fearful of rejection; better at sex; needing attention; bouncing between extremes; and feel good about themselves.

### **Freddy, Steve, and their multiple identities**

As upper-level constructions, the value of presenting ideal types is that they represent a holistic, albeit idealised, picture of participants' lived experiences. In themselves they represent two characterisations of the one individual. The difference between the two extreme characterisations is the amount of bodyweight the individual carries. It is evident that bodyweight is a significant factor that affected the lives of primary participants. The ideal types, as presented here, track a number of contradictory statements as participants moved between positive and negative, subjective embodiment. The results indicate, the polarised ideal types give way to a range of embodied identities. In this context, the data revealed the existence of 'multiple identities' which were socially constructed, and

subjectively accepted. However, there were points of contradiction between identities that were projected onto Freddy and Steve, and the identities projected by Freddy and Steve. In what follows, their multiple identities are outlined with the purpose of, firstly, highlighting their significant differences, and, secondly, tracking the changes as they moved out of their predominantly private enclosures to socially expose themselves. In this section I allude to some of the results from secondary participants where they confirm the existence of certain identities. Their voices appear in italics.

### **Freddy's Identities**

The joker was a favourite social identity imposed on Freddy. He was expected to perform and to actively ridicule himself in public. Freddy accepted this socially imposed identity, and in most cases gave a commanding performance. This identity is complemented by that of the inept sportsman (clumsy clown). Freddy avoided sport where possible. The joker and inept sportsmen are, essentially, negative identities. In contrast, the producer, describ<sup>h</sup>is a positive identity. Freddy is economically productive. His future is planned around providing for a family. These three, joker, inept sportsman, and producer, are public identities. Linked to the producer is another identity, that of the thief. The thief identity steals food to support his emotional needs. In this case, the items are all edible. This identity was renowned for traversing the private/public divide. He fed whenever there was food available.

The following two identities present a self divided between social acceptance and private exclusion. In response to his fatness, Freddy took on the social recluse identity (the slob). He avoided people, and they avoided him. He retreated into a private world of few friends. Finally, there is the 'failed' or 'failing' lover. His body image had the effect of confirming his sexual undesirability. Privately, he feels ugly and unattractive. Freddy's six identities are inter-linked to each other, and they affect his subjective sense of self as he interacts with other social identities. However, where there are points of convergence, there are also points of extreme difference. The following, pen-portraits, highlight this last point.



**The joker.** Freddy internalised a social expectation that he should adopt the joker identity when moving through private and public space. It occurred to him to reject the role in public, but he got the message that if he resisted he would be forced to play the role regardless of his desire to free himself of it. The contradictions inherent in acceptance and rejection of the joker identity were isolation and depression. The identity could easily be re-named the private, sad joker. However, his acceptance of the role pleased the social other. The joker is symbolised, in this case, by the fat body.

**The inept sportsman (clumsy clown).** This identity overlaps with the joker. Freddy as a child was told he was clumsy and uncoordinated. This became a defining feature of his life. As an adult, Freddy sees himself as clumsy and uncoordinated and resists participating in anything physical. Regardless of whether or not thinner men engage in sports, the point is they are seen to have the ability to do so should they wish. Freddy is not seen as having the same abilities, or choices available to him. The message is that fat men are not meant to be sporting men. The inept sportsman is characterised by an uncoordinated body. His body is slower and awkward-looking in action. The inept sportsman is looked at in a degrading way because of his size. He avoids exposing his body in public, and seeks out safe environments where his fatness is not challenged, and where he can expose his fat body with ridicule. The inept sportsman subjectively accepts there is a difference between what sports are available to fat and thin men.

**The failed or failing lover.** Freddy, to most, was sexually unattractive, except in those cases where he was in a long-term, intimate relationship. His sexual appeal, as indicated by his sexual contact, was minimal. He was not only thought to be sexually undesirable, he thought himself to be undesirable. The pleasure of sex lessened if his bodyweight was visible, in particular, his stomach and bum. His partner was at times critical of his body size and its observable unattractiveness. This added to his withdrawal from sexual intimacy. He came to see himself as sexually inadequate. This identity affects Freddy in both the private and public spheres of his life. In both he feels sexually restricted. This observation is from a lover. *"It changed our sex life for a while. He lost interest in having*

*sex because of his self image. There was less sex happening. I would get annoyed with him, and have to take things in hand".*

**The social recluse (The slob).** The recluse becomes Freddy's definitive subjective social identity based on the overwhelming judgment that fatness is not socially valued. Secondary participants overwhelmingly support this statement based on their observations. *"As he got bigger he withdrew into his bedroom".* Freddy did not want to be seen socially and sought to find ways to avoid social functions. He did not want to be socially ridiculed, or observed as a social out-cast. *"He would have bad days, withdrawn, didn't want to interact".* He had enough of being told that he was socially unacceptable. His social retreat fuels the damaging cycle. He eats to fill the void.

**The producer.** Socially, Freddy's work ethic was observed by secondary participants to be all-consuming. *"He was happy in doing the same thing day in day out. He was in a rut, but happy to be there. He was working hard".* Based on the lived experiences of his other identities, it is logical to suggest that he was left with little else but to pour himself into his work. The producer is a socially acceptable identity that is not normally projected at fat men because, symbolically, fatness can be associated with laziness and non-productive behaviour. Freddy acknowledges his desire to provide for himself, and to provide for a potential family (if one did not already exist). The producer is subjectively accepted by Freddy, thinking that if he were productive he might increase his social value. His choice of work reflects the need to move away from those positions that called for the thinner, valued, body image. He could be productive by sitting down at a desk, or sitting behind a driving wheel, or in any work environment where his weight was not a disadvantage to him. However, with production comes consumption.

**The thief.** The thief identity consumes beyond his need, yet not in greed. The thief identity takes opportunities when they exist. This was mainly an identity observed in Freddy as a youth attempting to deal with his emotions in a potentially, socially hostile world. The thief has a keen sense of smell and can flush out their target no matter what others do to hide food from them. This account from a secondary participant best

describes the identity in action. *"If you hid it he could smell it out. I used to hide things in my wardrobe, but he would find it, or he would steal other people's food, like chocolate eggs from a friend's house, or presents given to me like boxes of chocolates ...he would find and devour them"*. The thief identity is not necessarily a negative identity, if subjectively Freddy sees no problem with stealing to meet his emotional needs. Neither is it a socially positive identity. People who steal and are caught run the risk of having their trustworthiness questioned. Where food was concerned, this was the case for Freddy the fat, food thief. He felt no-one would trust him around food.

There was a difference between the way identities were subjectively created and socially imposed. Of the six identities mentioned here, the joker, inept sportsman and social recluse were isolating identities that were socially imposed. It appears Freddy had little choice but to create the illusion of accepting them. Freddy has to reconcile this for himself when placing himself into potentially hostile environments. The way he copes with this is to project that he is happy with his weight, or at least un-bothered by it. There is an element of deception here, and there are repercussions. There is a price to pay for this because there is little to be gained from creating the illusion of accepting socially-imposed identities, whilst subjectively refuting them. The illusion creates interpersonal problems that manifest in interpersonal conflict and self-destructive behaviour. In addition, by creating the illusion of acceptance, Freddy prevents himself from discussing his true feelings about his weight and other issues linked to this. Four of his social identities are contingent on the negative self construct 'there is something wrong with me'. The fifth identity, the producer, was more positive. However, the work chosen by Freddy reinforced his solitude. For Freddy, his symbolic experience of fatness was that something was wrong with him, and he should remain hidden where possible.

The opposite is true as Freddy undergoes the transformation and develops the social criteria for embodying Steve. Freddy's social identities become less noticeable as his body changes shape, and new social identities begin to develop. The seven are unable to pick the definitive point where everything changed for them. However, as the weight came off and their new-found, social freedom became a reality, they start to socially

engage with people based on new sexual, and action-based, identities. The social response to their new body shape signifies the embodiment of new identities. The five identities drawn from Steve are the athlete, the stud, the narcissist, the self-aware man and the dieting guru.

### Steve's identities

*The athlete.* Steve starts to be more athletic. He pursues activities with a new fervour. He is very physical and looks to express this at conventional places. The gym, the pool, the park, and the road (walking, running, and bush-bike riding), are places where he works out. The athlete pumps iron, preens and tones his muscles. He eats in response to the increased physical activity. He is faster and has more stamina when compared to the identities Freddy embodies. The athlete appears to be always on the move; even when resting he is poised, in readiness, to run off those fattening foods a secondary participant made this comment on the athletic identity: *"He was always out. I never saw him. It was go, go, go. all the time"*. The athlete is a positive social identity for Steve. The identity brings him social recognition. However, for the athletic identity to exist, Steve needs to employ self-control and self-denial. There is a lot at stake. He no longer observes himself to be clumsy. He is now a winner, on the winning, thinner team.

*The stud.* Steve is more sexually active than Freddy. The stud is a free agent with few relationship ties. He seeks to accentuate his sexual appeal by clothing himself in the latest, tightest-fitting clothes. However, this identity is confronting for jealous friends. As the stud becomes more internally focused on how he looks, he starts to move into an extreme thin position. He is harder to control in his social circles. The stud now controls where he directs his attention. He is no longer dependent on his immediate group for attention he can seek it elsewhere, or cause emotional turmoil for his friends by creating the impression he looking beyond them for attention and companionship. This social identity is defined by the look and shape of the body. It is subjectively appealing because it has socially-pleasing tendencies. A secondary participant makes this observation of the stud identity. *"I think at ninety kilo's he would be quite stunning. He has a broad*

*physique and slim hips which, if he got tanned up, maybe he could be a male stripper. He would certainly be pulling them in old, and young I am sure".* Secondary participants all comment on the studs' weight loss. "*He looked better with weight off*". To be thin is to be attractive. The stud identity melds into that of the narcissist.

*The Narcissist.* This identity reflects a man happy to look at himself continually in the mirror, or who is continually requiring positive social reinforcements. He appears to be happier with his body image as the body now reflects something that is sexually desirable. This identity also reflects the individual alone. In terms of competition, his friends felt unable to compete with him. There is an association between the stud and the narcissist. Both are socially projected to be sexual identities. The social reaction to both of these identities is wariness. The narcissist is accused of attempting to steal sexual partners from those in his social circle. The narcissist is in danger of becoming a social out-cast. This identity exists with a certain amount of fear. There is the fear of losing the attention of the social other. The narcissist starts to become self-destructive. Needing social attention, he resumes his need to lose more weight. His sexual desirability to the other becomes of little concern. He believes he looks good. However, the social other is reflecting he looks ill or in need of help. From here, he has the choice to stop losing weight, or to continue. If he continues to lose weight ....? If he chooses to stop losing weight he can move into a new identity, the self-aware man.

*The self-aware man.* The brakes start to be applied, and the self-aware man starts to observe himself in all his activities. He makes moves to embody an ideal existence between physical body, mind and emotions. The self-aware man does not want to re-embodify Freddy's identities yet is aware that food and exercise have to be balanced if a certain bodyweight is to be maintained. Therefore, the self-aware man is more connected to the wants and needs of his body than the stud, athlete or narcissist. The self-aware man watches where Steve is going and takes appropriate action to stem his decline into identities that are characterised by fitness and extreme thinness. Here Steve moves away from extreme dualities to experience the neutralising force the body has when consumption is based on need rather than greed, or based on acceptance, or inclusion, and

sociability, rather than on avoidance, exclusion and individuality. Self-awareness for Steve was a rewarding experience prompted by his move into balanced weight. He was not too fat, nor too thin. The ability to maintain a balanced position is observed by secondary participants. *"He knows where the balance is. I can remember him commenting that he knew when to exactly stop losing weight". "There is a certain awareness of himself as a person in a very positive way. It gives him more confidence. He is more aware of himself. When he doesn't have weight on he is more aware and more out-going".* There were observations about Steve's increased awareness of the integration of body and mind. *"He understands his body better now. He went through a stage of learning about minerals and vitamins and how they affect your body. He started to understand that your body is not completely separate from you and that you actually have to look after it, otherwise things start to happen".*

However, balance is hard to maintain. Steve is in danger of moving beyond this balanced position and being consumed by external forces. This happens for most of the participants. The self-aware man was observed to be a transitory position and a subjectively private identity, yet hard to maintain in times of emotional elation and depression. However, knowledge about weight loss can override these identities at any time. The guru identity reflects the public knowledge Steve now holds about food and weight loss practices.

*The Guru.* Steve's experiences testify to the experience of the guru as empowering. The guru is an informative identity. He is socially accepted and sought-after for his knowledge. He is elated to be socially included for the work he has done on his body and the control he exerts over his lifestyle. The guru is characterised by his attempts to assist those less fortunate than himself. He gives counsel on issues to do with the body, food, and exercise. He formulates exercise routines and accompanies his pupils on their walks. He suggests cooking and general lifestyle alternatives to those who will listen. However, he does not seek to impose his beliefs on those men he feels could improve their bodyweight through the appropriate action. In the context of this study, the guru is another action-oriented identity. The difference between the self-aware man and the guru

rests with the private/public divide. The guru needs people to exist. The self-aware man does not.

Steve's identities are made manifest through a positive self-construct reflective of a thinner body. However, there are tensions within and between these identities. The central feature was that of attention, and maintaining some form of social attention on his body. Weight loss came to be an obsession. Some of these identities were, therefore, unhealthy for Steve. The pivotal point between these healthy and unhealthy identities seems to be based on subjective and objective amounts of bodyweight. As the body changes shape, so does the way Freddy and Steve experience themselves and their social environments. It would be misleading to suggest that the identities existed in a social vacuum, each concealed within their respective environments.

Social life is characterised by multiple identities criss-crossing as the subject moves between different environments. They overlap and interconnect. The data spoke of colliding and blended experiences. I have sought to present these without asserting that these identities existed for all participants. Even so, these identities are embedded within each of the seven's stories. The degree to which they manifest varies for each participant. In light of this, Freddy is caught between social reflections that frame him as a joking, fun-loving guy yet sexually unattractive, and social reflections that frame him as un-healthy. This is of importance. It suggests that Freddy should play the joker role of being happy and content, yet at the same time accept his un-healthy, and sexually undesirable, social status, as determined by the existence of excessive body fat.

On the other hand, Steve is caught between performing to the social expectations placed on his thinner body which take him on a journey towards social exclusion, and, yet at the same time, wanting to be accepted. It is inferred that Steve needs to look good, but he should not look too good. There is a social contradiction here that requires explanation. It would seem the social message from Steve's immediate social group, conflicts with the social message from health professionals promoting healthy bodies, and a social sexual message that reinforces thinness is attractive, and fatness is unattractive. He is caught

between embodying his ideal, and embodying an ideal promoted by others. Hence promoting the underlying theme to this thesis which is the existence of an ideological tension between the individual and the social. In research terms, the themes arising from the ideal types will facilitate analysis and discussion. The themes emerging from this section, such as 'shifting selves', 'clothing' and 'food' become more apparent in the following section which recounts the individuals' story of weight gain and loss.



## Chapter 6

### Chewing the fat

#### Masculine experiences of bodyweight

## Introduction

The seven are different in height, embodied builds, and sexual preferences. However, there were strong convergences of their experiences of changing body weight. Each participant in this study has a unique story. The task for the social researcher is to find a balance between subjective voices and analysis through thematic schema. The results presented here move beyond the interview design where fatness and thinness are discussed separately. Instead, each theme encapsulates polarised and opposing concepts, as well as commonalities. The symbolic importance of clothes, for example, affected both thin and fat respondents.

The thematic schema resembles a tree. The single trunk symbolises the completeness of the social world, which bifurcates into self and social identity. The outward developing branches mirror the dominant themes emerging from the data. Mirrored selves, and imposed social identities are dominant themes. From each thematic branch subsidiary themes emerge as twigs. In this study, fatness and thinness are body determinants that affect and confer self concepts. Self concepts and social identities were contingent upon reflection from sentient and non-sentient objects.

Several of the main themes described in this section pertain to the way mirrors act to reinforce concepts of self and social identity. The literal mirror is avoided or embraced, dependent on the amount of weight participants are carrying. Clothes, bathroom scales, seats and space are reflective objects in the non-sentient category. Looks and comments made by the social other, or others, fall into the category of reflection from sentient objects. The dominant themes discussed include issues of indulgence, restraint and controlling food intake. Further, the visually healthy body emerges as problematic. There is conflict between symbolically healthy bodies identifies by weight, and thin bodies reflecting social deviance. Lastly, sex and nudity are explored in terms of their impact on masculine identity and body image.

In the thematic analysis, pseudonyms have been employed to conceal identity. Since there are seven primary and secondary participants, it seemed fitting to use the names from the film 'The Magnificent Seven'. I am using the actors first names for primary participants (Yul, Charles, Horst, Steve, Robert, Brad and James), and their characters first names for secondary participants (Chris, Lee, Vin, Chico, O'Reilly, Harry and Brit). The italics in speech marks, indicate the words, or voice, of both primary and secondary participants when describing an experience or opinion, and when making statements about their observations. With this said: "Lights, camera, action".

### **Overview of the seven's weight gain**

The comparative nature of this study requires participants to disclose the observable differences from their experiences of weight-loss. The seven's stories start from the point of being subjectively over-weight. However, events leading to their weight gain did not go unnoticed and their cumulative observations act to support the findings from extensive feminist research claiming that weight gain for women can be linked to emotional reactions when change occurs within their social environments (Bordo, 1993).

The seven have been split into two groups for the overview: those who identified with their fatness at a young age, starting at about high school or earlier, and those who identified with their fatness as an adult. Yul, Steve and James all had issues with their weight from childhood. At twelve, Yul considered himself fat, though his weight was not significant until seventeen. Steve has had an ongoing issue with his weight from primary school and was racially bullied. He had moved with his family from England, yet had darkish skin. His peers in Australia characterised him as indigenous and he was teased accordingly. *"I had a lot of names from school, especially high school. I got into a lot fights. I used to get called a fat black cunt; lard arse, and chubber chub"*.

James, like Yul, identifies his middle-teens as the time when his weight became very noticeable. Both Yul, and James, during their first interview, identified themselves as gay. James is a successful hairdresser and Yul works as a public servant. Chris and O'Reilly, both secondary participants (respectively) make the following comments about

members of this group. *"He started to put weight on at puberty. It might have been because he was gay. His weight I think was hormonal as much as it was about eating bad food"*. And *"He was seven or eight and he started putting on weight. All the kids were calling him names. He was a fat nigger. He had a teacher who constantly picked on him and who put him down. He was afraid of going to school"*. Both secondary participants notice the weight going on and both suggest that emotional reactions to discrimination were to blame. This differs to the next group, where their weight creeps up largely unnoticed.

As adults, Brad, Robert, Horst, and Charles, put on weight over short to extended periods of time. In this group, Charles identified himself as being gay and an outreach worker. Brad's and Robert's weight gain was quick and took a matter of months. They put on twenty kilos or more over this time. For Charles and Horst, their weight gain was slower and over a matter of years. They put on between thirty, and sixty-five kilos. Of this group, Harry, a secondary participant, makes the following definitive statement about their weight gain from both a primary and secondary point of view. *"I didn't see much of a difference. He was pretty out-there anyway. I didn't notice that he was getting bigger"*.

The amount of weight gained is not important for the study. However, it is important to establish the subjective parameters for the term 'fat' and 'overweight' for the seven. Essentially, most of the seven saw their ideal weight, as adults, to fall between seventy-five and ninety kilos. Most of the group actually climbed to over one hundred kilos, and Steve, as the heaviest for the overall group, reached one hundred and seventy-five kilos. Steve, at the time of weight gain was unemployed.

Normal weight range, as defined socially, for the seven falls between seventy-five and ninety kilos. Thinness equates to falling within this range. Fatness equates to going above one hundred kilos, given that the group have different body types and sizes. The seven's weight gain can be attributed to a number of reasons. For Yul and James, their sexual preference affected the way in which they saw and treated their bodies. Steve experienced a range of emotional upsets during his formative years that were dealt with through

eating. *"Every time I got stressed, every time I got depressed, I turned to food"*. He later explains that in adulthood he stopped exercising, started eating lots of fast food and stayed home to appease his partner; *"I suppose she always wanted me home all the time, I just got bigger, we drove everywhere"*. Robert's and Horst's weight gain, was due to leading happy, sedentary lifestyles. Robert explains: *"I guess it was a case of just leading a very comfortable lifestyle. I have always enjoyed my food. I have not been big on exercise. It just slowly crept on"*. Horst was a rugby player, but began to enjoy a happy home-life with his partner after a knee injury ended his competitive sporting career. *"See when you have a girlfriend and you have a job, and you have all the boys around you, you don't really care. I didn't care. I really didn't care if I was 200 kilograms. I didn't care how I looked. It didn't bother me because I had everything I wanted. In my life it didn't matter what size I was. It was a different story when she left. I started feeling bad about myself"*.

Charles switched drug dependencies, and put on weight through the effects of alcohol consumption. He was aware that his relationship was heading for stormy weather. He and his partner were living separate lives due to his drug use. Brad's weight gain was the result of a number of influences. He left a shared house to drive trucks in Darwin, and he binged on the companies expense account. Upon arriving at his new work place he was informed that he had an open food tab. He indulged to compensate for his dislocation. *"It was lonely up there, I liked having a lot of fun and that got taken away. We were going out and getting tanked and eating three course meals every night. We were living like kings"*. In summary, Yul, James, and Steve put on weight due to emotional reactions to their childhood environments, and issues of non-acceptance. This followed them into adulthood. Robert and Horst lead happy, sedentary lifestyles. Their weight gain was slow and unnoticed. They enjoyed relative safety whilst in intimate relationships. This is the same for Steve, at least while the relationship lasted. Weight gain for the seven was in response to both positive and negative emotional reactions to their life situations. Happiness, loneliness, discontent and rejection were the emotions identified by the seven as the reasons why they put on weight.

## Protection of self

All of the seven experienced social environments as hostile when fat. In order to protect themselves they avoided people who treated them according to their weight. *"I created a cocoon for myself and people I was safe with"*. This statement from James sums up the experiences of the seven. There was a need to feel safe amongst people who would not challenge them to look at their weight. Steve would hang out with friends, or with people who would not bring his weight to his attention. So did Yul, and Horst. This is understandable, considering the constant reminders that they were overweight, and needed to take action to lose it. There was a need to exert some form of control, considering how others framed them as out-of-control. Brad's experiences best sum this up. He returned home after three months away and remembers a relative saying, *"You fat shit! What have you been doing? You've been in a good paddock haven't you?"* His boss, six months later, explains that, prior to him departing, he was going to say something about his developing double chins. Until this time, Brad had not really thought about his weight gain. *"I didn't really notice it. It made no difference to people up there as they did not know me before I arrived"*. Robert echoes Brad's concern about how people might construct him with weight, as he ponders attending his high school for a reunion. *"It was a self-conscious thing. You think what other people might be thinking of you. In terms - whether they expected that is how he (meaning Robert) turned out, or whether they think. Gee! He has put on weight"*. His thoughts persuaded him not to attend.

Social outings, or engagements, acted as means for the seven to be self-reflective, often in negative terms. They would agonise over what others were thinking of them. They received comments from close friends, relatives, and people they did not know, that they were overweight. These prompts to action were often ignored. Robert explains, *"I was doing a denial trick: don't think about it and it might go away"*. The denial trick cannot hide the visible changes occurring. Vin explains, *"You started to really notice it. It was not so much in his waist and shoulders but in his trousers. Especially from behind. He almost looked like he had women's hips because they were really big. I wasn't*

*particularly worried. I mean I have known obese men and he wasn't looking obese. He was looking large*".

Socially, the seven were seen to change as their weight increased. Chico experienced this from a partner's perspective. *"He seemed to change with it. He would be less inclined to go out. We couldn't socialise. We couldn't go to the beach. It all stopped happening. He just has no inclination to go anywhere"*. Lee observes this from a mother's point of view. *"He used to spend a lot of time in his bedroom at that stage. He used to write poetry and it was dreadful. It was really sad. He was having huge problems and it was all down on paper ... It gave me an insight to what he was going through and that was when he was really big, really big"*. The morose mood described here is reiterated by Chris. *"He was terrible, very morose. He was quiet, he went back inside himself and he wasn't interested in anything. All he did was eat"*.

The reflective mirror was expanded to include other male bodies. The seven compared themselves to thinner men and they saw themselves as ugly. They would get jealous, and the other was always luckier than them to have a thinner body. James states, *"I would have traded anything to be thin"*. Steve's term for the fatter, male body was *"low miles"*. I ask him to explain the term. *"Oh, I'd last longer because mine is a low mileage body, you know"*. I took this to mean that he was less physical, and went at a slower pace, meaning his body would out-last the thinner male, energy-consuming body. The comparisons also went the other way when they were overweight. The seven would feel good about themselves if they saw bigger men. Steve comments on this, *"I would make myself look thinner by saying they're bigger than me"*.

The fat-man comparisons were not as safe as they thought, though. Charles realised that compared to other fat men, he was bigger, *"I then started to compare myself with friends who are overweight and then I realised my body mass was bigger than theirs"*. There was no escape. They could not protect themselves from the negative reflections. Everywhere they looked, they were informed of their weight. This was so pervasive that they often sought refuge away from other people. Robert sums this up for the seven, *"If you remove those situations that cause you to think about your weight, and so you are always in an*

*accepting environment that you are always happy with, and you're not making any comparisons or anything like that, it is very easy to ignore what weight you are".* His statement is supported by a secondary participant, *"Everyone he met made a comment. You've put on weight, you've got fat. Like really blatant, in-your-face stuff".* Self-imposed exclusion only allowed temporary relief from social condemnation.

In his relationship, Steve's weight-gain was reflected back to him, unlike the others. His partner is a size 8-10 model and he became depressed when she started speaking to him about his weight. The relationship took a dive as he reached one hundred and seventy kilos. He confides, *"People would call you names and, sure, they are only words, but they still hurt. The ex [his partner at the time] used to say 'I can't have sex anymore with you. I hate looking at your fat stomach. I hate looking at your fat arse'. All the time things like that and they used to get me down".* She left him because he had become too fat. Robert's and Horst's partners also left, but not because of their increasing weight.

Nevertheless a new reality hit, *"I was suddenly out of all that comfort and happiness where I hadn't been so blasé about it to begin with [his weight gain], when circumstances changed it suddenly became a bigger issue. I had an awful lot of weight to be unhappy about".* The ending of the relationship, in all three cases, acted as a catalyst for change, but before this occurred, all three experienced a veil being lifted, and they saw, for the first time, the extent of their situation. Robert and Horst (respectively) sum up this sentiment: *"I had come all this way and I've let myself go. I'm not really in there with the right tools for the job. I hit depression of being overweight. You are not much in a physical sense. People aren't likely to come to you and initiate anything with you".* And *"I was unhealthy and overweight, so as far as the girls went they weren't going to come my way".* Both had a realisation that they are overweight and needed to address this if they were to compete with others in the sexual market. Steve had already experienced this first-hand. In brief, they thought they had little to no sexual value in comparison to thinner men.

Both Horst and Charles discuss a vicious cycle. Charles noted, *"I had these feelings of insecurity. I'm not exercising because I am overweight, I am overweight because I am*



*drinking. I am drinking because I can't exercise". Horst continues. "It gets to the point where you don't want to go out ever, and it plays on your mind and that combined with the fact that you are not looking that good ... it all combines into a vicious cycle". For Horst, his big size was accepted at the rugby club because the club was full of big men. However, his playing position had a standard look, which he did not match. This became a concern for him. His confidence in his ability to play was undermined. "It is all about confidence, if you don't have the confidence you sort-of go back into your shell. You are not truly who you are or who you should be". This is reiterated later, when he discusses activities like swimming in the middle of a West Australian summer, "I'd be the one with the shirt on. I had no confidence in my body".*

Most of the seven refrained from physical activity. This included dancing and have fun at nightclubs. Charles refers to this as refraining from doing thin people's things. His experience of weight gain allowed him to see there were differences between what people thought fat men should be doing, and what they thought thin men should be doing. This includes being physically sexual. *"Well fat people are lonely, miserable people, unless they are out partying and having a good time. You know, over the top compensating for being over-weight and because they're lonely poor miserable sods of course they're going to look after whatever because they're not going to be chatting anyone up are they? I found that when I was thinner boyfriends would get, not confrontational, but short with me because I was hugging and kissing all the girls".* For fat men, self protection literally meant excluding oneself from environments that were believed to be the province of thin men. This was normally influenced by observing the reflections to their weight.

### Reflective surfaces and concepts of self

In a literal sense, the mirror acted as a signifier to the seven of their weight loss and improved looks. However, this section also addresses the 'virtual' mirror of the looks and comments of the other, and it outlines how these reflected responses were interpreted by

the seven. For them, the reflected responses signified their weight loss was drawing positive attention. However, this changed to negative attention when the reflections indicated they had gone too far in either direction (weight gain and weight loss).

Bathroom scales also mirrored and confirmed their new look.

When fat, the seven do not weigh themselves. Yul is the only participant who is weighed regularly, and this occurs only when visiting his doctor. His file charts his weight gain and loss over stressful periods in his life. *"My laziness came in as a way of coping with fear and stress which fed into a sedentary nature ... I only get weighed with my doctor. So I don't weight watch. When I go to my doctors I can see my weight go down and then back up again. Especially, when I lost the house at Mindarie. It went back up again ..."*. It is a different story as they lose weight. Brad, Charles, and James are now constantly jumping onto the weighing scales. Charles uses other people's bathroom scales until he bought his own. *"You go to the bathroom to wash your hands and they have a set of scales. I'll have a weigh and it would be probably three to four people's houses so it was consistent. Now I have my own scales"*. O'Reilly hears shouts of joy as bathroom scales indicate how much weight has been lost, *"As he got on the scales I could hear him say 'Whoopee'"*.

The mirrors cannot lie. They reflect instantaneous embodiment. The seven avoided looking at themselves when fat. This meant avoiding mirrors, or any other reflective surface. However, this could not last. At some stage they had to look into the reflective glass. What Charles saw was a thinner person, to some extent. He explains, *"You know how we all look in a mirror and we all see something different, particularly our own self image. I found it very hard to gauge exactly how big I was. My body mass was actually less than what I thought it was. I thought it would be the opposite"*. He thought himself to be bigger than he was literally reflected to be. James avoided looking at his body in the mirror. He concentrated his look on the face, or clothes. *"I wouldn't look down. I just wouldn't accept it. I was grossed out, hideous, hated myself. But you know, the more I hated myself the I ate...I had got so good at not looking at pictures, or looking in the mirror. I was just so ashamed of myself. When looking into the mirror I would purely see my face, or the clothes I was wearing"*. He would not look at himself nude. Steve saw a

monster in the mirror. *"My eyes looked like slits in my face. I couldn't see my chin. I ... looked like a monster"*.

The literal mirror told a new story as the seven shed weight and started to tone up. Brad saw a porn star, *"I had my own bathroom with two massive walls with mirrors. You didn't have much choice. You'd go for a piss and there you were. Honestly, I was the ultimate porn star"*. When Steve and Robert looked into the mirror, they saw different people. For Steve, *"The shape of my face came back again and I found I have actually got a split in my chin I didn't know was there"*. For Robert, *"You start noticing the thinness you're draining off the face, in the mirror, I mean you can see all your ribs in the mirror as well. I did enjoy looking at myself more in the mirror. It was another way of mapping the progress. The scales tell you, your clothes tell you, whereas the mirror is telling you the sort of overall look. I will look at myself in the mirror and I will know. Hey, that is where I want to get to. I don't have a set plan"*. Robert was going to use the mirror to inform him, holistically, when he had reached his desired look. He now treated his body as a project to be worked upon.

The body, as a project, started to emerge for other participants. Visual images acted as catalysts for the seven to explore new body options. Steve used the images of body builders, on the wall of the gym, as the motivation to acquire a certain look. *"I'd see the body builders on the wall and I'd say to myself that is what I want to look like. I've got the body to do it. My body can do it because I can put on muscle quickly. It takes me ages to put on fat. I can get there so long as I stick to this diet G has given me. I'll get there"*. James used an image in a magazine, or on the television, as models for what he could look like. His body project includes surgical body modification. *"I'd love to have my hips chiseled. I reckon my hips are like women's. I've an hour glass and it is bloody shocking. I'd love to have that done, or a couple of ribs taken out, like, you know how Cher had ribs taken out to make look smaller. When I lose more weight I want to have more cosmetic surgery because I feel everything sticks out more. My ears stick out and my nose is too big"*. In their imagination they could take the form of any reflective healthy body. The space between their reality and their ideal became smaller.

The discussion of virtual space centres on the seven's experiences of being fat and seating. *"I found experiences with furniture that I had never experienced before. The size of seats in the car and airline".* Steve also had problems with seating, *"Those white plastic chairs! Well, I wouldn't fit into them, and the legs would give way".* The seats on public transport were also too small. The way around this was to make sure they secured a bench seat. If none was available, they would stand. Steve sat in the front seat of his mate's car and it promptly bent; from then on, he was asked to sit in the back. *"Car chairs would bend on one side. I bent one in my mates four wheel drive. He didn't appreciate it. He still won't let me sit in the front seat and I'm not that big anymore. I still have to sit in the back".* Robert explains that he could still fit comfortably into cinema seats where the arm rests fold away. *"I don't think it really hit me until afterwards. If I wasn't so heavy then I wouldn't have this particular problem. I wasn't worried enough to do anything about it. I was too comfortable in my relationship and company of friends. Our activities were usually going to the cinema and I could still fit in the cinema chairs plus the arms come up now too".* They all sought comfort where possible.

Negotiating space was problematic for most of the seven. Steve, due to his size, had problems walking through doors. *"Doorways! I had to go sideways; you'd always walk in sideways".* Robert discusses other spatial issues. *"There was getting around in tight places. That would be annoying. You would have to push your way through".* This drew attention to his size.

However, spatial features also reflected their thinness. Space became a source of gratification, as Robert sums up, *"I don't really bother about space that I have got, even if there is not enough space, because it accentuates the fact that you are thinner. I push through spaces that I shouldn't be able to get through. Yep! Being able to get in and around things gives me a greater opportunity to show off".* Dining out was more comfortable. They do not have to worry about their stomachs touching the table, or whether they will have to hold themselves in whilst eating.

The most pervasive of the mirrors were the reflected looks and comments from the social other, or others. These could be brutal, and cutting. Charles starts to explain his experience of fatness, *"I had never really experienced being so big before, and also I noticed radically people changed around me. It lowered my credibility. People treat you differently. I went from a thin person to experiencing life as obese. When I was fat I felt physically, that I had changed status"*. This was very unsettling for Charles, and his experience of weight was the most profound in relation to class mobility.

He likens the experience to being 'othered'. His trip interstate to visit friends confirms that, socially, he felt himself being down-graded. *"The first thing someone said to me, the first thing, shit you're fat. The whole trip was like that. I was unable to be the person I wanted to be. I'm fat: I can't be that thin person anymore"*. His friends seemed pleased that he was putting on weight. It got him down, but he often saw that they were commenting on the fat, not thin Charles. He often felt under attack. *"My weight wasn't a problem. It was everybody's reaction to the weight which was the problem, and people were trying to move me from where I was. I felt a constant attack upon me when I was in Sydney. It was very difficult to deal with"*. His social and sexual value was undermined by his growing waistline. The issue of social status also emerged when Charles interacted with airline staff. *"And there was no respect either. I felt I was down-graded in their minds because you are overweight"*.

Steve would also hear remarks from his friends concerning his growing waistline. He explains they were usually said behind his back, when his friends thought he was not listening. Most of the seven felt discriminated against in some sense. Chico offers the following observations, *"He could appreciate how over-weight people feel because they get such prejudice all the time. No one meant it in a really harsh way. People like to give him a hard time because he can handle it. So they didn't consider it too harsh, you know. He wouldn't be offended if they came out with something like you're getting fat"*. The point was that he was affected by their comments. However, some of those close to

the seven refrained from making comments on their weight gain. Harry explains. *"I didn't want to talk to him about it. I don't see that it is any of my business. If he wants to do anything about it, it is his decision"*.

The seven all commented on the situation where people would feel free to comment on their weight. Even strangers would approach them and make rude, or derogatory, remarks. Steve discusses his experiences of naming calling. *"People would call you names and sure they are only words but they still hurt. People that I had never met when I walked past said he's fat and I said thanks mate, it is Mr. Fat to you. I would try to make a joke out of it, then go home and say perhaps I am too fat. Then I would get depressed. I would feel that the whole world is coming down on me. I would then stay indoors"*. The jolly fat man façade is used to deflect the insult. The beach was another example where remarks were common, albeit that the seven, when fat, would avoid such places as much as possible. Steve was asked to move because he was blocking the sun, and he was compared to a whale. He became so self-conscious that he would look for beaches that were sparsely populated. *"I was too afraid to take my T-shirt off at the beach. I used to wear shorts and a T-shirt all the time, never took them off. We had to go to the beach. I never went to the pools, I used to go to Dwellingup. I used to go there because it was quiet. I would go to places where no one would see me. Some places I'd go to I'd get 'Hey ring up Greenpeace and push him back in', or you'd hear comments, 'You want to move mate you are blocking the sun, and mate when you sit around the pool, you really sit around the pool'. I used to really upset so I never used to go"*.

Shops were other places where discriminatory words and looks were common. Charles and Steve relate that they would be 'looked at' when buying junk food. The serving person would look at them in a funny manner. The manner could not be explored further. People standing in queues would comment on their size and then refer to a fat relative who was going to die of a heart attack, or they would comment about their size and their greedy purchasing practices. Charles makes this comment, *"People would say, Oh, that guy is going to buy all the chocolate bars. There'll be nothing left"*. In public, people would stare. Steve was conscious of being looked at because he was out with a slim girlfriend, *"You could tell that they were looking at us and wondering, how the hell did*

*he get to go out with her? ". The last comment from Charles sums up the issue in terms of experiencing something that is often simply invisible to observers, "People would discriminate against you and I've never ever seen it, never, because you just don't see it". This changes when they embody a thin position.*

The seven felt they did not experience any discrimination when thinner. However, some felt discriminated against when they reached extreme thinness. Charles feels being thinner means the ability to be more assertive and forceful, James agrees, and confirms that thinner people do not experience any form of weight discrimination. Nevertheless, he does confess that people did cast discriminating looks at him when thinner, because his behaviour changed. He is more confident in himself when thin, *"When you are looking good and feeling good people always try and bring you down. I feel safer fatter"*. This experience is common to the seven when they reflect on comments and looks made by others about their new looks. The comments and looks had more to do with the way the other reacted to the seven's refined body image. Issues of jealousy and envy prompted cutting remarks and in some cases severe action,

Respectively, James, Steve and Brad discuss their experiences. *"You could see them looking at you and they were jealous that I was thin. Some may have thought I was looking a bit gaunt, but there were people not used to looking at me being that weight. They were use to seeing me bigger and I was my right weight. I was so confident and so happy"*. O'Reilly and Lee are observing a more confident person. In relation to clothes they observe the following: *"He is getting more comfortable about being seen just with shorts on. He lost all the weight and became more self-confident in his body-image"*. And for Lee: *"He was happy with himself. He would preen in through the door. He walked with an air of confidence. He could dress himself, everything matched. He was always looking trendy. Always meticulous in how he dressed"*. Their observations unite under the themes of increased confidence and increased sociality. There is a marked change from the person they knew with weight, and the person they now know without weight. Chris reflects, *"He feels better with the weight off. He was never an exercise freak. He never did exercise because he never played sport. The dancing has helped. I was saying to him*

*a couple of weeks ago the dancing must be helping him because that is great exercise. It is good, and he agreed". "He was quite enthusiastic to get back into the swing of socialising and meeting people and being around people again". O'Reilly adds. "He has the confidence to go out there and put himself in risky situations. He has the confidence to go and deal with the rest of the world. He has a lot more friends now. He is more confident, more open. He walks more upright. He doesn't slouch, or let his head hang down. He stands up tall. He walks faster. He is active. He is off ... I liked watching him, and like watching him mix and being with people, being with people his own age. Watching him have a laugh and a joke".*

The following remarks from O'Reilly reflect the change primary participants underwent in terms of their image and increased sexual appeal, *"His stomach started to go. His shoulders, his neck, you could see his face going very thin and his jaw line became more sharper. Even his face changed shape. His attitude on life changed. He'd be wanting to go out to nightclubs. You wouldn't hear him whinge that girls are not interested in fat men".* The reflections from sentient and non-sentient objects were subjectively interpreted as positive or negative based on how fat or thin participants were. These readings influenced their social identity.

## Social identity and bodyweight

When overweight, the jolly fat man façade dominated their social encounters. Yul Explains. *"You are supposed to be happy".* Brad agrees, as do Charles, James and Steve. For these five, happiness is equated with fatness, or at least that is what they were told. Joking about one's weight seems to be a social pastime, and those who are overweight are meant to laugh along. Brad recalls. *"The bigger fellas tend to get in first [with self depreciating comments]".* As James mentions. *"I always had a good act".* James insists that he was expected to play the happy fat man and everyone thought he was a happy, sociable person. He has something to say about this construction: *"I couldn't be myself".* He uses the term 'introverted' to describe his personality: *"I was really withdrawn".* Charles explains his take on the façade. *"Fat people are lonely, miserable people, unless*



*they are over-compensating for being overweight and having a good time*". Finally, Steve runs through some of his favorite ways of joking about his weight. His favourite being, *"Someone needs to ring Green peace and push me back in"*. During the interview he refers to this way of framing his weight five times.

The seven's social identity changed when they lose weight. Their thinner bodies were viewed as dangerous. Steve and James encountered jealousy over their thinner look. Steve is accused of attempting to poach a mate's girlfriend, *"I think he became jealous because I had lost all this weight. He is too obsessive, which is a shame really"*. For James, his friends were not as accepting of his new look as he would have liked, *"They are happy with me when I am bigger because I think they have more control of me, because I am not so outwardly bound and confident"*. Charles, and Robert (respectively), notice people are more accepting of their new look. They are no longer referred to as the jolly fat men. *"I had gone from one of the pack to getting positive reinforcement. I came back to an alpha male and that made a big difference you know. I am more forceful now"*. *"My grandparents seemed happier with me losing the weight and there is an interesting group of cousins, who had also put on weight over several years, when they saw me thinner they were shocked"*.

The seven's social identity changed at work, and their perceptions of occupation, role performance and masculinity also changed. Robert felt he could think more clearly at work with a thinner body. He felt less restricted, *"I would have been happier about myself and my presentation"*. He felt more confident, *"Feeling good about how you look and feel and that can only come across to anyone you come in contact with"*. James is happier at work when thinner. He likes the attention he gets. Horst has an ideal image for his body and it is motivated by wanting to work at a gym, *"Basically, I want it to look good so that I can get a job in a gym. It will be a lot easier strolling into a gym looking the part. Gym instructors are there to keep people fit. You are not going to rock up into a gym and get the fat bloke to get you fit, are you?"*. Charles reiterates the connection between expectations placed on body image and occupation with reference to electricians, *"You can imagine that people aren't going to let you walk all over their ceiling, or under their floor when you are kilos - they don't!"*.

Brad feels that, unless you are a model, body image has little to do with occupation. However, his new image does affect how he sees work. Work becomes the means to an end. His weight loss, and increased physical activity, prompt him to rethink his occupation, *"I was thinking of jumping on my bike and becoming a bike courier in town. I'd be riding around having fun all day. It would be an ideal job; you'd be getting everything at once, work, girls, riding all day, getting paid"*. Yul experiences comradeship at work. *"Especially in the office, from people who are losing weight. There's a little group that go out walking at lunch time"*.

### Food, diet and control

Issues of indulgence were significant to the fat seven. They all loved to eat and they all ate a lot. They all ate during the day, continually, and in most cases, this included eating foods high in fat. Charles is the exception, but he substituted alcohol for food. Brad indulged in both food and beer. These words sum up the sentiments of the seven as they ate their way to fatness, *"The scary thing was that the more I ate, the more I wanted to eat. I just wanted to eat all the time. I became attracted to the fatty and filling"*. Brad's diet consisted of beer. He was working away from home in a climate that was extremely hot and humid. Beer goes with everything up there, *"Whatever you do you'd have a beer"*. It was nothing for him to consume two cartons of beer (48 cans) with work mates after work. Beer was even on the menu for breakfast.

Against a backdrop of indulgence, and working away from home, Brad outlines his food consumption. Breakfast consisted of bacon and egg sandwiches with a choc-milk. Smoko (morning break) consisted of meat pies and Coca-Cola. Lunch could be a whole chicken and a loaf of bread shared between two. Afternoon smoko was again pies and coke. Dinner was a three-course meal at a restaurant. With this food intake occurring on a daily basis, Brad wonders where it went, *"You're not using it just sitting on your bum all day. It wouldn't be enough to just have one pie, you'd have more because you might get*

*hungry in five minutes*". Brad drove hauling trucks and would cover about 700 kilometres a day.

Charles is a vegetarian. He does not eat take-away food. His weight gain is due to using alcohol to replace his other drug use. He did not realise that the alcohol consumption would dramatically affect his weight. *"I gave up all other substances. I bounced onto alcohol and so consumed lots of alcohol. For the first six months I would eat and drink anything I felt like. I was fascinated how much body weight a person could put on in a short period of time. Especially, without really eating. Alcohol changes everything"*. The issue of being a vegetarian and fat brought some unique reactions from people around him. Prior to his weight gain, he had to justify his vegetarianism and rationalise the decision by explaining some of the health benefits. Now he was overweight, he was unable to rationalise the food choice, in terms of its health benefits, because, visually, he was the epitome of poor health. Apparently, vegetarians cannot be fat, *"People would say I have never met a fat vegetarian before"*. Meat is obviously seen to be fat-producing.

Robert likes his food. Breakfast was cereal. Lunch was usually a salad roll, *"We were at least attempting to be healthy, not that it seemed to be doing anything"*. Dinner was huge. He would have large meals that were prepared by either his mother or partner. He would eat out at restaurants with friends and had a reputation for finishing whatever was left over, *"I did have a reputation for being a garbage disposal unit as far as eating up. I couldn't leave anything that was left"*. There was always dessert and snacking between meals. The snacks consisted of biscuits, potato chips, and left-over desserts. His eating is regarded as a lack of self-control, *"It was amazing that I let it get that far. It would have been purely from the joy of eating and not having any self-control to stop that"*.

Steve's diet confirms the indulgence theme. Breakfast for him consisted of two, hot pancake meals, three bacon and egg muffins, and a large shake. Lunch would be fast foods again. Dinner saw him sit down to a plate of potatoes, steak or sausages, and lots of bread. There were always cakes. Bread and cakes were also snack items for the day. He believes that eating all those fatty foods, full of carbohydrates, in the evening, along with

no exercise, contributed to his weight gain, *"The body just stores it as fat"*. As a child, James had cereal for breakfast, with four pieces of toast and a coffee. School recess consisted of hot dogs, or fried chicken with sauce and a choc-milk. He always stayed with the fatty and the filling. His homeward journey took him past a fish and chip shop where he would buy a bag of chips, or other fast-foods. Dinner was what his mother cooked and she provided large, good, home-cooked meals. These consisted of meat and pasta dishes with salads. This was followed by dessert, and he would finish off with a sandwich before retiring to bed. At school, he learnt to cook fatty meals from a home economics teacher. There was also the snacking, *"Whenever I had free time I just ate. I would be eating boxes of chicken biscuits, loaves of bread, toasted cheese sandwiches. I would eat everything out of the cupboard"*. There were also packets of CC's and dip, boxes of chocolate, and Coco-Cola. His parents never knew what he ate and he spent the food money given to him on what he wanted. He told his mother that food at school was expensive and so received \$10 a day, and he had a credit card. When watched, he would eat conservatively. When unobserved, *"I [he] would binge eat"*.

Lastly, there is Horst, a large drinker, but only on social occasions. He would have a few beers with his evening meals when eating out. Counter meals at pubs were high on the list. Pizza and hamburgers were easily accessible and these would be eaten after work. He consumed large quantities of fast-food and saw this as a way of avoiding cooking. Chris, O'Reilly and Lee (respectively) make direct connections between food, the accessibility of money, weight gain and lack of social control. *"As a child he wasn't allowed to eat rubbish. He would eat at school if I gave him a lunch order but if I gave him lunch he would bring it back home. What he was buying at the tuck shop was the same I was giving him. It would be a salad roll or something like that. I don't think he was into pies"*. And O'Reilly, *"I was giving him sensible food. If I gave him money for lunch he wouldn't just buy lunch. He would buy coke. It would have to be the buddy bottles ...so he would have the man's size. I used to give them money to go to school, but instead of buying sensible food he'd buy rubbish. When it comes to lunch I cannot control him and what he is eating. I can control it at home but not at school. He had a paper round. He had his own money. He would spend it on bags of crisps, bags of this and that,*

chocolate". And Lee, "It was easier to give him money for him to buy his lunch and what he bought I don't know. What he ate between breakfast and dinner God only knows". Lastly, O'Reilly introduces the element of stress to the equation, "He puts weight on when he is under pressure and a great deal of stress. If he is under stress and has money in his pocket you can guarantee it will be spent on cokes and chocolate and God knows what".

Everyone knew what the seven should be eating if they wanted to lose weight. Some of the secondary participants started dropping hints. Others looked for diets whilst some took more decisive action. Lee explains, "I read about this allergy diet and spent an absolute fortune on everything that didn't have wheat and all sorts of things in it". O'Reilly had to hide the family's food, "I would hide things in my wardrobe ... any niceties I would hide and lock away in my wardrobe ... but he would smell it. He would start off there would be a little bit missing ... then there would be a bit more missing ... in the end it all would have disappeared". Some of the seven were advised on dieting techniques. This included: 'Herbal Life' to control their weight by reducing their food intake and taking supplements; the apple diet; and fasting whilst drinking only water for two weeks. Some were offered slimming tablets.

With the exception of Yul, all lost weight through restrictive practices. It is a time to reap the rewards of restraint. Yul started to lose weight through stress, but as the weight came off, he reflected on his lifestyle. In particular, he looked at the food he was consuming. Dieting was now constructed as the right thing to do, he attempted to go vegetarian, "I would eat meat at home, if it was presented to me I would eat it. That's not really curbing your will power and following through on your goals. I found out how much of an effort it is". For Brad, out went the fatty and the filling, and in came the lean cuisine. Breakfast was cereal. Lunch was a salad roll, or salads in general. Dinner was rice, steamed vegetables or other healthy alternatives. "I was trying to lose weight. I didn't want to impede my efforts by eating shit during the day. I wanted to try and eat well and keep high-energy foods so I can keep going". The issue for Brad was that he felt the need to keep his energy levels up. He tended to lean towards carbohydrates as a source of energy.

Water replaced alcohol, *"I'd pretty much controlled my food"*. He ate lean meat once a week and, when food shopping, he would check the fat content of products. Charles stops drinking and immediately the weight started to come off, *"I lost weight so quickly it steam rolls itself. I also tended to stop eating"*. Steve, and Horst excluded alcohol from their diet. Charles reduced his meal intake to one meal a day. He had a cooked breakfast. James had a similar process using breakfast as his one meal for the day. However, when at his parent's house, he ate with the family in the evening. Charles would eat at dinner time also, but only on social occasions. Robert, like James, Steve and Horst, cut out all snacks and reduced his meal size, *"The diet has been very strict to the point I was only having salad for lunch"*. Robert later added fruit to be taken in-between meals as a filler, and energy booster. Steve started losing weight by eating nothing but porridge for three months. He also took slimming tablets to assist the weight loss. He drank a lot of water, and cut out all fast-foods: *"Porridge filled me up and it kept me full for the whole day so I never had the urge to eat. I had lost 60-70 kilos on my own, no fad diet, it was just starving myself and exercise"*.

Horst had already done a nutrition course before deciding to lose weight. He knew what to eat and when to eat it. Breakfast consisted of bran. Lunch was a salad roll, and dinner was whatever his mother cooked, *"I do eat for pleasure, but it is a different type of pleasure. It is the getting-fit pleasure"*. James worked himself through numerous diets and his weight fluctuated for a while. He finally settled for 'fats and figures'. This is strictly followed, and he weighed everything he consumed, *"Living like that taught me how to look at what I was eating a little more objectively. It made me realise instead of having something quick like a sausage roll that has something like 9 grams of fat in it, I could have had three chicken and salad sandwiches, without butter for that one sausage roll"*. He reached 78 kilos and stabilised. Charles also bought a diet book, one that made sense to him and that did not require him to constantly measure his food, *"I needed a system that I could use that was easy, and as funny as it sounds, I read this book it was called the beer guide, the beer diet, or something like that. It related everything you eat to how much it was in beers. If somebody offers me a Fanta, that's three and a half beers"*. The book became his bible. He also used other methods to ensure his body was

receiving the required nutritional content, *"I eat red with green so I get the iron intake, and also the calcium leaching from it. High fiber food lowers your fat intake, and for the body that is extremely good and also flushes your body out"*.

James started to starve his body of food. He became bulimic, *"Then I became a bit more obsessive and I started throwing up that one meal a day. I became bulimic"*. His parents caught him in the act. *"They caught me yakking-up and they started to speak to me about it. They didn't really reprimand me or anything like that, but they certainly made sure I didn't disappear after dinner and go into the bathroom or anything like that for extended amounts of time"*.

In contrast, Steve indulged but with the specific purpose of building muscle. He turned to food as the means to a better, bigger, and more toned body. His diet, planned by an instructor, was high in carbohydrates and protein, and low in fat and sugars, *"The diet was to bulk up on your carbohydrates in the morning"*. Breakfast consisted of 200ml raw eggs whites, a glass of milk, vanilla essence and a pinch of nutmeg, blended with a banana. This was followed by three rice cakes. He ate potatoes; micro waved with soup mix, and drank a protein shake for both morning and afternoon breaks. Lunch was usually skipped, as he needed to eat at certain times of the day, *"I had to keep my meals three hours apart. I was never hungry. I was always full"*. The protein shakes are used as meal replacements, *"It has all the vitamins you need - all the amino acids you need, and it has 30 grams of protein, no cholesterol, no fats. I didn't eat meat"*. Steve then substituted 200 grams of tuna for the morning meal with rice cakes. He then added protein bars to the diet and at some stage these were substituted for the protein drink. A Diet Coco-Cola was included as well: *"I'd say to myself it was okay to have a diet coke, straight coke has too much sugar"*. I comment on the strictness of the diet, in terms of what and when he could eat. He replies, *"It wasn't strict. All it was, was changing certain food groups around in the day. So instead of eating carbohydrates like spuds, or bread at night-time, I ate them before 2pm. The theory is to eat protein that creates muscle which burns off fat"*.

Their new diets brought a body awareness that was not present before. It had an element of health attached to it. The seven explain they were becoming more attuned to their bodies. It was as if mind and body are becoming one. Robert states, *"I got a lot more in tune with what my body wanted, needed, and my body started responding more"*. Brad's body felt the goodness coming out, when eating rice and steamed vegetables, *"You just felt so energised"*. The food he was eating before made him feel, *"heavy and sleepy"*. He relied on his body to inform him when to eat. He skipped meals. The new lifestyle became habitual, rather than having to think about it. However, this awareness is not constructed as positive for James. Thinness had negative side-effects. He was sick for a few months, *"I had got too thin and wasn't eating properly and my immune system had crumbled"*. His insomnia and other ailments, like skin rashes, are blamed on his thinness, and extreme weight loss. On the other hand, he states: *"My digestive system seems to work better when I do not eat. I go to the toilet more regularly"*. He slid between two extremes, yet was still unwell, *"It was either really under-nourished and unwell, or completely overweight and unwell"*. Robert realised that the body has a new routine, and to put the right amount of weight on is a hard balancing act, *"You can't just decide that I'll wake up and say I can't lose any more weight today. The body's metabolism is going at such a rate it is expecting certain things. I didn't want to slow down as the whole thing would reverse itself"*.

The effort required to change eating habits was an issue for the seven. Even though most of them succeeded in changing their diet, certain foods do creep back in. For Brad, and Steve, alcohol crept back in. It is Steve's downfall: *"That was my downfall. In the end I started to drink too much"*. For Brad, and Steve, chocolate and sugar, whilst excluded from the original diet, are included as energy boosters. Brad comments, *"More of an energy boost. Like, if I see a chocolate and I'm low on energy I'll have it so long as I'm going to have some exercise after that to get rid of it. I'm still pretty conscious of that"*. For James, chocolate and potato chips slip back into his diet.

The seven construct themselves as dieting gurus to their friends, or rather this is the term they use when discussing the interest their weight loss provoked in friends and



relatives. Robert felt his weight loss has inspired some of his friends to lose weight. Horst discussed his weight loss program with a workmate, who wants to change his eating patterns. Charles is ready to talk to friends about the benefits of being vegetarian again. Steve goes around delivering the dieting message to everyone he knows, *"No wonder you look like bleeding lard. You are what you eat mate: lard is lard"*. He instructs people on how to lose weight, *"Grill, do not fry your food. Your attitude to food needs to change"*.

Chris, Vin and O'Reilly (respectively) witness primary participants decreasing their meal sizes and, in the process, watch them change their diets. They make reference to bouts of starvation, restraint and burning off calories, *"He went through a stage where he found it difficult to eat food"*. Vin: *"He would make sure that he did a lot of exercise to counteract the food intake. He had been losing weight through eating very small quantities of dinner. He swapped all his snacks for veggies"*. O'Reilly: *"He needs to be able to control his food intake by what he has in his pantry for starters"*. Lastly, the common sense approaches to food were adopted, *"We are what we eat. It is not how much we eat it is what we eat"*. And *"It is important that people eat properly and you know get out and be active"*.

### Thinness will be my saviour

Thinness for the seven is viewed as the answer to their problems. For most, it would mean that they would be more physical, and more sexually attractive. Yul felt that thinness would bring him sexual youthful looks. Brad, like Yul, saw thinness as the answer to getting some sex and it would allow him to push himself further physically. For Charles and Robert, thinness meant reclaiming their old lives back, *"I'd throw out these clothes right away, they're gone, and the new wardrobe is back. I would spend the money and fix the spa and the entertainment area and I would be more active"*. Robert states, *"The start to getting myself back together. I think I had always had this impression that if you're thinner, fitter, you can enjoy life and activities a lot more. I thought I would*

*he happier and feel good about myself again, at least physically anyway*". There is an overwhelming sense that thinness would increase the seven's self-esteem and confidence to engage socially. Inhibitions would disappear and interactions would be easier, and fuller, if the seven were thinner. The first step to this new life was to stop eating and start exercising. They embarked on a process that ultimately changed the way they thought about their bodies, and self-constructs.

In regards to the process, there are two things common to the seven. They reduced their food intake, and became more physically active; some went to an extreme. Food and exercise were the two lifestyle concepts targeted by the seven as the means to lose weight. However, the seven differed in the way they constructed their diets and exercise. For some, their strategy was to eat healthy food and as they lost weight they felt more comfortable about their body images and allowed their bodies to be seen socially. For others, the reduction in food was accompanied by planned, routine exercise.

In light of their responses, I asked the seven to consider a hypothetical question. The question was, "How would you respond if I made you fat again?" Their replies were united. They shared the view that to be fat again would mean having to work through the whole process again. Each of them agreed that it is hard work to lose weight. To be made overweight again would be soul-destroying. "*Bad! I would not be happy, I would be spewing if I had to start all over again*". The seven never want to repeat the process, "*We are not going back there*". Steve's response was hard hitting: To be fat again would mean not being socially accepted, "*When thin, I thought I was more socially accepted. I suppose that is the bad thing about it really, I had to lose the fat to be accepted*".

The hypothetical question is re-worded for secondary participants. Their responses reflect the issues of being in, and out of control, and the notion that happiness equates to thinness. Chico states: "*If he puts on any more weight he will be fat and then he will be unhappy*". Lee says: "*I was extremely happy that he was losing weight. I felt perhaps he was getting his life under control. Once you start losing weight you feel so much better about yourself*". Harry asserts: "*If he got fat again I'd be worried. I'd say something was*

wrong". And O'Reilly says, *"If he put the weight on again then I would really start to think there was something wrong because the lifestyle he is currently living he enjoys"*. These statements reflect the social construction of fatness as symptomatic of the person being out of control. The following statement emphasises the same concept can be applied to those of the group who went to the extreme thin position. Lee says, *"He became very thin. I was terrified because I knew he wasn't normal, and I knew he wasn't happy, and I knew his whole life was out of control. He was very defensive. It was very hard to speak to him about what was happening"*.

### The symbolic importance of a visually healthy body

The findings of this study indicate that the fat and thin body act as visual indicators of the participant's physical and emotional health. Brad and Charles both experienced the subjective delight of their respective parents to their fatness. Brad had a history of using illicit drugs. During those times he used drugs, his bodyweight would drop dramatically. To his family, he looked sick. They were delighted to see him put weight on, *"I had a bit of a history with drugs beforehand so they were happy to see me healthy. If you're fat, you're healthy"*. This was a confronting experience for Brad, and he explains that the weight gain actually brought him closer to his extended family. They were all big people who considered illicit drug use as bad. His stomach became a talking point, and a point of comparison, *"When I got back it really brought us closer together. For some reason they thought I was a lot better. I'd get my gut out, like, check this out, Uncle B. It was big. I had stretch marks: It was a good gut. It was something to be proud of. It was well paid for. It was a bit of a worry!"*. In terms of health, it is interesting to note that his father explains there is a family history of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and heart disease.

Charles has also experienced severe weight loss whilst using illicit drugs. Being gay, and looking gaunt, was an indicator to his parents that he might have contracted HIV. Having weight, was, in their minds, great for him; He looked healthy, and his weight meant that he was safe from contracting the virus, *"My family thought it was healthy, good and*

*encouraged it. People and my family thought it was great because I couldn't have AIDS".* His gay status was also questioned when fat. The popular preconception is that there are no fat, gay men. Having weight was often understood as testimony that he had switched sexual preference. *"Because I am gay, obese people then assumed I was straight".*

The issue of being fat and being healthy is remarked upon by both Chico and O'Reilly, *"His mum loves him to be fat. When he was down to sixty (60) kilos she thought he was HIV positive. That he had got AIDS. A lot of people commented when I was down to sixty kilos that they thought he was sick. As he put weight back on people, were saying it looks like he is getting better and getting well again".* And O'Reilly remarks: *"He has now put on twelve kilos since his extreme thinness. He could do with a bit of exercise to tone up the flabby tummy. He reckons he is too fat. I think he looks good as he is now. I think he looks healthy".* Their comments fit with those from primary participants where illness, deviant behaviour and sexual preference are associated with differing levels of body weight.

Thinness can be reflective of social diseases. It is the participants' history of sexual and drug preferences that led others to conclude they must be sick when thin. People looked at their thinness to confirm their worst fears. Brad's family reacted to his weight loss adversely: *"First they thought I was sick. They thought I had malaria or AIDS".* Brad convinced them that he was fine and well. He explained that he was trying to lose weight. His father found it hard to understand why his son needed to run five kilometers a day. James was told by his colleagues that he was looking gaunt. His clients (James is a hairdresser) had a group discussion about his new body. The comments ranged from, *"looking good"* to *"looking ill"*. His parents thought there was something wrong, *"Mum always thinks that when I lose weight that something is wrong, but it is actually the opposite".* His words were echoed by secondary participants looking for rational explanations of the seven's rapid weight loss, *"We were very concerned that there were drugs involved. I would check his arms and his feet to see if he was mainlining".* Robert was told not to lose any more weight or he would disappear. People, who had not seen him for a while, were shocked by his new look. It appears that one way in which observers construct extreme thinness is to assume that the person is terminally ill.

The link between weight, looking sick and thinness are issues of which secondary participants were aware. They voiced their concerns in relation to watching the seven get even thinner. Lee says: *"When he gets too thin he really looks ill all the time. He gets more colds. He looks sick and gets sick. He got to anorexic. Fingers down the throat. I am in control. He didn't eat and when he did I am sure he made himself sick. He would disappear and have the fingers down the throat"*. O'Reilly states: *"When he was super thin, his face, there was just no flesh on it. Just bone and he looked really gaunt"*. And Vin: *"At times now he gets worried that he gets too thin"*. These observations and comments reflect the seven as they moved towards, and embodied, an extreme thin position. They were also aware that, in some cases, members of the group wanted to go further. Chico explains: *"He still wants to keep losing weight. He's got this idea of getting down to seventy kilos or something like that. He wants to look a certain way"*. For some secondary participants, their concern prompted them to consider taking action. This from Lee: *"In his determination, if he went too far and anorexic. I would have to stop him"*. The link between weight and sickness now gives way as secondary participants discuss what was now driving the weight loss they were observing. Vin's statement sums this up: *"For a while there he really wanted to become attractive. He wanted to be wanted by other people"*.

### Men, clothes, and sliding wardrobes

As fat men, the seven isolated themselves from society. Society here means groups of people known or unknown to the seven. They did not want to be seen. However, society cannot easily be avoided, so the seven attempted to hide and cover their weight when moving through public space. This meant finding clothes that fitted. It is evident that clothes became quantitative instruments that reflected their increasing and decreasing sizes. Waist and chest measurements expanded and retracted. Charles explains, *"I had my fat clothes. I was wearing fat clothes because I am fat. I had started to project other people's experiences against myself"*.

For fat men, clothes shopping was a nightmare. It was a frustrating exercise for all of the seven. Yul's withdrawal into isolation was assisted by the fact that nothing fitted. He wore what clothes did fit, until they fell apart. Charles was reluctant to go into shops, *"They tell you that there is nothing in here that will fit you. It doesn't hold much attraction to try on clothes that you've got to ask have you got it bigger"*. Steve needed pants with a waist measurement of 127cms and a chest measurement of 142cms. He was looking for anything in the XXXX-large sizes. He did attempt to hide his weight by buying loose fitting tops, or deceive himself and others, by buying smaller sized pants and tops than he needed. He could then imply to others that he had lost weight, yet at the same time wearing clothes that were too small for him.

James was the only one of the seven who, at times, loved shopping. He shopped at expensive department stores and when he found something that fitted him, he bought five of them in different colours. At sixteen (16) he was buying clothes with a waist measurement of forty-two (42) inches. He compares this to other boys who had twenty-eight to thirty inch waistlines. Like Steve, he used deceiving practices to hide his weight. *"I tried to wear clothes where I could tuck them in with a belt in a way that hid my weight. I wore a girdle once and wrapped myself in plastic, before The Full Monty"*. Steve also used cling-wrap to hide his weight under his clothes.

However, whilst James enjoyed shopping, he did hate the fact that things did not fit, *"If I was out with friends I wouldn't try the clothes on because if they didn't fit I would get all embarrassed about having to put them back. I would take them home and if they didn't fit I'd get depressed and eat another bag of chips"*. The first indicators of weight-gain are clothes. The seven all noticed their clothes getting smaller. They were unable to fit into their favourites. Buttons flew off. Brad blamed the dry cleaner, *"I realised on my pants I was popping buttons, but I thought the bloody things were shrinking. Honestly, I thought because we were getting our clothes dry-cleaned. I thought they were shrinking our clothes"*. Derrieres would not fit into jeans.

The squeezing into tight jeans and other pants acted as catalysts for possible action. *"Putting on a pair of 40inches XX-large finally said something to me"*. James is

echoed by Horst: *"When you can't fit into your pants, you're like, what is going on I am a bit of a fat bastard"*. Nevertheless, no matter what their clothes said, the seven, while overweight, continued to indulge. Clothes got smaller, and bigger sizes were needed. Their stories change during and after weight loss. With thinner bodies, the seven had a different approach to clothing. Clothes were now welcomed instruments that indicate desirability. This is noticed by secondary participants: *"His clothes started to change. He started to wear good clothes and look better in his appearance"*. Belts, and waistlines, act as signifiers of how much weight has been shed. Belts need new notches punched into them. Waistlines decreased and new clothes were purchased. Clothes shopping became a pleasure, not a chore, for most.

The seven now had mixed wardrobes, as Yul explains, *"I've got three sets of jeans, I had to buy new jeans because I had lost so much weight the others were just falling off me. I went up to the middle size, then the bigger size, and then back down again"*. Thinner, Brad loves to shop for clothes. However, there is a small problem. He drops so much weight he now cannot fit into the smallest of men's sizes available. He has to shop in the boys' section.

The seven asked others, and were asked by others, to go shopping with them. These statements are from secondary participants. Chris explains: *"He asked me to go shopping. He said, Mum, will you come shopping with me and buy some clothes? He hates shopping. I thought that was lovely"*. And Vin: *"He'd go shopping for functionality but he wouldn't go shopping for fun. I can remember we actually took him shopping once. We took him to 'live' because we said he had a great new body and it was time that he got himself some fantastic clothes. We even put him in latex pants"*. These two statements suggest that, with thinner bodies, the seven still thought of shopping as a painful experience. This observation is supported by comments from Chris: *"Eventually he had to go shopping. It was so traumatic. I can still remember the look on his face when he realised that he was going to have to go shopping"*. In this last comment there is an element of surprise. *"You do notice a difference when he has gone out. He looked great. He came in with a new pair of pants and a new shirt and he really looked great and he found them himself"*.


Thinner, the seven could no longer keep their trousers up. Their weight loss was so rapid that in most cases it started to affect events for which clothing is an important issue. For example, Brad had to go to his sister's wedding. This meant hiring a suit: *"I asked them to hold right off until the last minute. I didn't know what size I would be"*. Robert identifies with the problem. His mother bought him a pair of jeans two to four weeks prior to Christmas day. He explains: *"They were a good fit then and when I hit Christmas they were starting to feel loose. We could have gone down another size. I was losing a kilo a week"*. Their rapid weight loss and loose-fitting trousers were observed by secondary participants. O'Reilly explains: *"To start with, his clothing got really big on him after he had lost all the weight. Then came the ever-whingeing and complaining as the belt had to tighten with an extra notch. To the point where he looked like a little boy in huge men's clothes"*. And Harry: *"He started to lose heaps of weight. From one week to the other, he just lost weight. Every week there was a change"*.

Both Brad and Robert enjoyed encasing themselves in tight-fitting tops. *"I will often save my tighter shirt for the Friday night so it just adds to that presentability"*. His behaviour drew attention from his secondary participant: *"When he used to go out on a Friday night he used to wear what he had worn to work. Nowadays, he always brings a change of clothes. He must be more aware of how he looks in clothes"*. Brad wanted to find the tightest fitting top he could without looking gay. Some of the seven were observed to be wanting to wear tighter fitting tops from the trendy shops. Harry states, *"He started to wear this sort of weird, thinner-fitting, clubby type stuff that you can buy from 'Liquid' and 'Live'"*. [Both clothing stores cater for a clubbing culture].

Borrowing clothes is exciting. With the new clothing experience (things actually fit), came the availability of the other's wardrobe. Robert eyed-off his brother's wardrobe, *"It didn't take me long to work out that if he is borrowing my clothes then that means that his clothes are fitting me. He has a lot more larger range than I do, and I made a bit of an excessive use of his range so basically I got told-off"*. Charles and James were able to again share their partner's clothes. Chico explains: *"He was getting back into clothes that we already had and he loved it. That was great"*.



The new-found freedom had its limits and, in some cases, these limits were over-stepped. James loved the fact that his clothes were falling off him. *"It started to become a bit of a head trip"*. Charles put on the wrong trousers: *"I put the wrong jeans on and they fitted and then I put the belt on and it was: 'Shivers!' Before I couldn't even put the belt on, now the belt is on notch four"*. At some point, the weight loss went to an extreme, and at this extreme, the lowest point, clothes acted as signifiers indicating a need to put some weight back on. The symbolic nature of this experience is summed up by Steve, who is down to a thirty-four (34) inch waist (87cms), and who carries a pair of his old trousers as a display of his old size. The old trousers have a waist measurement of one hundred and twenty-seven (127) centimeters. He is keen to show them to me. I interpret this enthusiasm as a mile-stone celebrating a historical connection with fat people, with whom he no longer shares the experience of being fat.



### The male body and constructions of masculinity

For Yul the male body ought to be trim. Yet being a man has nothing to do with weight or body image. James agrees: Men should be able to express their emotions freely without being demeaned. Brad feels men should not be too muscular. They should be trim and fit looking. Muscular men are assumed to be aggressive and threatening to women. Although he states, *"I think girls look for big guys. But I think a lot of girls are threatened by big guys too"*. Steve feels the muscular look is okay, but hard to achieve. Distractions need to be avoided if this look is what men are seeking. Charles is with Yul and Brad, and plumps for the athletic look. He feels other attractive men offer him a means to reflect upon his own body. He makes comparisons. Horst feels men should perform the protector role and he is aware that if he gets too thin he may slip outside the parameters of such a role. I asked the seven to explain how they made sense of other men's bodyweight. There was a resounding answer, which is encapsulated in Robert's words, *"You never know, you may be an inspiration to someone. I mean, if I can do it anyone else can. Well, I believe anyone else can if I can"*. Brad reiterates Robert's feelings on the subject, *"I didn't feel like picking on them, that's for sure, but at the same*

*time I didn't feel sorry for them. So, like, feelings of, like, if you really want to get rid of the weight I'm sure you can".*

Charles has empathy for men who are over-weight. If asked, he would discuss his experience of weight loss with other men, but would be mindful of his language, so that he did not put them down. Secondary participants were united in their claims that the thinner seven were different men. One particular comment sums up this position and reflects some of the thoughts expressed by the seven in relation to observing other fat men: *"As long as they are conscious, no not conscious, as long as they are looking after themselves and they seem to have respect for themselves. If you see them sort of, you know, being active and you know, getting out and having fun and looking after themselves and not just eating junk and sitting around doing fuck-all. If you see they have respect for themselves, I have respect for them".*

### Sport, leisure and the body.

The fat seven construct themselves, and are constructed, as non-physical. Chico explains: *"I was aware of his weight gain. He wouldn't have been doing anything".* They are observed to be inept at sports, or observed to be lacking in the ability to perform in certain team positions. This meant, for some, that they have more time to pursue intellectual activities. This from Chris: *"I came from a sporting family. All my brothers played football and tennis and sports were very important to us. He had no coordination he had nothing going for him. He was the academic one".* Yul, James and Steve were all teased at school for being fat. This is supported by the following account from Chris, *"He must have put on a bit of weight because I can remember they had sports and that you had to run and I can remember thinking that's awful because he had to run and he couldn't. He just couldn't run. He was given a pretty torrid time at school".* Most of the seven have vivid accounts of their reactions to being teased, and the effect it had on how they viewed their bodies. The reactions had more to do with how their bodies were seen in action, and the comparisons they made to other active bodies.

Sports were hated. Yul recounts: *"At school I felt awkward when competing in sports. I hated playing football because one team had to play with their shirts off [going skins]. At fourteen (14) I felt I was developing breasts and thought there was something hormonally wrong. I was fearful of showing that part of my body. I took up golf. There was a way around having to take your top off"*. The seven refrained from any activity that necessitated revealing their bodies. They felt clumsy and un-coordinated. Having to play team sports whilst one team played bare-chested could be avoided. However, swimming was another issue. Yul explains, *"I didn't like to undress around people. I am not happy with the way I look, with the shape of my body"*. James not only avoided swimming lessons, and carnivals, he also avoided skiing and any activity that showed him to be fat, *"I was just ashamed of myself"*.

The exception, for the seven, is Horst, who played rugby union regularly. However, there were expectations placed on his body in relation to his playing position. His body did not reflect the position he was playing. He was teased by his team-mates for not meeting the selection criteria, and then devalued as being a slower player than he was formerly. Fat, he played in the backs, but looked like a forward. He was meant to be trim and fit: *"I was 107 kilos and could still run fast and I was pretty hard to stop. But I could only run a couple of times before being out of breath"*. Playing in the backs requires both speed and stamina.

The fat seven blamed their bodies for the lack of physical stamina. As Vin noted: *"He said he felt lethargic and really should be doing something about it. He started using a gym but it became too difficult. He'd eat what he could, like chips, which were far too easily available"*. The physical strain of carrying up to an extra 30-60 kilos meant that, in most cases, the seven avoided physical activity. Charles explains, *"The physical strain, I was carrying a 30-40 kilos. I'm a windsurfer: Not going to happen! Swimming long distances is not going to happen either. Running, all those things, had to be cut down"*. Robert avoided stairs where possible. Steve found it a strain to do up his shoelaces. He had to sit on the bed so he could reach them. He had bad pains in his chest and lower back. He also had reflux problems. He could not run, and when playing ball with his son, he would have to excuse himself after five minutes.

Brad avoided anything physical, he sweated a lot, and felt uncoordinated on the dance floor, so would not dance. Yul was told he had bowlegs, and was clumsy. He responded by avoiding anything that required coordination. The seven experienced the feeling of being inadequate. If they did not internalise the feeling, it was certainly pointed out to them. Feelings of inadequacy determined their responses to offers of help. Charles is offered a gym membership and refused to go. *"God, no Laurel and Hardy effort for me, thanks. The last thing someone who is overweight wants is someone who is drop-dead gorgeous giving them pointers"*. It was a different story as the seven lose weight. In conjunction with their change of diet, the seven took to the road and either walked, ran or jogged their weight off. Some included weights and the gym, some did not. However, across the board, the seven became more physical. Yul, Charles, and James do not exercise like the others, but they are more active. Yul and James walk more. *"I'm more active now some of the weight is off. The weight loss I have experienced is because I just go out and do more walking than I used to but I don't have a very physical regime"*. James stops using the bus and lifts, and walks instead. At home, James does push-ups and sit-ups.

In his imagination, Yul wonders what he could have looked like if he had done some bodywork. *"If I do the exercise and weights, ate better, what physical shape would I end up in? I couldn't do it as I don't have the energy reserves"*. Yul constructs his lack of food intake as the reason for his low energy, which, in turn, is used as a reason why he cannot commit himself to a physical exercise program. Charles, like Yul, becomes more active but does not have a daily exercise routine. His form of exercise is tied more to leisure.

Brad, Robert, Horst and Steve have a daily exercise program. Brad starts by marking out a 5 km circuit. He is up at 4.30am running the circuit. *"I'd put on my running shoes and go for a run. It was a wobble for the first couple of times"*. For the first few days Brad could not complete the circuit: *"I couldn't make half of it, ended up having to walk back and then I was too sore for the next couple of days. Eventually I was able to run the full 5 kilometres"*. Robert discusses his program: *"I started very simply. I walked*

*down to the local oval, walked around the oval and then walked back home. I did that for a week. In the second week, walked around twice every day. I kept upping the level on a week-by-week basis. By the fourth week I was jogging. Then I pushed myself to five laps at a faster pace. The dog came too and loved it". Robert was invited to join a gym. He goal-sets, to tone up, but does not know where it will end, "It is more like a continuum and improvement". Horst ran and walked daily to lose weight. He also began kick-boxing to get fit. Acquiring the six-pack is important to him. However, there were winner and loser days. He explains: "I sort of tick my days off when I lay in bed at night. So I have walked today, went to training, what did I eat? I try to have five winner days in a week. I usually take weekends off. They are like my slack days, but then also I try and cheat. I'd go for a walk on Sunday that has to be good".*

Steve's exercise program started by walking everywhere, "You'd be walking down the road and you'd be sweating because it was the middle of summer, imagine walking, just walking, and walking. The dog was getting tired". Steve started bench-pressing some weights. He joined a gym and started to push himself. The program was mapped out for him by the instructor. He worked his upper body, legs and lower body separately, "I'd keep pushing myself harder, and harder. I'd see the body builders on the wall and I'd say to myself that is what I want to look like. I've got the body to do it". His weight program increased and he started to do aerobics three times a week. Steve was engulfed by the experience of body shaping. He reduced his food intake, again, and increased his exercise program, "This was my theory. I can live on weight loss pills and just drink protein powder and take a couple of vitamin tablets a day". His doctor agreed with the theory, but warned he must keep up with the multi-vitamins and protein powder, and to be careful, as the body is being starved of carbohydrates. He gained 10 kilos of muscle, in a month. He lost twenty-one percent (21%) body fat.

He then tore a muscle. Rather than rest, and pay a physiotherapist, he used steroids to repair the injury, and an anti-estrogen to re-set his testosterone levels. He gained more muscle and lost more weight. He was pleased with the results, "I was getting noticed.

*People I didn't even know were saying things to me about my legs and gut".* He acknowledges the need to embody his self construct. He has learned that his self construct is, in part, informed by the size and tone of his body.

The seven took-up leisure activities as a result of relocating themselves in their new bodies. The exception was Yul, who still constructs himself as clumsy. He would rather watch television and read a book than waste energy on leisure pursuits. The way he rationalises this is to imply that the rewards are not quick enough to warrant his energy out-put. In contrast, the others have a new body and want to be out in the public eye. Dancing became a primary source of exercise. Night clubs are high on the list. Brad explains: *"I'd get right into it too, lots of fast dancing, the faster the better"*.

The weekend was a constant party for Steve, *"It was just mayhem. It was crazy. I felt so energetic and energised that it was what I wanted to do. I could go to a club and dance all night long. Just keep on dancing"*. Steve's dancing technique improved. He could jump, swing and do push-ups on the dance floor. James also danced the night away at the local club. Brad hung-out at the beach more, attempted new leisure activities such as sky-diving and trail bike riding. Robert has started running triathlons for fun. Charles enjoys going to the beach and is thinking of joining a gym. *"I am more interested in going to a gym after I have lost the weight"*. Horst explains that he is more sociable thinner, *"You want to get out and do things because you want to be seen as opposed to not wanting to been seen"*. In general, most of the seven agree with this statement. To be thinner means you want to be seen. James feels life is more exciting when thinner, *"I seem to have more drive to do what I want to do and be inspired to do stuff"*.

The change in attitude to sports and leisure is observed by Harry, *"He does a lot more riding. He is pretty energetic in the things he does. He does quite a bit of exercise, running around, kicking a football. Dancing is pretty aerobic. Mountain bike riding and squash"*. Similarly Vin noted: *"He enjoys fitness a lot more. Like he does voluntary stuff like the city to surf fun run. I think that is fantastic"*. Everything in moderation seems to be the key as Vin continues: *"He now plans his day with leisure times as well as his work time"*. Their active involvement in sports and leisure was observed to build their

confidence as O'Reilly explains: "*When body building he looked great. In fact, I was pleased that he was doing it because he was actually doing something for himself and you could see the confidence building up in him*".

### Presenting the nude body.

With the weight loss came a new problem: loose skin around the waist and stretch marks. Robert explains: "*I keep my shorts tucked up over the loose skin on my stomach. I am a vain creature. You see, this is what weight loss has done, it has made me vain*". James and Steve refine their new look. James has the solution, "*I try to sun bake and get some colour on my skin to cover the stretch marks*". This is confirmed by O'Reilly: "*He was always too embarrassed to wear a pair of bathers anywhere. He wouldn't put his bathers on. It is a bit awkward for him still because he has got big stretch marks*".

Now thinner, other body parts come under scrutiny, as James explains, "*My arse is too big, my thighs are still big. I'd love to have my hips chiseled, or a couple of ribs taken out. My ears stick out and my nose is too big*". Horst experienced doubt over his reduced size and his ability to look the part when he entered the gym for his first kickboxing lesson. It was rationalized as a lack of confidence in his body, and a lack of social interaction through prolonged isolation. Charles is now comfortable with nudity and tells me about how he looks at his body: "*If you have a better chest, your belly does not matter so much. The physical shape of your body changes with a more developed chest*". Brad wanted the trim look and achieved it with little fat hanging off his hips. There seems to be a tussle now between accepting the new look for what it is, and improving it to reflect a more desirable and presentable body.

### Sex and body-image.

"*You cannot be sexual [when fat]*", explains Yul, who still hates his fat body. His body becomes the external sign of his slothfulness and discontent. Sex was run-of-the-mill for

him. Fatness meant comfort and a means of preventing him from being sexual, James uses his extra weight to assist him in delaying the decision whether to approach other gay men. *"I think being fat helped me not to have to make that decision. If you are fat, you are not appealing to anyone, whether male or female. I was able to stay neutral for years"*. On the other hand, Horst and Robert were sexually active and their partners did not seem to mind their weight gain. It was discussed to a certain degree, Horst explains. *"I said, 'Wow' I am putting on a bit of weight aren't I? And she would come over and rub my belly and say that she didn't care, there was more to love"*. This is in stark contrast to Steve, who was told that his body was sexually ugly, and Brad, who gave up trying to engage with women sexually because of constant rejections.

The issue of desirability is central here. All the participants felt less sexually desirable when overweight. Bodyweight affected the way the seven saw themselves in relation to potential sexual partners. Brad explains that he had no sex when fat. His ability to pick-up 'chicks' was hampered by his weight gain. The inability to dance seems to restrict part of his courting ritual: *"You'd try to go and dance and couldn't dance because you'd wobble. It was a joke. The more they sort-of had a look they'd get disinterested. This made me feel shitty. After a while I just wouldn't bother"*.

He continues with another experience. *"It was a cold night. I had a long shirt on but I got in there and it was very, very, hot. I wanted to take my shirt off, but I wouldn't take it off. I'm fucking overweight, a blubber guts, guts hanging out over the top. There were all these beautiful girls there. There were all these guys with their shirts off, buffed and cut. You just didn't see anyone with a big blubby guts with their shirts off. So I kept it on"*. The seven saw themselves as unattractive. Chico experienced this first-hand: *"He lost interest in having sex. That was about his self-image. We would have sex, but it might happen once every few weeks and it wouldn't be like the full sex thing"*.

Fat people are sexually safe because they are less likely to pick-up. Charles felt he was able to flirt with girls and boys without inference from their partners. *"A fat guy can kiss anybody and everybody. It is just jovial fun. I was told you're safe, you can kiss my girlfriend"*. The safe concept is also referred to as trust. *"I would be trusted with their*



*bags, and drinks, but not a plate of food”.*

Thinner, the seven are now observing themselves to be more attractive. Their bodies are seen to be subjectively, (and imagined objectively) desirable. However, it is not all bright lights and pretty boys or girls. Yul had an expectation that being thinner would mean having sex with younger, fitter, attractive men. Sex has always been problematic for him growing-up in the Catholic faith. However, he states that sex looks better thinner, *“You didn’t have the stomach in the way, though my belly did wobble”.*

Brad finally got some sex. Charles’s libido increased, and he confides that sex is better thinner. James is still sitting on the fence, *“I am such a prude. I have been living with the same person for three years and they haven’t got anywhere with me. I am not promiscuous. I don’t like people touching me”.* Robert’s new-found vanity has not improved his luck with the girls. He feels it has more to do with his personality than his weight. However, he does feel more confident around women than he did before.

Charles feels that his sexual marketability has increased. *“You are then raising your marketability. It changed, like how, a really crude way of putting it: out of a 100 I would have given myself 30 (when fat). Now I would give myself a good score”.* He avoids giving a value. He finally gives himself between 75 and 80, when thinner. He concludes: *“Single, overweight men have no sexual market value”.* A thinner Steve markets his sexual self extremely well. Older and younger women proposition him: *“My score rate has gone through the roof. I have had more sex in the last three months than in my life. It is unreal. I have picked up so many. I scored another one today”.* Steve’s successes are due to the confidence he has in his body, and he feels that women now see him as attractive. This might be restated as they now see his body as a desirable sexual object. Vin makes a direct connection between the body and Robert’s attractiveness. *“Your body is part of who you are. He had gotten thin because he wanted to be attractive. He found that being thin was much better for him sexually”.*

### **Summary of results.**

In this research, conforming to an idealised, attractive body image, resulted in performing acceptable body practices. There was a change of lifestyle from one of indulgence to one of restraint. In this study, when dieting, most men sensibly controlled their food intake and avoided fattening foods, replacing them with fresh fruit, vegetables, salads, and low-fat alternatives. Alternatively, they semi-starved themselves, though this was the exception and not the rule. The more weight lost, the less food eaten.

The results of this study indicate that the seven's self-constructs and social identities constantly changed dependent on their physical appearance at any given time. The men in this study experienced these shifts as isolating. Fat men withdraw from social encounters based on self-imposed loathing, and social stigma. Thin men were seen as appealing. They became desirable to themselves and others. However, in both fat and thin states of being there were social conflicts. The clash between these forces, the individual and the social, suggest discursive power relationships woven through daily interactions that influenced both self and identity constructions.

Body image, as defined by weight, acts as a visible testimony to health. Men in this study were caught between presenting subjective ideals, and conforming to subjective limitations in their embodiment. What they thought was healthy, was not necessarily accepted as healthy by others. Fat and thin people had something to say about their weight. Central to the theme of health are the symbolic concepts of indulgence, restraint and desire. The results confirm that the fat man is seen symbolically as someone who has no self-control, and who is unable to deny himself fattening foods. Fat men indulge beyond their functioning needs and are physically lazy. Conversely, thinness continues to symbolise someone in control of themselves, and their indulgences. Thin men are seen to eat according to their functional needs and are more likely to be physically active. The problem with these constructions is that they over-simplify body image and behaviour and do not speak of the emotional, rational and physical experiences of human embodiment (Lupton, 1995).

When gaining weight it was evident that the seven indulged, and whilst indulging they started to divert their rational minds away from their physical bodies. The seven employed avoidance techniques to screen the reflections held to their faces by objects that indicated they were putting on weight. The reverse was evident as they lost weight, and imposed strict, eating and physical practices. Mirrored reflections indicating a desirable look were welcomed, and to some extent were sought after. The results indicate that subjective embodiment as determined by differing levels of body weight influences the extent to which men look at themselves, and the extent to which they want to be looked at.

The acceptable normative body, for the seven, is toned and fat-free. Social environments, according to the seven, seemed more accepting of the normative body displaying lean looks, and less fat, than they were of hulging looks and rolls of fat. Participants felt included in their social worlds when thinner. They felt excluded in their social worlds when fatter. The extent to which participants were included and excluded from their social worlds is based upon the display of a normative body image. Inclusion and exclusion are dependent on the social conventions directing interactions within any given social context where there are expectations placed on having the 'right' body. Bodyweight, (levels of fatness and thinness) as a determinant, can inform the parameters of an interaction. Body image, as a social determinant, can inform the level of acceptance a person may experience over a range of social environments. The following discussion takes up these themes and explores them in their relation to theory and literature on the body, self, and identity.

## Chapter 7

### Fat and thin men

**Symbolic interactions between private masculine selves and public masculine identities**

## Introduction

In brief, the evidence establishes that men react emotionally to weight gain and loss, and are equally concerned about the level of their attractiveness when fat and thin, yet some men prefer to be privately, rather than publicly, emotional about their state of masculine embodiment. There is a softer side to men reflective of their emotional vulnerability. The results of this study will be examined in the light of social interactionist theory (Cooley, 1964, 1983; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1963, 1967, 1969; Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996) and combined with theorists and authors writing in a range of disciplines on masculinity and masculine embodiment, subjectivity, and power (Bordo, 1990, 1999; Drummend, 2002; Murphy, 1994; Sparkes, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 1999; Valetine, 1994; West, 2000).

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section, 'subjectivity and social identity', discusses the results in light of Cooley's (1964) research into self development and supports his interpretation of a self formed through reflection. The section follows through on the self theme and suggests Mead's (1934) concept of the static self does not allow for a shifting self tied to its state of embodiment. The research supports the concept of the divided self (Bordo, 1990; Laing, 1967; Lupton, 1998). In this case, the self was found to be divided between conforming to socialised standards, and resisting these to be accepted on their own terms.

The second section, 'Framing social power. Conformity and individual subjectivity' deals with the issue of surveillance at the social and at the individual level through internalisation. In this section, the concepts of health and ill-health are discussed with reference to normative body-weights and body-weights that signify sickness, and or deviance, to the observer. Foucault's (1980) work on surveillance and technologies of power are applied to the results to infer that 'the gaze' and 'the word' hold social and subjective power to create and impose negative identities. In this context, there are social stigmas attached to fatness and extreme thinness that are reinforced during interpersonal interactions. Essentially, this chapter posits the view that interpersonal interactions consist of subjectivities reacting to their symbolic socio-cultural environment based on subjective interpretations of social symbols. Fatness and extreme thinness were devalued

physical states that condemned the subject to an inferior social position. Conversely, the lean, toned look was subjectively constructed and experienced from a superior social position.

### Cooley's embodied self

This study supports Cooley's (1964) 'looking-glass self'. His central thesis was that people act, literally, as mirrors for each other. Sullivan, drawing upon Cooley's work, supports his claim: 'one can find in others only that which is in the self' (1947, p. 22). The seven's imagined concept of self was projected out into the imaginations of the other. In other words, subjects observed their sense of self as subject to their reflected state of embodiment. The results establish that the seven, in private and public contexts, where no verbal conversation took place to substantiate the intent behind the social other's look or gesture, interpreted other's look or gesture based on self-feeling, imagination, and experiences in specific social contexts.

For example, Steve felt concerned about his relationship with a size ten (10) model. His sense of self was reflective of this when observing social others observe himself and his partner: *"People looked at me as I walked in and they were looking at you as if to say he is huge and the other girls would be looking at you thinking he is big. You can tell what they are thinking. He is big, what is she doing with a guy like that? You could just read their minds, like you knew what they were saying"*. It is clear that Steve's sense of embodied self, which is negative at this point, influences the way he reads the other's body language and looks.

In contrast, when he was thinner, the social other's behaviour is read using his now sexually attractive and positive embodied sense of self. *"I think he was jealous because I had lost all the weight. I had lost all this weight and his girlfriend was having a better time with me than him. We never slept together, nothing like that happened. People get jealous because you lose all this weight"*. Steve's words say more about his sense of

embodied self than they do about looks of discrimination or reasons why his friend was jealous.

Similarly, Petersen and Walker (2001) noted that young, indigenous children, when moving between private and public spheres, experience a feeling of hostility from onlookers. It could be suggested that it is their sense of self that expects hostility from a non-indigenous population. This is not to blame fat men or indigenous youth for their feelings. Rather it makes the theoretical point that the way interactive settings are interpreted is contingent on self constructs that are reflective of their socio-cultural environments and embodied sense of feeling. In brief, fat men feel bad about themselves because fatness is socially constructed as being unattractive and unhealthy. Thereby, consistently projecting a negative self into social interactions that may have consisted of little more than a look, gesture, or comment. Conversely, thinner men feel good about themselves in comparison to fat men in an array of social contexts because thinness is predominantly framed by reflected positives.

Fat and thin men observed their sense of self in interactive environments based on their perceived level of attractiveness determined by their level of bodyweight. Participants used their understanding of the social meaning placed on unattractive fatness and attractive thinness to explain what the social other was observing (in their imagination). This finding, while it supports Cooley's 'looking glass self' (1964), presents half of the picture. It was also found that participants interpreted non-sentient objects as determining their sense of embodiment. Self constructs were projected onto, and reflected by, clothes, spaces, food, bathroom scales, and furniture. In this study, non-sentient objects were infused with negative and positive emotions as they reflected the subject's subjective state of embodiment (as socially informed).

### Non-sentient mirrors

The seven observed themselves reflected in the interactions they had with non-sentient

objects. This statement has resonance with Cooley's work on self-constructs, which he understands to be informed by reflected impressions from the other. Whilst this research supports Cooley's concept of the 'looking glass self', it has extended the idea. The first part of Cooley's statement 'each to each a looking glass' implies that all objects can be reflective. There is no emphasis on interpretation here for either subject or object. The second part of his statement 'reflects the other that doth pass' refers to the way individuals look at each other. Each look is embedded with information reflecting what the observer observes. In an interaction I reflect your imagined self, and you reflect mine. I look for confirmation of my imagined self in your embodied symbolic reactions to me. However, when this is applied to inanimate objects Cooley's statement makes little sense. In the context of this study, participants interpreted reflections from inanimate objects based on their subjective self-constructs at that point in time.

The reflective surfaces, and symbolic information coming from things like food, clothes, mirrors, belts, bathroom scales, chairs, spaces and photographs were interpreted, and sometimes denied or avoided, based on negative and positive self-constructs determined by the group's subjective thoughts about their body images. Charles only has to look at his available wardrobe to know his embodied state, *"I knew I was fat because I had fat clothes"*. Brad denies his weight gain in the face of symbolic images indicating otherwise, *"I realised on my pants I was popping buttons, but I thought, 'Oh bloody things are shrinking!' Honestly". I thought because we were getting our clothes dry cleaned I thought those little bastards they're shrinking our clothes"*.

In brief, the embodied self interprets its observations and other sensory reflections based on the state of its physiological embodiment. This suggests a modification of Cooley's statement: the modified version might read 'Each to each a looking glass. Reflects the *self* that doth pass'. This modification is supported by the experiences of primary participants. They observed their subjective self-constructs, as determined by their body images, in the reflected impressions from non-sentient objects. The reflective qualities of these 'non-sentient' objects were underestimated by Cooley and other interactionists like Sullivan (1947) in their significance to the reflective development and daily formations of self-constructs.



Cooley (1964) did not focus on the power of non-sentient objects to inform reflective self-development. This extension of his insights incorporates the symbolism of socio-historical and ideological contexts as they change. The associations placed on visual material items, and symbols to inform and convey a sense of self, was not central to his thesis. Today, there is, undeniably, symbolic importance placed on non-sentient objects to inform and convey self construction. As Bocoek (1992) explains; 'Men and women ... desire to articulate and express their own sense of identity, their own sense of who they are, through what they wear, buy/consume. Such an articulation of identity is done through clothing, hair-styles, body decoration (perfume to earrings)...' (p. 142).

The reflective object is invested with subjective and social value in a materialistic, individualistic society. The results of this study support the extension of Cooley's saying, in the way the seven contextualised their visual, interactive, environments in relation to their sense of self. It was found that where only visual symbols existed, as a means to experience self reflection, the symbols where subjectively read, influenced by the participant's sense of embodied self, at that point in time.

In this study, the defining feature in the non-verbal, visual interaction was the dominant social construction of fatness and thinness projected onto the observable symbol. This means socially stigmatised symbols (like fatness and extreme thinness) have the power to direct the interaction and influence the interpretation. One's embodied sense of self is the product of subjectively endorsed social information. However, it was also found that the embodied sense of self shifted as subjects traversed the private and public divide. The concept of shifting selves is taken up in the following sections predominantly using the work of Mead (1934), and his concept of the impenetrable self unaffected by physiological change.

## Shifting selves

### Positive and negative selves

The seven experienced both positive and negative selves, as determined by their visible bodyweight and image. It was assumed and emphasised by Mead (1934), Cooley (1964, 1983) and Sullivan (1947), that people would mostly seek to develop positive selves, thereby promoting satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships and reducing their social anxieties. The results of this study do not support their assumptions. Negative selves, and identities were products of fatness, and these shifted as participants reduced in body size. This element in the identity dynamic refers to the power embedded in 'social influence' to construct, project, and enforce identities which affect a man's sense of self. In this study, participant's sense of self changed in the face of negative and positive identity projections about their level of embodied weight.

Mead's position was that a subject's sense of self was static once formed and would remain intact in the face of adversity. Self constructs, for Mead, were not necessarily embodied constructs. He writes, 'We can distinguish very definitely between the self and the body' (1934, p. 136). In short, self constructs for Mead would remain static and intact as the body undergoes change. In this context, self constructs can exist as disembodied constructs. This study suggests the opposite. Self constructs changed as bodyweights changed, and with the changing social reflections directed at their changing bodyweights. However, it was observed that the seven attempted to disembodify their self constructs without success. They sought to protect their sense of selves, and hold to subjective formations as their bodies underwent change. For fat men this was observed to be an impossible task because excessive body fat was predominantly framed in a negative or degrading, humorous way.

Steve's experiences best sum this up. "... I would try and make a joke out of it and then I would go home and say perhaps I am too fat. Then I would go into a depressed mode. I would feel as if the whole world was coming down on me. I would stay indoors for a

while, most of the time we stayed indoors". Mead's concept of the static, intact, disembodied self suggests that fat and thin men would be unaffected by their changing bodyweights and by the negative or positive social projections framing their social identities and informing their self-constructs. The experiences of the seven do not bear this out. Mead (1934) asserts, 'Parts of the body are quite distinguishable from the self. We can lose parts of the body without any serious invasion of the self' (p.136). The implication that the individual is free from social interference where their embodied sense of self and, consequently, where their expression of social identities are concerned is not supported by these results. Self formations were found to be the products of men responding to social reflections laden with symbolic social value. The self is always embodied.

The problem with Mead's formation of self, as experienced by the seven, is that the social other does not attempt to understand the subject's weight gain or loss, and reacts to the fat or thin man using subjective and socially informed constructs of superiority and inferiority. Mead's (1934) assumption was that individuals would interact through consideration of the other's embodied position:

The conversation of gestures is the beginning of communication – one starts to say something, and that calls out a certain reply in himself which makes him change what he was going to say. One starts to say something, we will presume an unpleasant something, but when he starts to say it he realises it is cruel. The effect on himself of what he is saying checks him; there is here a conversation of gestures between the individual and himself (p.141).

From the above passage, Mead assumes each individual will externally consider the other's feelings about their state of embodiment before saying something about it. Subjects would not refer to someone as fat because fatness calls forth a negative response based on the negative symbolisms socially attached to it. For Mead, this would prevent cruel interactions where the other is placed into an inferior position. Mead's position cannot be substantiated by the results which framed selves swinging between negative and positive positions dependent on subjective feelings about their state

of embodiment, as informed by symbolic reflections constituting fatness and thinness in different ways. The ideal types substantiate this claim. Negative and positive self-constructs were evident as participants traveled between fatness and extreme thinness.

### Fat and thin selves

Self-constructs changed according to the symbolic reflections the seven received. However, at times, they acted to reinforce their subjective self-constructs, both negative and positive, and in the process denied reflected information to the contrary. In particular, fat men attempted to resist change, or resist changing their self constructs to suit others and the others' reflections about their state of embodiment. This result would normally be taken to support the findings of Mead (1934), and Sullivan (Cited in Muuss, 1996), where the self actively organises and filters out information challenging the participant's construction of self. However, as established, fat selves were unable to resist the pressure to be thinner. In all seven cases each man lost more than twenty kilograms in bodyweight to fit an imagined ideal which would be socially rewarded, in most cases sexually. It was also found, that happy, fat men in intimate sexual relationships were able to resist the social pressure to be thinner the longest.

In this study, fat men were found to resist losing weight by denying their weight gain. As Mead predicted, they did try to filter information. Their fat selves attempted to dismiss all incoming information reflecting their fatness and interpreted the information as someone else's error. They also avoided social interactions that would reflect their fatness. This was continued to the extent that, when comparing themselves to other fat men, they constructed themselves as thinner, until their thinness could no longer be substantiated. However, they reached a point where it all went belly-up.

Their interactive behaviour and experiences suggest they eventually came to embody the negativity directed towards their fat body-images. The result was that they responded to social messages and came to hate, or intensely dislike, their fat bodies. This result

suggests that Mead's (1934), and Sullivan's (Cited in Muuss, 1996) position requires some revision. They suggest selves filter out information to the contrary of their sense of self; this study establishes the seven's fat selves experienced themselves in public to be socially stigmatised. These experiences impacted negatively on their sense of self. In this study, fat selves were unable to filter out the social pressure telling them they need to be thinner. The social pressure was too great. The fat man's positive sense of self changed eventually in response to negative social reflections about their embodied weight. This finding is further supported in the analysis of emotional masculine selves traversing the public and private divide.

### Emotional, private, and public selves

Emotional men are not anomalies. This study establishes that men are emotionally connected to their level of bodyweight. Emotionally, they experienced both negative and positive emotions about their state of embodiment. There were distinct emotional shifts as they moved between different social contexts. These results support Cooley's argument, where selves react to social stimuli and interact based on self-feeling (1964). In addition, emotional, masculine selves reacted both negatively and positively to their reflective socio-cultural environments. This further supports the concept of shifting selves being presented in this discussion. Subjective, emotional embodiment is privately and publicly influenced.

The seven's emotional sense of self changed as they traversed the private and public divide. As Hochschild posits: 'Most of us maintain a prior expectation of a continuous self, but the character of the self we expect to maintain is subject to profound social influence' (Hochschild, 1998, p. 6). In this study, men experienced different emotions contextualised to their level of bodyweight, and socio-cultural environment. It was found that there were different modes of interactions and re-negotiations between fat and thin men, their social groups, and the unknown social other in both private and public spheres. There is an intrinsic link between embodiment and emotion.

The negative, symbolic nature of fatness and extreme thinness were observed to cause emotional turmoil for men, both privately, and publicly. The results suggest that men experience a range of emotions about being fat and thin. Further, the results show that levels of fatness and thinness were linked to male emotions (Lupton, 1998). In short, emotions affected the ways men treated their bodies, how male embodiment was experienced, and how male bodies responded to other bodies. For example Brad's experiences at a rave indicated an emotional response to his state of embodiment in comparison to other embodied selves.

In his case, he was ashamed of his body and at the same time angry with it because male "buffed" [muscular and oiled] bodies get more sex. *"I went in there and it was kind of a cool night so I had a long shirt on but I got in there and it was very, very hot. I wanted to take my shirt off because it was hot, but I wouldn't because there was blubber guts. Big blubber with guts hanging out. I stayed in there and sweated, and sweated, I remember that I just wouldn't take it off. I'm over-fucking-weight ... All those beautiful girls. I'm having a ball but not going to take my fucking shirt off. I remember all those other dudes with their shirts off, and they were buffed and cut, and for them, sure, not a problem ..."*

Brad's experience of being fat is based on his negativity directed towards his body, on not fitting his imagined concept of self for the social context he chooses to be in. His body shape does not fit the norm for the socio-cultural context. In a more familiar and comfortable setting his attitude changes, and his sense of self now is more positive. He visits his family home for an Australian BBQ. He travels 190 kilometers. He connects with his extended family on matters of bodyweight. Emotionally, he feels connected to the group because he now resembles the norm, which is to be big. He is no longer visually distinct from the family.

The interview reads:

Brad: "I got on a lot better with the whole extended family ..."

Lenney: "Can you explain why?"

Brad: I think because I came down and I was very jolly. I had just come back home. I was home a week and went down because they were all there, come together to have a big party and just wanted to hear stories. I'd tell them stories because I'd been away for so

long. I had stories to tell and I don't know, yeah, it really got me back-in with the extended family to a point that I wasn't as close to them when I left and when I got back it really brought us closer together for some reason. Maybe, because they thought I was a lot better [I had given up drugs]...I hadn't seen them for about six months ...most of my uncles are pretty big and some of my aunties are pretty big too"

Lenney: "Did you feel that you could relate to them on a more one-to-one level basis, now you were that size?"

Brad: "Definitely, definitely. Yeah, muck around. I'd get my gut out, like, check that one out, uncle B, check it out. It was big. I had stretch marks it was a good gut. It was something to be proud of. I'd say well paid for, you know".

The beach was another socio-cultural context that produced emotional turmoil for members of the group. These results establish that socio-cultural contexts influence men emotionally. The seven felt more comfortable and accepted in those environments where their bodyweight was reflective of the norm for the group. Emotional selves exist and are contingent on reflective socio-cultural contexts that imply inclusion or exclusion from the group.

Drawing the concepts together, men experienced shifting selves as they gained and lost weight in a social context framed by the existence of an ideological private and public sphere (the ability to split the individual from the social). The seven's experience of their bodyweights acted as symbolic markers for their embodied sense of emotional self. This study found, for those men who were subjectively overweight, the 'thin, healthy, and attractive' message, was pervasive enough to cause feelings of stigma that culminated in self-imposed isolation and social exclusion. It was also pervasive enough to promote self-improvement in order to meet social standards. The resulting swing between fatness and extreme thinness was found to present a number of socially and subjectively manufactured identities.

## Multiple, manufactured, identities

The embodied self projects itself into the social world using a range of symbols. The interpretation of different symbols has led to the acknowledgment of multiple identities (Bocock, 1992; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Social identities are contextualised in the relationships existing between individuals, and environmental constraints, both imposing a set of rules and conventions on interpersonal interactions. As Sullivan writes, 'every human being has as many [identities] as he has interpersonal relations' (Sullivan, 1964, p. 221). In support of Sullivan's claim, this research found that as the self traveled between two extreme positions it projected a range of social identities contingent on its social environment, and simultaneously, it found that social identities were projected onto it. It is clear from the results that symbolically, fitness is socially and subjectively constructed using predominantly negative images and symbols. The exception is the socially projected jolly fat man. In contrast, thinness is socially and subjectively constructed using predominantly positive images and symbols. The exception in this case is the socially-envied 'stud' and 'narcissistic' identities. Both identities promoted social exclusion, rather than inclusion.

Using the concept of significant language, Mead (1934), and Sullivan (1964) suggest that the power to inform identities is embedded in interpersonal relationships. Significant language for Mead and Sullivan refers to the use of language by those whom the subject holds in high regard, and for Sullivan, language which is heard to validate both negative and positive self constructs. Placed in the context of this research, the seven fat men heard predominantly negative comments about their bodies and consequently reacted to these comments by forming negative and humorous social identities. However, when thinner, they heard both positive and negative comments about their bodies, and there was some deliberation in their identity construction. In some environments, it was good to be thinner, yet in others, it was not.

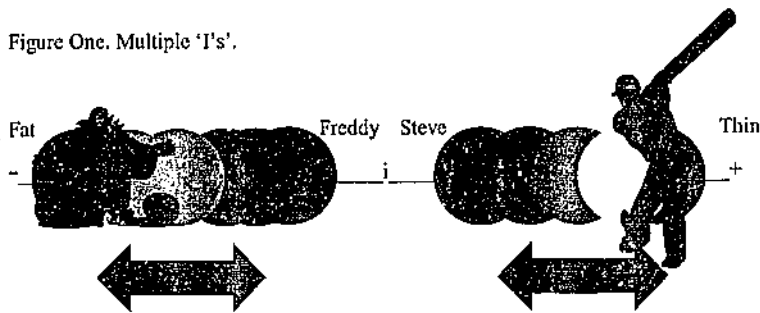
Figure one provides a visual impression of what happens as multiple identities are projected whilst the self travels between positive and negative positions (See figure one.



Multiple 'I's', p. 198) The visual impression shows that projected identities develop, and each identity is projected from the existence of a continuous self that is neither static nor balanced. It incorporates both ideal types and each individual's experience. The axis symbolises a continual self which has positive and negative extremes. The coloured circles represent the number of identities that were identified in this study for each ideal type (Freddy and Steve). Their existence is contingent on the subjective level of bodyweight.

The symbol 'n' is the neutral position between the conflicting forces. The arrows indicate a two-way process. Participants travelled between the balanced position and each of the polarised positions. When subjects moved towards the negative end of the embodied axis, defined in this case by subjective notions of fatness (symbolised by the clown), Freddy's identities became more isolating. It is the opposite as participants moved towards the positive end of the axis and embodied Steve's identities (symbolised by the sportsman). Each projected identity is reflective of the intrinsic link between a self-construct, a social identity, and the environment at any point in time.

Figure One. Multiple 'I's'.



The problem, as indicated by the seven, was finding an ideal position between these competing and often conflicting identities. The ideal is to be socially accepted, no matter what their body shape or weight. The seven seemed caught between allowing themselves to be what they wanted to be, and acting how they wanted to act, compared to being what others wanted them to be, and act how others wanted them to act. Visually, the image of a seesaw comes to mind. If the seven had too much weight, they slid into

negativity, isolation and public humiliation. If they had too little weight, they slide into narcissism. Socially, they felt they were rejected when fat or when extremely thin, and yet generally accepted when reaching a certain normative subjective weight. The results also imply that the subject needed to find the right weight and body shape to maximise their social acceptance. The issue for the seven was how to maintain the ideal position when acceptance and rejection meant that they were the focus of attention.

Multiple bodies reflect multiple identities. No one body shape can fit the bill. Yet there was a pervasive view that fit, toned, healthy bodies are the most accepted, and to embody this type of body is to project an identity which enjoys the good life offered by the industrialised Western world. A sense of self is reflected by material items, and the successful body project (Giddens, 1991). This establishes an inward direction and subjects focus on the abilities and attractiveness of the body. Men in this study reinvented their social identities to suit their purposes and environments. Their social identities were creations they could wear, or discard. They used space, fashion, body language and other consumable material items to indicate, symbolically, their changed social position. This finding supports Baudrillard's conclusion, that consumable identities in a material world can be created to suit individual subjective needs, and are not formed solely as reactions to media and socially-fed images.

Consumption for Baudrillard is no longer seen as an action induced by advertising upon a passive audience which belongs to a specific social class or life-stage, but as an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identity ... The sphere of the symbolic has become primary in modern capitalism: the 'image' is more important than the satisfaction of material needs ... we are not already constituted as an attractive women, or handsome man. Rather we try to become the beings we desire to be (Bocock, 1992: 149-150).

However, the study also establishes a tension between subjective and socially-constructed identities. Although the seven actively re-created themselves, they were also what other people could create, form and project onto them. There was tension between what was subjectively created and projected, and what was socially accepted. The seven's ability to

negotiate the frameworks of their social identities were mediated by symbolic associations attached to their body images. For example, the stud was a positive subjective identity, yet a negative social identity within the individual's in-group. The slob was a negative identity both subjectively and socially. Yet the jolly fat man identity, whilst being a subjectively negative identity, was a positive social one. These contradictions further support the claim that identity formations are not static. They vary dependent on the power the social group has to direct particular identity formations from a range of socially available options. In this study, men were caught between forming and projecting subjective identities in a social context in which they were either socially accepted or rejected-simultaneously accepting or rejecting social identities being projected onto them.

The subject can either accept or reject socially projected identities based on the power relationship between subjects and their interactive social environments. In the case of subjectively projected identities, the social other can also accept or reject these. Both subject and social other may also accept or reject identities based on their social value, and need or relevance at any point in time. For example, in this study, Steve's stud identity was imagined to be appealing to potential sexual partner; however, within his group it meant competition, resulting in conflict. The stud was subjectively projected, yet socially rejected in some instances. In contrast, Freddy's producer identity was subjectively projected and socially accepted, as was his inept sportsman identity.

Each of the identities incorporated prescribed roles and social expectations. In this study, failure to meet expectations attached to the role had social ramifications, as did rejection of the role. Social acceptance, referred to here as inclusion, required the illusion of role compliance for acceptance. Where participants sought to impose their subjective identities they were met in some cases with opposition if those identities conflicted with those being socially ascribed. The opposite, social avoidance, referred to here as exclusion, can be the consequence of non-compliance or rejection of socially imposed identities and their affiliated roles. Participants experienced these when expected to perform the jolly fat man facade. They were expected to accept the social role, but in most cases, subjectively, rejected it. My interviews with James and Yvonne highlight this

point.

Lenney: "Were you happy?"

James: "No, because I couldn't be myself anyway but everyone thought I was ... I always had a good act".

Lenney: "You say you had a good act. What were you projecting out? What were you showing people"?

James: "Everyone always has said that I was a really happy, out-going, friendly, sociable person. Over-the-top, you know. Now I can't be bothered and everyone can get fucked. Excuse my language".

[Next interview]

Yul: "...I use the word fat because to me it is a derogatory term".

Lenney: "Why?"

Yul: "Full of negative connotations".

Lenney: "What are the negative connotations that you see"?

Yul: "Makes you look ugly, affects people's judgments on your personality".

Lenney: "How?"

Yul: "You are supposed to be happy... at this stage I had a girl-friend. She was quite large and she was always bubbly, but knowing her I found that she, deep down, was a little girl in a lot of pain, but her facade was there".

The observable disjuncture between identities that were subjectively and socially accepted or rejected lends support to theorists like Sullivan (1964), who claim that multiple identities exist and are reflective of multiple interactive environments steeped in relations of power. The results clearly indicate that individuals responded to their socio-cultural environments. Identity formations, in a social context, fluctuated based on a range of presentable body images and the projected meaning of these from the social other. The social other's profound influence where masculine subjectivity is concerned is discussed in the next section in the context of social power.

## Chapter 8

# Framing social power: Conformity and masculine subjectivity

## Introduction

In the masculine, hegemonic ideal, diets, and food would remain feminine practices. However, as this research establishes, the hegemonic ideal is constantly being revised as men move outside traditional masculine practices. In this research, men diet and like dressing themselves to look attractive. This finding questions the legitimacy of understanding practices such as dieting and fashion to be uniquely feminine or masculine. However, in the case of fashion, it was observed that straight men are a little uncomfortable about dressing for a potential queer eye. Therefore, in the following analysis of post-modern symbolic masculinity, and the embodied contexts of fatness and thinness, particular reference will be made to those authors whose works underpin self development and the construction of social identities, and their relevance when sensory organic beings interact in a hierarchical gendered social context (Bordo, 1999a, 1999b; Cooley, 1964; Drummond, 1998, 2001, 2002; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1974; Sullivan, 1947, 1950; Lupton, 1995, 1996, 1998). This research extends the works of authors like Sparkes, (1996, 1999), West (2000), and Drummond (2002), who critique the insular focus on masculinity, sport and violence. In this section, masculinity is discussed with reference to subjective and socially constructed masculine identities, and the gendered symbolism attached to clothing and food.

## Men and food

The eating practices of men have remained under-researched unless tied to physical activity and the diets of sporting men (Connell, 1995; Drummond, 2002) or to men 'who are particularly sensitive to health issues' (Grogan, 1999, p. 68). In this study, the term diet represented a complex and multi-faceted interaction between embodied senses of self, food choices, and lived experiences (Lupton, 1996). This research established that, like women, men can eat fattening foods to fill emotional voids regardless of their sexual preference, or restrict their food intake to lose weight. This finding establishes that men diet. Hegemonic masculinity is, to some extent, defined by its exclusion of practices that undermine its construction. Symbolically, male superiority is defined through physical

strength (Gagnon, 1974), real men do not cry, and dieting is constructed as a feminine pursuit. Authors who have commented on men, dieting and the feminisation of food generally imply that men lose weight via physical activity rather than restricting their food intake (See Brownmiller cited in Grogan, 1999; Connell, 1995; Drummond, 2002).

For example, Drummond refers to this in the context of men constructing masculinities through muscularity:

acts such as dieting are not perceived as appropriate weight loss methods for men. The feminised stigma that is often linked to dieting may deter some men from food restriction or diet modification (Yates, 1991). It appears men tend to acknowledge exercise rather than food restriction and diet modification as a more 'masculine' model of weight control or loss (Drummond, 1999, Yates, 1991) (2002, p. 81).

This study offers a complementary view based on the experiences of men losing weight outside of a sporting context. Men, in this study, lost weight dieting. They switched to non-fattening foods, and in most cases, further restricted their food intake to lose body fat. However, this was a small part of the story uncovered by this research. Not only do some men starve themselves to lose weight, it was also found there is a symbolic connection between a man's subjective sense of embodiment, and his choice of foods. The seven searched for, and ate, foods that reflected their physical and emotional embodiment. As their sense of embodiment underwent change, so did their diets. This meant the type of food, the time of day, and the amount of food they consumed changed in accordance with their state of embodied subjectivity. For example, those of the seven who came to experience the physical side of their embodiment to an extreme, realised that they had better start eating to compensate for the type and amount of exercising they were doing. This finding suggests that there is an intrinsic link between self and diet, and in some contexts, food is not necessarily distinct from the embodied self, as Lupton contends in the context of risk taking:

At a more symbolic level of meaning, the risks associated with food consumption involve challenges to our sense of self, including our maintenance of self-autonomy and self-control and our membership of social groups. Because eating is an act that involves

the incorporation of a substance that begins as 'other' into the 'self', it is fraught with risk (2000: 205).

Men actively searched for dieting techniques that suited their sense of self and ate foods that reflected this, at that point in time. Self-construction, in this context, has not been widely acknowledged as something which directs the choice of diet unless it is tied up with upper-level constructions, and social identities, such as class, ethnicity and gender (Connell, 1990; Germov, 2002a, 2002b; Grogan, 1999). For example, the beer diet, discussed in the results, aligned with a self-construction reliant on drugs. The other diets mentioned also aligned with self constructions which framed the individuals as sensitive to their environments. These diets consisted of allergy-reducing foods for a sensitive palate and body constitution, and a diet used to build a certain body type associated with a muscular, sexual identity. In this context, who the seven believed themselves to be, and who the seven believed they could become once they acknowledged they could lose weight, influenced their choice of diet.

Overwhelmingly, the seven men made the connection between certain types of food, weight loss, sexual attraction and youthful looks. The resounding message was that if less fattening foods were eaten male bodies would look more attractive. Yul makes the point clear: *"I wanted to be younger, let's not put a finer point on it. If I was thin I'd be more attractive"*. Non-fatty foods were symbolically associated with a distinctive, imagined self, further adding to the claim of this research that self and food can be reflective of each other. This is supported by the emerging thinner, sexually attractive selves, where food is observed to be reflective of their self-concept, yet tinged with a practical component. It was found that foods considered to be fattening do have their place in the thinner man's diet.

Food was also constructed as energy-giving after weight loss, and when participants were more active. Here all foods, fattening and non-fattening, are reflective of selves exercising and needing extra boosts, and of bodies needing resources to keep up with hectic lifestyles. Food takes on a more pragmatic meaning when thin selves control its use through diet and exercise to produce the imagined effect. It is here that Lupton's



(1996) work on food as risk comes into play. It is clear that the thinner seven construct fatty-foods as both energy giving, yet risky .

Thin men saw fat men in those foods that were associated with high levels of animal fat, and those foods high in sugar. When these foods were eaten, they were eaten with the view of burning-off the fat content. In this context, fatty foods were observed to be pleasurable yet risky. There was a risk the seven would put on weight, and there was no way participants were going back to embody Freddy's identities. Fatty foods belonged to an abandoned sense of self, that was nevertheless lurking in their taste buds. This finding has implications for social information promoting healthy diets as a means to increased longevity and health; there is a need to consider that men react emotionally as well as rationally to their food choices. From these results it is clear the health message is getting through in regards to what are healthy, as opposed to unhealthy, foods. However, men are not associating the health information attached to eating non-fatty foods with improving their longevity, and reducing their morbidity. In this study, men symbolically associated healthy diets/foods with producing sexy, attractive and desirable bodies. The contextual intent of the social health message is being lost to a subjective, symbolic, sexual context informed by the concept and existence of a competitive sexual market. In this research there is a disjuncture between health messages sent and health message received. This finding is substantiated by fat men, who, when in happy intimate relationships, put on weight, over time.

Food is therefore reflective and symbolic of certain body types. Men looking at food observed symbolically thinner and fatter bodies as reflecting the food's fat content. Fattening foods were believed to produce fatter bodies. In particular, meat, beer and sugar were symbolically associated with fatness, whilst water, vegetables, salad, and fruit were associated with thinness. These associations reflect the dominant conceptualisation of healthy versus unhealthy food. The health component of the seven's dieting choices was not evident to the extent that it was their motivating force to lose weight. In this research, men lost weight to look more attractive for potential sexual partners. Outside of a sporting and physical activity context, food takes on a more symbolic reflective quality. It

is perhaps time to talk about the symbolism of food in terms of the reflective self that shifts emotionally, contingent on its socio-cultural environment. This means researching the diets of different kinds of men, in different social contexts. This suggestion also applies to fashion and the symbolisms attached to the clothes of fat and thin men.

## Men and clothes

The symbolic expression of masculinity incorporates many facets. One of these pertains to wearing the right kind of clothing. The results indicate that symbolic socio-gendered distinctions were made between what constitutes gay and straight clothing for men. Brad states: "*I tried to fit into the smallest thing I could without looking like a poof*". The word 'smallest' also implies a distinction is made between sizes. The feminisation of clothing for men, the size, style and fit, colour, and how much of the body is seen, all conflate to give an overall impression of men and their affiliation to homosexual or heterosexual identities. This includes the physical act of shopping. This analysis of the public presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) in terms of clothing now needs to incorporate distinctions of bodyweight. In this study, there were stark differences between attachments to clothing for fat and thin men. This study extends the symbolic significance of clothing beyond the public presentation of self and the homo/hetero divide and suggests that bodyweight significantly influences male clothing taste.

The extent to which men shopped for clothes was mediated by their level of bodyweight, and the availability of clothing for different sized bodies. Bordo (1999a) suggests that male bodies have become increasingly objectified in terms of their physical and sexual attraction, as a response to advertisements constructing male bodies as erotically pleasing, sexual objects. This study supports Bordo's claim. It was found that men were inwardly directed, when thinner, to be concerned about their embodied appearances.

The overwhelming statement from participants was that thinner bodies looked better, and were easier to dress than fatter bodies. This was in response to the larger range of clothes available to thinner men. However, there was also the distinction made between

exposing the thinner body, and hiding the fatter one. In this analysis bodyweight influenced clothing taste in two ways. Firstly, there was the search for comfort without looking like a four-man tent, and secondly there was the extent to which clothes exposed the body. Both have implications for fat and thin men.

The biggest problem faced by fat men was where to shop for clothes that fitted. This problem is compounded by the fact that fat men did not like to shop. The results also suggest that fatter men disliked the clothing range available to them. In particular, bigger sizes were needed, and comfort around the bottom was essential as Steve explains. *"Back then it was more about size. I can't be this and you'd go to the dressing room and it wouldn't fit. I then tried on the 102cm. I'll try the 117cm then when they didn't fit I went the next size up and they were the largest at a 127cm. I got them on and they were nice and comfortable and I had to get a shirt because she wanted to go to the casino. I got this rayon shirt. It was 142cm, chest and shoulder, like, you know".*

From these results, it is clear the market place is mainly geared towards meeting the demands of a thinner male consumer, and of fat male consumers wanting to be thin male consumers. It is clear fat men need fashion choices. In this study, fat men felt ugly and hid their weight as best they could under loose-fitting clothes. Comfortable items, and hiding body weight, when fat, dominated the seven's clothing choices. This means that fashion producers would need to provide increasing sizes beyond what is currently available. Yet the problem still remains that no matter how much material is used, the fat person will never look thinner. The problem seems not to be the availability of clothes, but the availability of clothes that hide bodyweight. This leads into the other influence affecting masculine taste in clothes, that of body exposure. Different environments called for different levels of dress. The swimming pool is a legitimate environment to wear as little as possible within socially sanctioned limits. In this study, fat men hid their weight when attending both private and public swimming venues under T-shirts.

They felt uncomfortable about the level of their bodyweight and the symbolic associations social others were likely to attach to it. In those environments where bodily exposure is sanctioned, clothes acted as buffers protecting the subject from negative

symbolic associations attached to fatness. In contrast, thinner men brought clothes that would accentuate their weight loss with the intent to look good for a potential sexual mate, or with the intent to direct social attention towards their slimmer bodies. In this analysis, clothes act to direct social attention towards certain aspects of the body which are believed to increase the subjects' sexual desirability. Therefore, men shopped for clothes which symbolised their intention to attract admiring gazes. Contextualised to taste, thin men were attracted to clothing that made their bodies visible, and which accentuated the shape of their bodies. The symbolic implications of this is that excessive body fat is subjectively and socially constructed as ugly. In contrast, fat-free bodies are subjectively and socially constructed to be attractive.

The subjective and social constructions of bodies as attractive and ugly draws into question Mead's (1934) disembodied self where fatness and thinness would have no subjective value. In Mead's analysis subjects would be uninfluenced by social meanings attached to certain body types to promote consumer desire, or sexual attractiveness. However, taken that selves interact in a social environment that continually reinforces certain messages about the negative symbolism attached to excessive body weight, this would be a hard path to follow. Clearly, men in this study could not resist these messages where access to the sexual market was concerned, and where their visual health hinged on presenting a normative body-shape.

Social messages can, of course, be changed and there is evidence that some cultures constitute being fat as prestigious (Spring et al, 1994). However, the ideological shift required to value fatness both subjectively and socially in Western industrialised States, requires a social system that does not operate using social hierarchies implying one body type is better than another in terms of its sexual appeal, or by perpetuating certain body types as stigmatised because they fall outside of normative parameters. These ideological matters are discussed in the next and final section for this chapter, in which masculinity, health, fatness and thinness are discussed within an interactive, ideological frame.

## Symbolic power, social control and stigma

### Primary Frameworks

Goffman's (1974) concept of primary frameworks refers to how subjects interpret socio-cultural symbolic information. 'In sum, then, we tend to perceive events in terms of primary frameworks, and the type of framework we employ provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied' (p. 24). For the men in this study, a primary framework is liberal capitalism (Heywood, 1998, pp. 24-65), in particular marketing strategies that define negative and positive body images for men.

Liberalism is defined by the existence of the individual, the split between classical liberalism and modern state liberalism, and the differences between negative and positive freedoms (Heywood, 2003; Germov, 2002b). The ideology is also defined by a value system associated with unregulated capitalism, an economic system in which goods are sold at a profit and the capital is reinvested as a means of making more profit, and governments that take a hands-off approach, allowing the market to regulate itself (Heywood, 2003, pp. 62-64). In this climate individual identity can be expressed through consumer goods. Today individuals are capable of purchasing multiple identities from the market place. The market place becomes a place for competition. Competition for liberals is a central concept. It brings, rewards and, most of all, competition for liberal's is necessary for progress (Heywood, 2003, pp. 25-68).

In the context of health and food choices, the crux of the issue in an ideal liberal society (that is where only classical and modern state liberals exist) is how to promote individual responsibility without being dictatorial. In other words, controlling individuals is too strong for a liberal position. They would rather promote and imply conformity to a greater good through information dissemination (harm minimisation) than force people to act against their free will. The concept of individual choice is ultimately a liberal concept (Heywood, 2003, pp. 25-68). Therefore, based on the health information available, people would choose to be thin and not to be fat. In the context of this research, the

greater good would be promoting men to choose a healthy lifestyle over an unhealthy one through attaching social meaning (negative and positive) to fat and thin symbolisms.

Attaching negative and positive meanings to social symbols is one way to promote conformity or, rather, rational choices. This type of socialising relies on subjects accepting the symbolic associations of, in this case, fatness and thinness. This form of symbolic control also relies on the message being widely disseminated, usually through social, and interpersonal interactions. Ogden (1992) notes this to be the case, describing the link between symbolic control and self worth:

As women in this society our worth [value] is determined by our physical [symbolic] attributes, we are something to look at, we learn to evaluate ourselves in the way that others evaluate us. We learn to derive a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem from how others assess our attractiveness. We see ourselves as a reflection of how others see us (p. 22).

In this study, it was found that the thin health message was reinforced using the look, the word, and by placing fat and thin subjects into a subjective, yet pervasive, social body-image hierarchy. Within a liberal, capitalist primary framework thin men, in this study, felt their social value was improved due to social reflections embedded with positive symbolisms, physical and material rewards. This finding questions the ability of Marxist (and generally socialist) methods to bring about social equality, and the ultimate collapse of social hierarchies (produced from economic stratification) when determinants other than material wealth, and social status impact upon the ways people are socially positioned in relation to one another during interpersonal interactions. Bodyweight was observed to influence social positioning adding to the complexity of the phenomena (Ogden, 1992, ppx-25).

#### **Power and conformity**

However, conformity to primary frameworks is variable. In what follows, I critique symbolic conformity and individual subjectivity using a predominantly interactionist

analysis referring to symbolic violence, perfect bodies and the divided self (Laing, 1967; Langer, 1996; Murphy, 1994; Valentine, 1994), and combine it with a number of authors writing on masculine subjectivities, social interactions and social control in an ideologically, politically, liberal society (See Bordo, 1999a; Drummond, 2002; Erdman, 1994; Foucault, 1980; Goffman, 1963, 1969; Mead, 1934; Sparkes, 1999; Sullivan, 1952; Valentine, 1994). Subjects in this study used a sexual-health-attractiveness schema to assess the other, and place themselves relationally into a socially condoned, body-image hierarchy. It was found that wealth, health, and sex-appeal are definitive, socially empowered symbolic concepts, underpinning all social interactions between fat and thin men in their socio-cultural environments. In this section, the term 'object' is taken to be synonymous with 'symbol' both of which may be collapsed into the term 'image'.

Fat and thin embodied symbolisms hold different social values. Fat bodies are socially constructed to be different to thin bodies. 'What is bad about being fat is the social interpretation of this body, not the fat itself (Erdman, 1994, p. 162). In light of Erdman's comments, men in this study placed more value on thinner, attractive, male bodies than they did on fat, male bodies. In this context, thin embodiment symbolises a range of conforming practices that are rewarded, the rewards being access to a wider range of consumer goods (Bordo, 1993, 1999a), and being socially valued within a social health context. Therefore the key issue under discussion is the power to ascribe 'value' to embodied symbols to enhance their subjective and social desirability.

In a masculine context, men desire toned, fat-free bodies that are sexually appealing, and a joy to dress. This was a dominant finding. The desire for sexy bodies is usually conceptualised as the product of symbolic advertising placing sexy images, with certain products, promising perfect and desirable bodies (Bordo, 1993, 1999a; Murphy, 1994; Valentine, 1994). The results support this position. Langer offers this:

Whole incidents such as teenagers being mugged for their shoes feed a widespread sense of a social world that is unpredictable and out of control ... self-esteem and social status are inextricably linked to the capacity to fulfil desires generated by the market (1996 : 57).

In response to Langer's comment, it was clear the seven experienced a profound shift when thinner, and actively commoditised themselves to be desirable. However, the results also establish that interpersonal interactions were as important as consumer-fed images when perpetuating the symbolic value of the thin ideal. This calls into question Valetine's claim that interpersonal interactions are of less importance than media-fed images when shaping social constructions of embodiment (1994, pp. 118-119). In this study, media-fed images played less importance to the seven's subjective sense of self than interactive reflections which had immediate effects, in some cases, prompting weight-loss and the embodiment of the thin ideal. In this context, the immediate social group had the power to influence the participant's subjective construction as socially informed (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Mead, 1934; Sullivan cited in Muuss, 1996).

The social issue is whether men who lose weight are doing so to fit the desirable thin ideal as perpetuated by the popular press or are losing weight for other reasons. The social constructionist would presume that their choice to be thin aligns with conformist messages promoting thin imagery as the desirable norm. In this case, fat men are placed in a reactive position to socio-cultural environments that tell them to be thin. In contrast, Baudrillard's (1992) and Thompson's (1997) position is that male choice to be thin is not a passive reaction to their socio-cultural environment, but instead their subjective embodiment is something about which they have a choice. Men have the choice to manufacture a thin ideal as they do to manufacture a fat ideal. They also have the choice to embody numerous ideals that are not a reaction to popular images. However, there was a link between embodying the desirable ideal, sexual competition and being visibly healthy.

Competition, in a liberalised context, is socially healthy (Heywood, 1992, 1998, 2003; Sercombe, 1996). However, the down-side to competitive systems is that they establish differences between losers and winners. In this study there was competition between fat and thin symbolisms to socially constitute subjectivities in winning and losing ways. The thin ideal for men was found to be socially superior to the fat ideal. Fat and extremely thin men felt devalued socially, meaning they experienced social interactions from an inferior position. In other words, they felt stereotypically, stigmatised during the



interaction by observing the other's reactions to their level of body fat (Goffman, 1969). Their choice to be fat or extremely thin was socially questioned and in most cases challenged. Their choice to be thin was a response to competing for sexual intimacy after a separation.

Fat men who were left by their partners needed to compete sexually for new partners and did so by losing weight. In this case, there was a pervasive view that the sexual other prefers thinner male bodies as sexual partners. This was based on the seven's subjective preference, preferring thinner sexual partners themselves. The seven's preferred sexual ideal was the basis of their own embodied devaluation in the eyes of the sexual other. Brad's experiences at the rave best sum this up, where he compares his "*blubby guts*" with those of "*buffed men*", and convinces himself he stands no chance of scoring.

The social message that thinness is more sexually attractive is subjectively endorsed. The chicken and egg question remains: Which came first, the imagery of the thin ideal, or the embodiment of it? Regardless of which came first, the subjective endorsement of it allows advertisers to exploit the message based on individual, sexual, and intimate needs. The self is divided between choosing attractive and unattractive embodied-weight. The choice means either embarking on a weight-loss process, improving one's looks, or remaining static (fat or thin) and dealing with any social stigmas attached to the image. Therefore, this study suggests subjective choice always occurs within social contexts and what is of value to the individual, in this case attractiveness, will act as the catalyst for change. There is a great deal of social value (wealth) tied to promoting the attractive thinner ideal. As found in this research, thinner men buy more clothes than fatter men, and are more likely to buy into exercise to maintain their embodied ideal.

The 'thinness = attractiveness' concept is a simplistic but dominant schema. It had the power to influence interactions in either a positive or negative sense. In this study, fat men were looked down upon and felt inferior to others. Thin men felt socially superior to their fat counterparts. However, there was an additional symbol affecting the way masculine subjectivities were constituted beyond 'thinness = attractiveness'. I am referring to the concept of health. In the triplex, (thinness=attractiveness=health) health

becomes a more definitive means to assess who the other is, what their sexual preferences are, what their level of health is, and whether they are using drugs. This triplex was employed as a means of framing and stereotyping people in interpersonal interactions, in both valuing and devaluing ways.

Interactions that occur using the negative aspects of stereotypes can lead to interactions steeped in bodily prejudices (Sparkes, 1999; Spakes & Smith, 1999). Interactions of this kind seek to establish an illusionary, subjective, social hierarchy. In this study, social others interacted with men in a number of other stigmatising ways outside of the attractiveness context. The social other predominantly used the negative aspects of the fat and extremely-thin stereotypes to locate men within a health hierarchy. Their health value was the result of assessing the seven's level of fat and connecting this to any known sexual, drug and health practices. Health was found to be a guiding principle for locating individuals within a social hierarchy.

The existence of a social health hierarchy is the result of the importance placed on sustaining a healthy socio-cultural environment. This was Foucault's position in terms of his concept of docility (1980). Docility is defined as being the socialised acceptance of the status quo. The central issue is how to manufacture docility. In other words, how does a society manufacture docility in men to be thin and not fat? This refers to the State's ability to make individuals responsible for their state of weighted embodiment, thus requiring self-regulation. In this study, Foucault's (1980) concern over the way subjects come to internalise their embodiment was evident, but was nullified by fat men in relationships. However, his central thesis is supported by this research, in that self regulation also entailed fat men hiding their weight as best they could.

Self-regulating practices are best manufactured using fear (Laing, 1967). In this study men feared being fat for a number of reasons, but essentially they feared social taunts about their state of embodiment. In a health context, there was a fear of being constituted wrongly based on their level of bodyweight and known deviant behaviours. Therefore, social knowledge that continually highlights some practices as deviant, abnormal, or unhealthy renders subjects prone to social control and fear of being framed in

stigmatising ways (Goffman, 1963). Laing's work best sums this up:

All those people who seek to control the behaviour of large numbers of other people work on the experiences of those other people. Once people can be induced to experience a situation in a similar way, they can be expected to behave in similar ways. Induce people all to want the same thing, hate the same things, and feel the same threat, then their behaviour is already captive – you have acquired your consumers or your cannon fodder. Induce a common perception of Negroes as subhuman, or the Whites as vicious and effete, and behaviour can be concerted accordingly (1967: 80).

Using Laing's work in the context of bodyweight, if people can be induced into believing fatness is unhealthy and unattractive, then interactions would occur implying the fat, unattractive, and extremely thin men are socially inferior to attractive, healthy and normative men. In this study, it was found that bodyweight intersected with other symbolic categories locating the subject in an inferior position, thereby supporting Laing's contention. For example, if the subject under observation was known to be gay, then the projection of HIV is imposed onto them if they lose too much weight. Another example, was the known drug user-if too thin was presumed to be using again. The results indicated that the amount of fat seen on the face and stomach, were determinants used to position men within a masculine and social hierarchy which symbolised their state of wellness, illness, deviance, and their social positioning in the sexual market. In response, subjects attempted to deny or reject the inferior, sick and diseased constructions. However, in most cases, they were unable to do so.

Social and subjective acceptance of thin symbolism, as superior to fat symbolism, is creating a competitive, hostile social environment. It was observed that fatness has the symbolic visual power to frame a person negatively, thus preventing them from being framed with positive constructs. Their freedom to 'be' fat within an economically capitalist society was undermined by a message implying this freedom has severe individual, sexual, and social health costs. The choices, socially presented, are between fatness which is stigmatising because socially it is considered to be ugly, wasteful,

indulgent and sexually unattractive, and thinness, which brings unbridled hedonistic pleasures and social status.

The problem, as identified by the seven, was that being fat was not a freedom they were at liberty to choose. Their embodied sense of self needed to reflect the dominant social values of their socio-cultural environments. Further, there was social pressure to conform to a normative image of healthier attractive men. This was mainly achieved through the sense of sight. This finding reflects Foucault's (1980) work on promoting regulating practices through imaginary, internalised, surveillance.

### The power of the gaze

Foucault's work on the authoritative gaze of the medical professional and the power of their 'gaze' to constitute the subject as sick or in need of segregation (Rabinow, 1984) can be extended to this study on bodyweight and men. The authoritative gaze, within an institutional setting, has the power to punish and segregate those who do not conform to their normalising practices. The same power is extended to those gazing upon deviant behaviour in a number of social environments, and in the process of 'othering', excluding them from their social group (Becker, 1963). This study has extended the power of the authoritative gaze of professionals to individuals when constituting subjects as healthy, unhealthy, and deviant, or within normative embodied parameters. It was found thin men are more likely to self-regulate their bodyweight when experiencing socio-cultural reflections indicating they were too thin.

Bentham's Panopticon is the foundation for Foucault's interest in surveillance and subjectivity (1980). In particular, his interest centres on the concept of conditioning the subject to be their own watcher. This is posited as the State's ultimate goal. Social control is maintained through the subject's compliance (docility) to institutionalised authority. The issue of achieving this rests in the education of subjects to act or perform, in a certain social way for fear of being seen (or heard) not to, and to be educated to gaze (and speak) in certain ways. In a health context, this means looking at bodies and framing them as healthy, unhealthy, or within socially endorsed normative limits.

These findings endorse the existence of Foucault's (1980) eye of power through which individuals experience social regulation with the aim to promote self-regulating behaviour. Emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, superiority, and emotional-confidence were identified.

you have the system of surveillance, which on the contrary involves very little expense. There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost ... It is indeed the case that the gaze has had great importance among the techniques of power developed in the modern era, but, as I have said, it is far from being the only or even principal system employed (p. 155).

In accordance with Foucault's (1980) work, this study establishes that participants self-regulated their eating and exercising practices having lost the weight, and in response to symbolisms inferring weight gain, or extreme weight-loss. In short, having achieved a normative, thinner, more attractive body, men maintained this embodiment in response to gazes and words constituting them as healthy, and attractive (or if they went to the thin extreme they would be framed using language to infer they were unhealthy, and unattractive). Foucault (1980), Laing (1967), and Bordo (1999a, pp.172-173) are all concerned with the way 'fear' is used to promote social control through stigmatizing certain embodied subjectivities. In this research, participants feared returning to a life of fatness, felt stigmatised when socially constituted using negative social symbols, and feared losing the socio-sexual attention that thinner bodies brought them. Therefore, self regulation of healthy embodiment and sexual attractiveness, are enhanced when subjects fear being looked at and constituted as fat, unhealthy and unattractive.

In addition to the look, the word was also found to affect the seven's subjectively embodied self. Mead's (1934) and Sullivan's (cited in Muuss, 1996), position was that the language was dominant in self construction. Whilst this study supports their claim, it

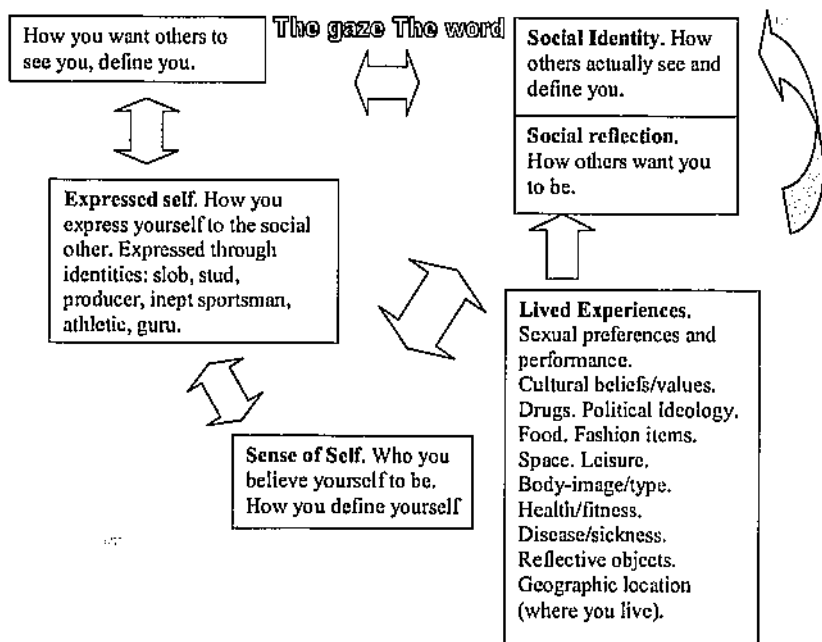
has identified that the visual is also important where subjective construction is concerned. It was found that subjective construction is based upon, and constantly changing with, the other's looks combined with the other's words, and the subject's interpretation of their reflective symbolic socio-cultural environment. In other words, subjectivity is constructed through social-symbolic reflection. This process is illustrated as an interactive model seen in figure two (p. 220).

The model has been developed from the results to symbolise the negotiation of identities by fat and thin men. The model incorporates three positions: 'a sense of self', 'an expressed identity', and 'the socialisation processes, or lived experience'. The self is the repository of a vast amount of social information, and is formed, primarily, in response to reflected social information over the individual's life course (Berger & Luckman, 1967). This information comprises a range of concepts and determinants. Generally, they include determinants such as gender, class and ethnicity. However, it is clear from these results that embodied subjects were prone to changes in their self-formations as their bodies gained and lost weight. In this study, continuous symbolic socialisation was found to influence the subject's embodied self-construct and socially expressed identity. The dominant social symbolisms affecting a man's sense of self were identified as food; fashion, drugs, leisure, body image/type and attractiveness, disease and sickness, health and fitness, cultural beliefs and values, political ideologies, sexual preferences and performance, reflective objects, space and geographic location.

In the model, the arrowed lines indicate the dynamic flow between the three key features: social reflection, self formation and expression of social identities. Firstly, the model suggests the socialisation process influences the self development of a human being. This aligns with the interactionist work on identity formation (Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934). Secondly, the model draws attention to how the individual can also be directly influenced in their socialisation process by the 'symbolic' outside of their immediate socialisation process. This refers to the subjective side of identity formation where the individual is active in his own constitution as he interprets the meanings behind what he reflectively experiences in his symbolic interactions with a range of abstract and concrete symbols

(Baudrillard, 1992). Lastly, the model incorporates the concept that how people look (the gaze), and how people construct others and themselves in their spoken language (the comment) is reflective of their socialisation process and lived experiences (Bordo, 1990, 1999; Goffman, 1963; Bandler & Grinder, 1979).

Figure Two. A model for interactive subjectivity.



Clear examples from the research include Charles, when his sense of himself was in direct contrast to how social others observed him with weight, and James's experience of being expected to play the joker role when fat, which he clearly disliked, but performed anyway. Ultimately, the seven's experiences of conflict between subjectively formed and socially prescribed identities are embodied in the stark contrasts presented through the

ideal types. Even though, subjectively, they thought they could do certain things when fat, in their social interactions they got the impression that fat men and thin men do different things. The symbolic analysis of this would suggest a power relationship at play between the individual and the social. In a sense, fat men felt they were punished for attempting to behave like thin men; and attractive men were punished for attempting to look to good. There is tension between subjective expression and social acceptance.

The model implies a dynamic loop in which fat and thin identities are constructed and under constant change, but the dynamism cannot portray that the individual and the social are the same thing. The self under social construction is also simultaneously the embodiment of its socialisation process, reflecting itself to other selves. I am a receiver of social information and at the same time a transmitter of it. Yet individuals are active agents. It is clear that some participants identified more with some of the symbolic symbols underpinning their continuous socialisation process than others. What this model shows is that each individual is a composite of identifications that relate to social phenomena. The issue is to what extent does over or under identification with these influence social behaviour and interpersonal interactions? The results suggest both primary and secondary participants experienced a strong link between identity formation, identification with their expressed social identities, and the social reactions to these.

There was tension between the way primary participants wanted to be framed and the way they experienced themselves interacting with others. Essentially, participants had little control over the way others framed their social identities, which, in turn, affected their sense of self. In this study, the issue of power and control was deconstructed. The power to inform, project and resist masculine identities, and embodied subjectivities was variable. Power was found to be intrinsically woven through the symbolic, and experienced through the word and the gaze.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that men are rationally and emotionally embodied selves (Hearn, 1993; Lupton, 1998). As Lupton explains:



The interest in the sociology of the body potentially includes a greater attention to the sociology of emotions, including exploring the relationship between socio-cultural meaning and representation, social interaction and bodily experience. Like the body itself, emotional State's serve to bring together nature and culture in a seamless intermingling in which it is difficult to argue where one ends and the other begins (Lupton, 1998 : 4).

The problem, as identified by the seven, was that their sense of emotional belonging was conditional on the size of their bodies. It was found that fat men have a sense of emotional belonging when in intimate private relationships, but they do not have the same sense when walking through public space. In public, their subjectivity reflected their weight status. Fat men were the joker.

The study establishes that social knowledge about bodyweight influences both self and social identity formations. It demonstrates that people learn to *be* within a social context, yet *who* they learn to *be* often conflicts with *who* others think they should *be*. The prominent task for these men is to establish the self as continuous, and embodied. Embodied subjectivity is synonymous with self (Lupton, 1998; Sparkes, 1996) within a primary framework. This study has also shown that the self incorporates both negative and positive dimensions.

Self and identity formations are social phenomena used to distinguish difference. This study has shown that bodyweight acts to mark difference, and that identities can be influenced by bodyweight. The post-modern approach to absolutes and hegemonic masculinity has been to suggest the existences of multiple masculinities, or the availability of multiple male identities (West, 2000). In brief, that there are differences between men in their beliefs about what it is to be a man. These different beliefs can be subjectively experienced and symbolically expressed. The post-modern claim is supported by this research which establishes that fat and thin men experienced their embodiment differently. In brief, it was found that fat and thin men expressed themselves differently using a range of social symbols to convey a multitude of subjective and socially-known identities.

## Chapter 9

### Summarising the Study

## A softer side to men

This qualitative study of seven primary participants and seven secondary participants adopted a symbolic interactionist framework to explore male bodyweight, defined as differing levels of body fat. Primary participants are men who have gained and lost twenty (or more) kilograms of bodyweight. The secondary participants were intimate people who observed the weight-gain and loss. The results were coded into symbolic themes relating to men and masculinities, fatness, thinness, food, clothes, emotions, health and sexual attractiveness. The results were initially presented as two ideal types, 'Fat Freddy' and 'Sexy Steve'. These ideal-types characterise the extremities of bodyweight for primary participants. In the second results chapter, fourteen individual stories build an account of embodied weight gain and loss. Food, clothes and sexual attractiveness were found to affect men in profound emotional ways.

The rationale for using an interactionist theoretical framework is based on the premise that individuals reflect their socio-cultural symbolic environments, and that interaction is influenced by this (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Cooley, 1964; Goffman, 1974; Mead, 1934). In the analysis, the symbolisms identified in the results were teased apart and discussed within the framework of previous studies and analyses of subjective, emotional embodiment, and self/identity construction in contextualised socio-cultural environments (See Bordo, 1990, 1999a; Bourdieu, 1984; Cooley, 1964; Drummond, 1998, 2001, 2002; Foucault, 1980; Laing, 1967; Lupton, 1995, 1998, 2000; Goffman, 1963, 1967, 1969; Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1950). It was established that being thin holds more subjective and social value than being fat. Based on size, fat men are not the same as thin men. It was evident that the seven's interpersonal relationships changed as did their relationships with their self-identities.

Today, social constructions of fatness and thinness are pervasive in identity construction and in framing interpersonal interactions. To be fat or thin is to know one's place in the social world. There is no real need to be told that fatness is negative and thinness positive: individuals accept this to be the case without question. Fat men in this study,

knew that they were socially inferior to thinner men and this was learned through the 'gaze' and through social interaction. Fat and thin bodies were found to be embedded with symbolic power to constitute the subject in a number of stigmatising ways, these include being gay; straight, healthy, unhealthy, HIV positive/negative, and a drug user/non-user. Such symbolism arises from a health conscious social context. In brief, it was evident that body weight is socially constructed, and that the construction differed based on lived experiences, the relationship between observed and observer, and connections made between meaning and observation.

This research showed that men experience a profound emotional shift as they moved between subjective negative and positive self concepts based upon gaining and losing different amounts of body fat. This shift affected their social interactions in emotional ways. Indeed, there were tensions between subjective identity projections, and social projections of identity. Points of conflict existed between who the participant wanted to be and who they were expected to be. Philosophically, the thesis explores the tensions between the divided self, the individual and social control of the body. I used the experiences of men who gained and lost weight, and the experiences of those witnessing expanding and reducing masculine embodiments, to posit the idea that subjective interpretation of the symbolic is influenced by one's state of subjective embodiment. To complicate matters, the state of one's subjective embodiment is influenced by the differing social values associated with, and projected onto, differing body types by social observers, and other reflective symbols.

There was evidence of a power dynamic operating between valued and devalued body images. The symbolism of body weight acted to mark subjects in a number of socially stigmatising ways. Valentine's (1994) claim that interpersonal interactions are of little significance compared to mass-produced imagery contrasts with the claim of this research, which suggests that it is at the level of interpersonal relationships that people most experience marginalisation.

This study has built on previous work on masculinities by showing, in detail, how the competitive world of men may be acted out through body image. The tension between the self and the social exists as both an internal and external tussle. Internally, the self is attempting to find balance between its subjective state of embodiment, and social reflections suggesting a healthy, unhealthy, valued or devalued state of embodiment. The discrepancy between what constitutes fatness and thinness is played out in subjective minds and in the verbal and non-verbal language embedded in social interactions with both sentient and non-sentient objects.

Most importantly this study has given voice to men's issues with body weight (fatness and thinness) in relation to body image and their experiences of masculine identities. It is unique, in that, it maps the experiences of men gaining and losing body fat. This area has been largely ignored in favour of attention to the female body and patriarchal practices. The study reveals that the softer side to men is often expressed in private. Their journey from fat to thin was an emotional and physical journey in which they ceased to see themselves as "*Blubber guts*" and "*Monsters*" and adopted new, sexually attractive self-constructs. Hence, the social value attached to thinness, or experienced subjectively by participants, reinforced the need to be thin and not fat. Fat men were found to experience stigmatisation when socially interacting. Bodyweight is a visual determinant for marginalisation.

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# Appendix 1

## Self motivations

### **Motivational biography and researcher reflections**

In qualitative research it is customary to reveal the values-base of the researcher in order to make transparent the process of analysis. Similarly, qualitative research normally includes a journal in which the researcher's thoughts at the time of data collection and conceptual analysis establish an audit trail so that future researchers in the same field can explore the validity of the analyses. This appendix describes my background, motivations and journey through my PhD research and thesis writing.

I first started to discuss the research project with my supervisor at the time, Dr Howard Sercombe, February 2000. However, I feel that a brief account of the construction of my own sense of identity would better serve as the starting point. My life experiences affect upon my work (continually) in many profound ways, without which this research would not be what it is.

I was born in Greenwich, 1966, to working class parents. I quickly established myself as an accident-prone child. This manifested itself in breaking through glass doors, falling off see-saws, and breaking bones. I was continually active at this time. I would spend all my time out of the house, on my bike, racing other kids in the street. I was highly competitive but never reached the finishing line first. I always saw myself as the second-in-command. The caricature, embedded in the character of 'Little John' in Robin Hood best sums this up and highlights one of my bigger personal issues, the fear of leadership and taking the helm ("What if I fail? Will they like what I have to say? Will they reject me? And therefore will I be left alone?"). Lynne, (Principle supervisor), became frustrated with my constant need to put theories up front when writing the first draft of the discussion chapter, and rightly so. I have always felt that I needed permission from others before conveying my observations. This has more to do with the fear of rejection than it does anything else. I had to work hard to take ownership and to place my results up-front when editing and writing the second draft of the discussion chapter. I cannot trace where I have learnt that what I observe has little to no importance, and where the fear of being rejected for what I believe to be the case originated. I observe life as a struggle and a battle against the environment. I trace this to my working-class back ground.

All my parents had hard childhoods. Some had to give up their dreams; some were shifted about as pawns in some bizarre game of hide-and-seek with parents who blew and in and out of their lives. I often had a sense of the injustices that parents put their children through, and have come to realise that if I had had their upbringing I would have failed and fallen by the way-side. My step-father (Davy) inherited an emotional boy, who would need to be stronger if he was to survive the cruel world he (Davy) had had to endure.

I have often wondered why I have come to where I am. I can link my desire to work in the human services with all my care-giver's sense of social justice. My own care-givers all have had tender hearts, some wear them on their sleeves and some hide them, but the feeling was always the same when I was allowed to see them for who they were. My admiration for them has grown over the past four years, and I have come to see my part in the disasters, that at times tore the family apart, and at others, had us laughing until we could no longer breathe. I can remember stories of teeth being lost in swimming pools as the wearer (60+) drank a bit too much alcohol and vomited; or a holiday villa that was sold on a promise and turned out to be vermin infested, and lacking in all amenities-and personal antics that have destroyed rooms, carpets, furniture, and household appliances. Family life, as I now remember it, was always fun once the conflicts were forgotten.

At some point, I started to put on weight. There are pictures of me, skinny as a rake, with blonde hair, before our move from my childhood home away from the village, and into the town. I did not do especially well at school. My school reports were consistent in the remark "could do better if he applied himself". I hated summer sports because of my weight, and I always tried to skip the compulsory shower due to my poor body image. However, these experiences were compensated by the advantages gained in rugby. I can remember running at full pelt and knocking an opponent clean off his feet. Speed and weight can be unstoppable forces. When combined, the two they can be devastating. I had good school and social relationships with the Physical Education team. They were always friendly and ready to assist. I did not tell them about my body issues and instead placed myself in awkward positions where I would fail at completing the activity.



Climbing ropes were especially hideous, as was the indoor gym set-up for the obstacle course, consisting of benches, climbing frames and ropes, and hoops. However, indoor murder ball was okay due to my weight advantage. Physical education could be both fun and humiliating, depending on the activity and my ability to perform the tasks to a certain level of competence, and therefore, be relatively invisible and normative within my peer group. At school I was a bully, and I was bullied. I would often find myself wanting to confront those who tormented me at school, and to sincerely apologise to those I physically and emotionally hurt.

At school, drama was my saviour. I loved improvisation and being creative. I had visions of treading the boards, but lacked confidence due to my weight. I was teased for dancing. I was teased for being the fat kid. More often than not, I was to be found rigging and focusing lights for school productions and quickly established myself as a lighting technician at the local theatre. I worked there during school holidays and during term time (unbeknown to both school and parents until now). I had a healthy work ethic that saw me work in a variety of settings. I had a sweet tooth and as a paperboy, I can remember eating bars of marzipan covered in dark chocolate before getting home for breakfast. At home, stealing food was a childhood past time, especially if mum baked one of her fruitcakes. I would offer to make coffees, and whilst the water was boiling, cut a slice and slip it under my bed for later. (It was not until writing this do I understand that stealing food, particularly sweet foods, has survived as a habit into adulthood. Stealing for me was about getting one over the system. I also had the conscious thought that I was owed something, and that I needed to take what I was owed through covert techniques). Chocolate was my friend. I ate a lot of fattening foods.

Theatre was to be my career. I went to drama school and completed two years of stage management. As a stage manager, I had to learn to run a movement class. Here again my weight, or rather, the size of my stomach, was an in-joke amongst the dance teachers. Before completing the diploma I toured England with a couple of theatre shows. Musical theatre was my passion. I was now 20 and had never read a fiction novel, or textbook. I had managed to get this far without reading a solitary book. My political view was

conservative (neo-liberal/classical liberal), I can remember Margaret Thatcher coming to power and supporting her from the sidelines. I would have discussions with labour supporters, but be unaware of what I was discussing. Truthfully, politics was a mystery to me and I preferred it that way.

My father had immigrated to Australia when I was about 14, I was now 20 and wanting to join him. I left England in December 1986, and arrived in Perth. It was not until I met the crew at the Regal theatre that I started to read books (for the first time). The genre I choose was fantasy fiction and I immersed myself in the adventures of dwarfs, goblins and wizards. I toured Australia, and at some point, decided to quit theatre and start studying. I came to look upon my studies as a means to gain more knowledge about the world in which I lived, and how it could be changed to better reflect the needs of people which were clearly not being met. My ideological position had obviously changed but I did not recognise it at the time. I did not have the language to explain it to someone. At this time, I had a shaved head, and had lost 66 kilos in weight. I had gone from 154 kilos to 88. Sydney's bright lights, house parties, illicit drugs, low food intake and swimming had taken their toll.

I started a BA in Psychology, and switched to Archaeology and Anthropology very quickly. I also started an Arts degree in History, both European and Australian. It was at this point in time, that I met and started working with Val. He was a twelve-year boy, coping with autism. I had never met anyone like him. I was employed to take care of Val whilst his mother either worked or took respite. The first time I met Anne, we had an emotional heart-to-heart, and I was asked to go out with her and Val the following day to trial the experience this kind of work would bring. We all had to experience each other, before our relationships could begin, and before Anne would consent to employ me.

Val, Anne and I went to a local shopping centre for lunch. Within ten minutes I was fascinated with this young man's behaviour, and being the centre of attention for me from passers-by was difficult to cope with. I then realised that when out in public space we were going to be extremely visible. I can remember saying to Anne, "How does he

process information? I would give my right arm to get inside his head and experience the way he processes information". I believed this was the key to working with Val. Of course, this was unachievable, and in light of the comment, devalues Val's ability to function in a world he was attempting to control. Control was the pinnacle of any relationship with Val. He had been able to control people through a variety of behaviours including pulling their hair. I had no hair to pull and Anne was intrigued to observe what would ensue.

It was the experience of seeing what life was like for a family dealing with a teenager, coping with autism, which prompted my departure from other degree courses and entrance into Youth Work. The times spent with Val incorporated every possible emotion, from high elation, when he rode his push bike on the road for the first time, to complete frustration and anger over his inability to be sensitive to other people's needs. However, those 18 months were remarkable and I worked with people who were committed to Val, Anne and their family. I ended up studying Youth Work with the vision of making a difference to the lives of young people with disabilities.

Youth Work changed my attitude to life. It also equipped me with the tools and language to define myself as a worker, and person. Ideologically, I established myself as an anarchist with strong new-age beliefs. The anarchist part serves to make power relations visible and transparent. The new-age value system structures my day-to-day interactions and work practice. I worked full-time whilst completing my degree as a full-time student. I had a number of jobs, all within the disability field. I was a community access officer, a nursing assistant, and a supervisor of a community home for young people with autism. I started working with a young man with cerebral palsy as his leisure buddy and was amazed at the public's reactions to us, and our reactions to them. I was fascinated by how we were constructed and how Elton and I constructed those we met. My Honours year was spent researching the experiences of Elton, and able-bodied people as they interacted in public space (See Lenney, 1999, Lenney & Sercombe, 2002). I was introduced to interactionist theory at this time.

With the past behind me, I started the process for this study. My interest in men's body image and identity construction is informed, as you can tell, by my personal experiences. My interest in difference, inclusion and exclusion is informed through my work practice. I am currently employed to tutor Indigenous students at several maximum-security prisons and I continue to support Elton visit various pubs, cafes and clubs. This year (2004) I will be supporting him attend Australian Rules Football. I currently lecture in political ideology to first year undergraduate students enrolled in the Social Sciences and Humanities, and I am starting to push myself into several other disciplines, one of which is Health, and the other is Physical Education (activity).

This research was first designed to explore women's body image contextualised to weight and their experiences whilst looking for work. The literature review was delivered to Howard within three weeks and we met to discuss the way forward. It was apparent that the feminist critique of body image was extensive where women were concerned, but when we decided to look at men we discovered their body-image issues were essentially tied to developing muscles and perpetrating physical violence. There was little research, at that time, that contextualised men's body-image and identity, to weight gain and loss. I disclosed my experiences of weight gain and loss to Howard and we decided to change the research to focus on men. The research question took some four weeks to form. The proposal was well under way when Howard informed me that he was leaving to take a leap of faith and return to the field. At this juncture I had been supervised by Howard for two years, including my Honours year, and I was apprehensive about placing my work in front of other staff members. I was being forced into a vulnerable position which could mean rejection and ultimately, internal humiliation.

The search for another supervisor began in earnest. Howard would co-supervise with the intention to return after a year. Associate Professor Lynne Hunt emerged as the primary staff member to supervise me. The proposal was handed in within six months under Lynne's supervision and I started data collection December 2001. This was completed by March 2002. I had transcribed the data and handed over copies to Lynne, and Howard, for coding. I simultaneously coded the same transcripts and we met to discuss some of

the results. It was an anxious time. The data was rich and we all picked codes that were similar in content but framed using different language. Lynne advised me to keep a journal of my thoughts and feelings for this audit trail. The following account describes many abstract jottings in the journal, culminating in this, the finished product.

### **The PhD journal**

The analysis of the data was completed manually following the principles of computer software programs that deconstruct data into main themes that are then divided into sub-themes that represent patterns in the responses. In the journal I switch from big picture framing, seeing the data as dominant symbols, to individual and subjective frames of reference. This led to some abstract, but insightful theorising.

I initially saw the data represented by a symbol: the symbol 'V' to be more precise. I began to explore this symbol in terms of my ideological position, and the way I view social change occurring. Visually I saw society as an open-ended cone, or V. By using this sign to represent the social and the individual I may be open to criticism that it is a bottom-up framework. I understand this criticism. The V does not indicate a hierarchical power relationship, yet the use of this particular V does indicate, for the purposes of this study, a power relationship of agency. The thickness of the lines reflects that relationship. The thinner line symbolises the individual. The fatter line symbolises a group of individuals.

The fatter line symbolises a group of individuals, yet fatness goes against the social construction of the norm. The thinner line, in this context, represents an individual, and most people want to be thinner. That is, thinner than they are now. The V symbolises for me the individual against the group, and the normative standards for body image as represented in its visual structure presented here. When bisecting the sign/symbol down the middle the self becomes reflected as both fat and thin. This symbolised the experiences of the seven.

At the base point of the 'V' stands the individual. The top is open-ended and represents the social (the social is infinite). The individual is located at the central point, found at the bottom, yet as he moves upward he encounters others. The symbol represents the constant change and movement people can undergo in their relationships. They may travel upward and outward. As a person does this, they can expand their social encounters. At other times, the person may travel in reverse and minimise their social encounters depending on circumstance, context and self interpretation. However, the person may also remain static at any point in time. Emotionally, there is the feeling of withdrawing, expanding and stillness.

The symbol, or sign 'V' has, as yet, not been placed into an environment. Or has it? It has if it is agreed that this text forms an environment. It fits within a structure. It resembles other signs and symbols within the same structure. And it has been given meaning within this structure. It is unable to stand alone without structure because otherwise it would not be here. It would be invisible. Structure gives it meaning. If the V was printed on a white background and presented to you, and you were asked what does this mean to you, you would have to draw upon a social structure to give it meaning. Meaning is socially constructed and reached by consensus. Alone, in a vacuum, the individual finds no meaning to who, or what he is. To find meaning for oneself, one has to interact with others. These abstract jottings refer to the way I see the world as an interactionist, using a specific symbol to convey my meaning. I felt that each participant described their experiences in a social and subjective context as withdrawing (when fat) and expanding (when thin) in their interactions.

Watching a TV advertisement, July, 2000, I was stunned to watch as two men sat in a sauna, their bellies uncovered, one fat and one thin. The punch line was "lose face ...or lose weight". The fat belly was referred to as a joke. This advertisement, in conjunction with reflection upon Mead's words, lead me to posit the question "by changing the outward/inner appearance of the body, are we able to change our self concept"? This question underpins those sections dealing with self-constructions and social identities.

The first six transcripts from the pilot study, gave rise to several design flaws, and these were discussed, but at this time, some of the themes started to emerge as well, especially, the social identities framing the *jolly fat man*, and the *Stud*. I reflected on what I had heard, and again listened to the interviews. I was listening for indications that I was leading participants to tell my story of weight gain and loss, and not theirs. I felt these two identities were identities I had experienced. I resolved this by admitting to myself that the first impressions of the data would likely reflect my experiences as I identified with the participants' words. I needed to work at setting my experiences aside as I listened to, and transcribed, the data. At this time, I was hearing that regardless of sexual preferences, the sexual self needed to feel desired and see itself desired. The objective being needed to be accepted by a potential intimate sexual partner. The data were already indicating that men's body image was important to them when entering the sexual market and where a sense of belonging was of concern.

It is not within the scope of this research to determine whether the male is attractive or not. However, the attractiveness of the male body was brought to my attention by a *Seinfeld* episode where Elaine refers to the male body as utilitarian, "It's for getting around in, like a jeep. It's not attractive". The female form in this episode was constructed to be more attractive when compared to men's. The female body commands the gaze. This episode placed the male body as existing outside a sexual context. The rebuttal against feminist literature was obvious. However, though men's bodies are normally constructed as sexed bodies, which assume patriarchal power over women, there is no mention of whether, or what, male form women find attractive. The research was indicating that for men, attractiveness is something they are concerned about, albeit that for men in this study attractiveness was determined by their level of weight and body shape. These thoughts led to the idea that perhaps there was a link between ideology and body image. The men in the study were disclosing information that seemed to confirm this. Here was another theme for discussion, or at least a structural discourse that could be interwoven within other discourses.

I made a note to remember to talk about the positive and negative side of surveillance. Is surveillance always a bad thing? The underlying question for me seems to be: What has motivated the surveillance, or what motivates a person to observe another? The issue was greatly enhanced when I reflected upon the issue in terms of wellness, and maintaining a degree of consistency when others expect a person to act in a particular way. I had recently watched The Madness of King George. The king suffers a loss of identity, and when he seems to have recovered he is observed by his valet, "Your majesty seems more yourself". The reply to this was "Do I...yes I've always been myself even when I was ill only now I seem myself and that's the important thing. I've remembered how to seem". This dialogue fitted Mead's analysis of the self remaining static even in the face of adverse change. However, the passage also refers to the way people need to be 'seen' for who they are constructed to be. This passage highlighted the way the data was throwing up tensions between the individual and the social. This confirmed the ideological tension that exists within liberalism.

I started to see the data in everything around me. Films I watched, conversations I heard, were both watched and heard through the transcripts. I would be dancing at a nightclub and be thinking of the data in terms of what I was seeing transpire on the dance floor, and as I watched different sized bodies interact. Beer coasters were used to jot down structural ideas, sentences and abstract thoughts. Some of these survived, and some were lost in the wash.

I took a conspiracy theorist position when I wrote in the journal that 'social information that emphasised weight issues were distracting you away from social issues'. The person is here directed to look at themselves and often to disapprove of what they see. This thought aligns with some feminist writers on the issue of body image and women. This led onto a "what about" question. How would this apply to an exhibitionist; who looks for and needs the attention of others? To a lesser degree, how much do people attempt to escape the observations of others, or conversely attempt to attract the observations of others? The interactionists seem to sway towards the proposition that life is geared towards a continual performance. I started to look about me and observe others to see if I



was being observed. I found that performance is more than likely geared towards specific audiences rather than a general audience. I was made more aware of this when participants discussed their desirability to the other, and to themselves. Their immediate social groups seemed to be the definitive groups for their observable performances.

Ideologically, I sit left-field. My ideological viewpoint has affected the way I see the data. It confirmed for me that people do not trust difference, or at least are prejudiced in their construction of the other who is different to them. I was horrified to hear of the persecution participants had experienced. I felt, at the time, persecution of the individual seems to reinforce the group's normality. The power relationship that ensues depicts one as abnormal and one as normal. I could not understand how normality was being constructed unless it was, as Foucault asserts, a product of State, or professional power. These thoughts lead onto the proposition that information passed through State institutions can be used to assert one's power over another at an interpersonal level.

The data was throwing up issues to do with personal and physical space. Bourdieu's habitus led me to think about this, in terms of the commodity of space. Technology is being used to reduce time spent producing, to reduce the energy needed to produce, and in the process, human beings seem to be reproducing at a phenomenal rate. The issue of space, and its use in Western capitalism, would have to be one of the main sociological issues under current discussion. However, the results were pointing towards space as an instrument of reflection, rather than as an economic consideration. I determined to take these paths when discussing the issue in text.

May, 2001. I began to develop the view that the senses are of primary importance when self and social identities are constructed and I could see the link between the interactionists and Foucault's work on social surveillance. I started to look at the work of authors to discover which sense they predominantly used in their analysis and presentation of results. I came to see that the senses, for me, were higher-level constructs located in individual bodies. The way people hear and see things is highly subjective, yet

not socially exclusive. This led to the proposition that people discriminate through sensory perception. People sense difference.

Media advertisements were all saying the same: men need to exercise and develop the 'V' shape, in order to attract women. The message also seemed to infer that people, when exercising, need to be self-conscious about their body. In this context, I read the message as saying men need to look good when exercising. At this juncture, June, 2001. I accepted a one-year appointment and deferred my thesis for a year.

During this year I spent most of my time researching issues to do with men's health and continued to lecture part-time. My partner asked me if I would be interested in spending a weekend cross-dressing. She would dress and experience masculinity as projected by a woman, and I would dress and experience femininity as projected by a man. I agreed. We would shop together and I would figure out how to have breasts. I shopped around for prosthetic breasts but they were too expensive. I improvised by using small flour sacks placed into a bra. I can remember shopping for our outfits. I was absorbed in the process, but it became abundantly clear that as a man shopping for woman's clothing I sucked at picking clothes that were the right size. I needed clothes in the size range of 22-24, yet I was drawn to the 8s and 10s (Reflection on this experience suggests I have a sexual preference for size 8-10 women).

The actual experience of cross dressing was terrifying. As soon as I put on my outfit with breasts, and shoes, I immediately felt like I was being constantly watched. This was unrelenting for the whole time I was dressed as a female. I realised that the experience I had whilst wearing women's clothing was a projection of what I felt it would be like to be a woman. Of course, I was going to feel more exposed to the gaze as I was a guy looking very awkward in women's clothes, but I also felt restricted by them. My partner experienced a freeing of herself as a man. This leads me to believe that men don't feel that they are constantly under surveillance, or are the objects of the other's sexual gaze, unless there are deeper issues to do with how they view themselves. Weight was certainly

one of those issues. When fat, I feel like I want to hide from the world. When thin, I can do anything. This is awful!

July, 2002. I returned to my thesis and re-read the transcripts. The following notes in my journal describe the way I was seeing the themes to be discussed. The invisible body is the body beneath the skin. Its health is reliant on technology to see its ability to function. The functioning body is visually, and audibly accessible to scientific methods. I recently had an echocardiograph (ECG), and to my delight observed and heard my heart in action. Normally, people are unable to do this without the assistance of machines. People cannot see internal illness without this assistance. Normally, the first indication of an illness is felt through the body as pain, or through observing the decline in one's ability to do something physical. My father observed that over a three-month period his ability to lift a television set declined as the cancer in his body affected his strength. He told me of pains in his back, chest and shoulders. I observed his physical decline, and weight-loss, whereas my step-mother and adopted sister could not. The way people look is contextual not only on socialisation but also on their emotional connections, or attachments to the subject/object under their gaze.

May, 2003, I have just re-read this section and seen another meaning for the symbol 'V'. Perhaps it is subconsciously a masculine identity symbol, or I am simply conforming to social information framing the male body as representing the V shape? It seems the social and the individual cannot be separated easily. The body for me is the intermediate entity caught between these two forces. Sensory experience is constructed through socially gendered language. Yet it is often not the language that individuals would choose to explain their experiences. Their choice of words, when framing their bodily experiences, are loaded with social stigma and therefore social consequences. These reflections underpin the discussion chapter.

July, 2003. The first draft has been handed back. Lynne's main criticism was that the discussion trails off into streams of consciousness that do not refer to the results, the literature review or the theory. The journal entries become very negative and I start to

doubt my ability to finish the project. I re-read the first draft and agree with Lynne. As I read the discussion chapter I started to wonder what Lynne must have been thinking when reading this, and I start to get bored with what I was saying. I start the editing process and by September had edited out 26, 000 words and added 7, 000. I am now referring to the PhD process as a prison sentence (and a prison of sentences).

However, I start to watch a lot more sport. In particular, the finals play-offs between the top eight clubs in the Australian Football league (AFL). I realise that I have left out some major themes to be discussed with reference to men, sport and masculine identity. I start to address this and the thesis starts to take on a new form. Mead's position starts to be clearer as I listen to the way commentators frame individual players and realise their social identities were being framed without any input from the players. Players have little to no control when sporting commentators remark upon their abilities and skills, even the player's thoughts are commented upon. Sporting commentators are really saying this is how they would think or feel given the same situation. I reflect on the way participants reacted to social projections framing them in a certain ways and their lack of control to control the way people looked and talked about them.

Sporting male bodies, in the context of the AFL, are muscular bodies displaying strength, stamina and speed. Coaches use strategic match-ups to counter the skill, strength and abilities of the opposing side. There is a lot of aggression in the sport. I conclude that aggression on the sporting field is legitimised within a capitalist society where fame and recognition is desirable, and pays well. As I watched the games I came to see sport in a new light. Games were driven by desperation and the desire to win. In the context of the game, male aggression is condoned. The problem from an interactionist perspective is when this aggression, as part of a sporting identity, is incorporated into their other social identities and therefore expressed during their interpersonal relationships.

What goes on, on the sporting field, needs to remain there. This highlighted for me the performance-role metaphors used by interactionists which are criticised by non-interactionists. Performances occur in everyday life and occur, as sporting matches do,

within a set of socially defined rules, laws and conventions. There is no set script: each match/interaction is an improvisation with no conclusive outcome already pre-determined unless the match or interaction is *fixed* before hand, and therefore acted out. These comments form the foundation for the re-drafted discussion chapter.

I make these journal jottings as upper level concepts to be filtered into the discussion. "Your power comes from your emotions". Emotions play such an important part in our identity constructions. I ask myself why academics seem driven to dismiss them ... as yet I have no real answer except that perhaps they are just placed in the too-hard basket and that the intellect, being rational, aligns more with the concept of objectivity than emotions allow for.

"What is reflective of me will exist because I reflect the social environment I exist in. We are but imperfect copies of what has preceded us, we are copies of copies". Computer copying programs cannot copy something perfectly. There are always imperfections and this reflects the imperfect minds that created them. Likewise, no one individual embodies the entirety of human thought. The perfect society does not exist where people live in unity with each other. Imperfections are passed on, discrimination, alienation, oppression, and domination are all concepts passed on in the process of socialisation. If there is to be unity in thought, unity in social living, harmony, if you like, then an ideological shift will have to occur at a social level as like nothing seen before. Until this occurs individuals have to make a decision about how they will gaze upon the other, and discuss the other, and place the other in relation to themselves. These jottings indicate my lofty ideals and left-field ideological beliefs. I have attempted to keep them out of the discussion, yet they do form part of the criticism levelled at liberalism and its inability to bring about harmony in the face of promoting competition between individuals and groups.

October, 2003. I have just re-read the interactionists position on static self-constructs as proposed by Mead and Sullivan. In my journal I write: I cannot substantiate their claim, and yet it is one that I believe to be true. I strongly believe that subjects will filter out information to sustain their self construct be it negative or positive, thereby remaining

static, and closed to new experiences (Sullivan's position, and a position supported by Taylor and Bogdan, and myself in 1999). I am in the position to re-think the influence of social information to direct identity construction where the self responds to its social environment. There is not enough evidence to suggest that participants are reacting to their social environments based on childhood experiences or constructions. I would need to explore these constructions and relate them to the way participants reacted to the social environments as adults. There is some evidence to support the claim that participants felt unaccepted as children contextualised to sexual and racial taunting, and where there was emotional and or physical distance from their fathers. However, it is not conclusive.

October 2003. I am in the midst of reading Susan Bordo's *The male body*. It has caused me to think about the films that have influenced me in relation to how I view men and women. I grew up in the time of Westerns and war movies, and Prince Charming saving the princess. However, I was most taken with musicals from 'Top Hat', to 'Paint Your Wagon'. I remember men being active and handsome and women being passive and submissive. Romance was set around an awkward beginning with a happy-ever-after ending. Or, saving the day required doing battle with formidable enemies. However, as Susan has experienced, memories of childhood take on a different meaning when read using conceptually different languages. I am interested to explore these movie memories again with the aim of observing and exploring my experiences, and how men in movies have influenced my masculine and feminine constructions. One such man is Johnny Depp. He is by far the best-looking actor I have seen, and foremost, the best male character actor I have been enchanted by. In reference to this study, symbolic conceptualisations of what real men are supposed to be like may have been influenced by other mediums which were not explored, and in hindsight may have been explored if I had the identity model at hand to work through with participants. For example, I could have explored their most memorable movie in relation to masculine body image and bodyweight.

November 21<sup>st</sup>. It is one week before the second draft is due and I have again been thinking about the study and more importantly: will the research be understood? I have become more aware of how identified I am to my working-class heritage. I mentioned

that at school I avoided reading like the plague. My use of vocabulary, writing style, use of tense, and grammatical mistakes can all be linked to this, and I take full responsibility for it. It is therefore important to note that both my supervisors have suggested alterations to the text. I also asked for editorial comments from two external readers (Bethany and Peter). Both of which highlighted some areas where I could improve the text. It was made clear that acceptance of these changes was a choice I had to make. I have made this a work practice of mine when tutoring and editing the work of undergraduate students. It is essential that students take responsibility, and 'own' their work. I frame myself as a practitioner first and an academic second, though as I have made clear the two cannot be separated. I can see no point in theorising about something unless its practical use can be made clear. There is a pragmatic approach to my studies that underscores what I study and why.

Xmas 2003. I have just met with John, my new associate supervisor, and discussed revisions to the theory chapter. He has a keen eye and we discuss the concept of self and the rewards to be gained when claiming a national identity that is part of your history, but not part of your lived experience. The second draft is given to Lynne, and is back within the week. Lynne's first point in her response to the second draft reads: "It's all here. Results chapters basically done but may need stuff on control-diet to be tightened". There are also some structural issues to be resolved, and I am gently reminded to stay focused on the issue at hand: that is, expand upon concepts of masculinity, masculine identities, fatness, thinness, self and social control across the private and public divide. These structural themes are used as the sub-headings for the last part of the discussion chapter. I am also cautioned to stop reading literature and theory as the process will likely run away with me in tow, and there are deadlines looming. I am finding I want to keep reading. "Is what I have here enough?" I read Lynne's caution just before heading-off to my favourite second-hand bookshop. I return with nine (9) more books on the subjects under discussion (Laing, Goffman, and authors on self and identity). I am looking for more information on self and identities across the private and public divide.

Flash back, December 1989. I was driving from Sydney to Perth. I was coming home a thinner man by some sixty (60) kilograms. I get home and my father upon seeing me thin for the first time, immediately sits down and asks for a stiff drink. "Who the hell are you?" he says. My step-grandmother takes me to one-side and asks whether I need to see a doctor and because I am poor [a student], she'll pay the bill. In her next sentence she asks whether I have AIDS. The actors I am working with comment on my tight arse, and I get together with a dancer (she's my first real girl-friend and I am now 23). This research is not my story of fatness and thinness.

However, I can see points where my story, and the stories of the fourteen, converge, only to separate under different contexts. I had forgotten about stealing food as a child and teenager, and my mum hiding food until a secondary participant mentioned it during her interview (being a mother herself). I immediately identified with the seven over their clothing issues, and controlling their food consumption whilst, in some cases, maintaining a high-impact exercise regime. Primarily, I lost weight due to health reasons and a fear of dying. I did not lose weight to compete on the sexual market; although, I did believe that women (and myself) found my fatness unattractive.

2003, December 26<sup>th</sup>. My bodyweight has increased over this writing process by some thirty (30) kilograms. I started four years ago weighing approximately ninety (90) kilograms. I am now just over one-hundred and twenty (120) kilograms. Firstly, I noticed a lethargic mood take control. I stopped physical exercise, except for walking the dogs (40 minutes a day). As my bodyweight increased, I experienced body-aches. The pain in my back intensified. My knees gave way on several occasions. I avoided stairs and took lifts. I became out of breath walking in the spring and summer heat. My sugar in-take increased. I discussed my weight gain with my partner at the time. She and I experienced my sexual drive decrease. Except for the extra sugar, my diet remains the same, yet the time devoted to physical exercise has vanished in place of writing. Friends I have not seen for a while comment on my weight gain, and have a laugh at my expense. I have let myself go, yet I am now at that point where I can no longer bear to look at my fat stomach in the mirror. I observe myself make excuses for not attending social functions



because I am fat, I witness my motivation to be socially active diminish. Even an invitation to a New Year's party where I have the opportunity to meet old friends acts as a reminder that I am fat and should not attend because I do not want to be seen this way. I make the decision to lose weight. I have already started to swim more regularly (I am self-conscious about my fat stomach), and plan to start ball-rooming dancing and Tai-chi next year (2004). I am motivated to lose weight again for health reasons and to alleviate my aches and pains. I also want to look slim.

December 28<sup>th</sup>. I have just returned from the last instalment from *Lord of the Rings*. Return of the King was an emotional experience (between you and I this version could have finished when Aragon rightly proclaims "You should bow before no-one" and then everyone kneels before the four Hobbits of the Shire). I remember everyone laughing (along with Bilbo) in the cinema, as Gollum, throughout the second and third movies refers to Sam as the 'fat' hobbit. I observed Sam for signs of self-conscious behaviour over his bodyweight. There were some querying looks from Sam in response to Gollum's words, but no rejection of the joker identity now projected. The Fellowship of the Ring is finished, but I am taken with the concept of 'fellowship'. People coming together, in this case, to fight for a common cause. In an emotional reflective state I am transported back to my first Postgraduate seminar. I can remember the Deputy Vice Chancellor talking, at that time (1999), about the relationships between students and their supervisors, as a marriage (some of which can sour). He continued to tell us that his first draft was returned with the remarks 'start again' written on it. I started to wonder what I had done when deciding to continue with my education. I have been extremely fortunate with my choice of supervisors (Howard, Lynne & John).

I have already documented some of Lynne's replies to the first and second drafts. However, I am nearing the end of the process and I need to sum up my learning curve under her supervision. The PhD process has been defined for me as my ability to receive highly contextualised, constructive, criticism. Firstly, Lynne has given me extremely insightful criticisms of my work, and working process. Secondly, she provided with a number of visualisations which have been incorporated into the work (the thematic tree),

and "visualise the results chapter as a spring-board into the discussion". Both of these assisted me greatly when lost in my writing. She has kept me focused and kept me on track by being both expressive and straight forward. Her availability was continuous. Lastly, and most importantly, Lynne suggested writing under sub-headings in the discussion chapter. The PhD process, in this case, producing a thesis of about 90, 000 words, comes after a Honours thesis of 30, 000 words, which is preceded by essays of not more than 2,500 words. I have not used sub-headings to direct my focus before and I found it very useful. In other words, I feel Lynne summed up my strengths and weaknesses (as an under-graduate student) and taught me how to be a more confident writer (and I have tears in my eyes as I type this. I am an emotional man and it is hard to suppress emotions when needing to create the illusion of academic objectivity). With complete gratitude "Thank you Lynne for your work on this project". Therefore, this thesis symbolises the synergy between student and supervisors. This is for me the end result of a 'fellowship' that started four years ago.

## Appendix 2

### Introductory letter and Information package

Date:

Re : Introductory letter.

Dear,

I have obtained permission from Edith Cowan University to conduct a study of men's experiences after significant weight loss. I am writing to invite you to participate in the research project entitled: "A softer side to men".

My name is Michael Lenney, I am a PhD student, studying at Edith Cowan University. This study has evolved in response to my personal battle with weight loss and gain. As a consequence, I am interested in what happens to other men, after weight loss has occurred. Participants will be interviewed with the purpose of exploring their experiences after weight loss. The questions will focus on how participants have dealt with their weight loss. In particular, participants will be asked to discuss their social relationships and encounters with others.

Further details regarding the research project may be found in the accompanying information sheet. After reading the material please feel free to telephone me at my home address to discuss any queries. I shall contact you in due time, to see if you are willing to be interviewed, and, if so, to arrange a mutually convenient interview time. It is envisaged, at this stage, interviews will either be conducted on one of the Edith Cowan campuses, or if participants prefer at their home.

Yours Faithfully,

**M. J. Lenney,**

B.S.Sc. (Honours 1<sup>st</sup> class).

## Information sheet.

### “A softer side to Men”

The aim, of this research is to piece together an encompassing picture of what life is like for participants after weight loss. Participants will be asked a series of questions about their interactions, in an attempt to explore *their* self-image and social relationships.

There are two groups of participants for the study:

- 1) A primary participant is a male who has lost twenty kilograms (or more) of body fat. Primary participants are asked to provide a ‘before’ and ‘after’ photograph for discussion. Photographs will not be kept by the researcher. Primary participants will be interviewed twice. In the first interview participants will be asked to focus on their experiences prior to weight loss. In the second interview participants will be asked to focus on their experiences after weight loss.
- 2) A secondary participant, is a ‘significant other’. They should have known the primary participant for a minimum of three years. Secondary participants should also have known the primary participant prior to, during, and after weight loss. A secondary participant may be a partner, close friend, or other family member. Secondary participants will be interviewed once, but the interview will be split into two sections. Firstly, discussion will focus on prior to and after weight loss, after which the discussion will move to experiences after weight loss.

The interview will be informal in nature, conversational in style, and be based on the lived experiences of participants. All participants are assured complete anonymity, and will be given a false name during the interview process. Interviews will be recorded. No individual will be identified in the interview. Each tape will be identified with a code number only. Confidentiality and anonymity is assured with the use of code numbers and pseudonyms. The interviews may be transcribed. In the event of this, all discs will be marked with a code number only. This eliminates any possibility of participants being identified. All recordings will be secured in a locked cabinet at my home address, and no one else will have access to them. Participants will be sent copies of the transcripts for signed approval. The only identifying feature of the research will be the naming of Perth as the locale for the study.

The implications for men after weight loss have not been investigated. There is limited research that seeks to understand the experiences of men after weight-loss, and whether

men are now facing new problems concerning their image, appearance and body size. This research is breaking new ground in men's studies. It is a unique opportunity for you to discuss your experiences of weight loss to further knowledge on this topic. The results of the study may also be useful to men currently undergoing weight loss in dealing with the significant social changes they may undergo.

At the time of the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form, a copy of which is enclosed for your information. The information package does not need to be returned. I would be happy to discuss any queries you have with regard your part in the study. Please feel free to call me at home on [REDACTED]

**Michael Lenney.**

## CONSENT FORM.

### “A softer side to men ”

The aim, of this research, is to piece together an encompassing picture of what life is like for participants after their weight loss. Participants will be asked a series of questions about their daily interactions, in an attempt to explore *their* self-image and social relationships. Primary participants are the focus of this research, as such, secondary participants are being asked to describe their experiences of the other (primary participant). The secondary participant will be asked a series of questions with the aim of piecing together their experiences of the interactions between primary participants and others. The secondary participants *self* image is not the focus of the study,

The purpose of this study is to investigate, examine, and understand, how men experience themselves, and how they react to others after achieving a socially constructed normative body.

1. All recorded material gathered for this study will be kept confidential and will not be released for public use.
2. All material will be stored in a locked cabinet for a period of five years, and thereafter all material will be destroyed.
3. Participants will not be identified in the study. Names will not be used, nor will any other identifying material be included.
4. During the storage period no other researcher will be permitted to use the material for whatever purpose.
5. Quotes from the interview may be used, but the original tape recording of interviews will not be used by anybody other than the researcher. In addition, no one will have access to the data, other than myself, and those supervising the research.
6. Participants will be sent transcripts for signed approval.

I \_\_\_\_\_ understand the purpose and aim of this research as explained by Mr. M. J. Lenney. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study during the initial stages. However, should I choose to withdraw after analysis has begun I understand that I am to enter into negotiations with the intention to resolve any misunderstandings between myself, and the researcher, over the use of material. I here by give my consent for the interview data to be used for the purpose of this study and any subsequent publications.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date, \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent's signature.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date, \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature.



## Appendix 3

### The Interview Prompts

## Interview prompts

### First Interview. Primary participants.

1. (Using the before photograph). Tell me how you got to be this big?
2. Tell me what life was like for this person?
3. At this time, tell me about your relationships with people?
4. Being this size, in what ways did you feel normal?
5. In what ways did you compare yourself to others?
6. Did you experience discrimination being this size?
7. What was being fat like for you?
8. Can you give me any examples of how you were discriminated against?
9. How did people relate to you being this size?
10. In what ways did you experience avoidance, did others avoid you?
11. In what ways were you self-conscious of your size?
12. How did this affect you?
13. Can you identify any key incidents that upset you when you were this size?
14. Can you identify any key incidents that were pleasurable when you were this size?
15. To what extent did you feel like a valued member of society being fat?
16. In what ways did being this size affect your: health, family relationships, leisure, religion, shopping, social outings.
17. How did being big affect your sexual relationships?
18. What advice did you receive on your fatness?
19. At this time how did you define yourself as a male?
20. What did you believe being thin would be like?

### Interview prompts for second interview (Primary participants).

1. (Using the after photograph) Tell me about how you got to be this size?
2. Tell me what is life like for this person?
3. Tell me about your relationships with people now you are thinner?
4. What does it mean to you to be thinner?
5. How do you compare yourself to others?
6. How do you regard fat people now?
7. How do you regard thin people now?
8. In what ways do you experience discrimination now you are thinner?
9. Give me examples of how
10. What do like about being thin?
11. How do people relate to you being the size you are now?
12. Can you identify any key incidents that upset you whilst being thinner?
13. Can you identify any key incidents that have been pleasurable whilst being thinner?
14. In what ways has being thinner affected your; relationships at work, your health, family relationships, leisure activities, religion, shopping, social outings.
15. How has being thinner affected your sexual relationships?
16. To what extent did you feel like a valued member of society being thin?
17. In what ways do people give you advice about staying thin?
18. Has thinness lived up to your expectations?
19. At this time how did you define yourself as a male?
20. How do you define yourself now?

## Interview prompts for secondary participants.

### First section.

1. (Using the before photograph) Tell me what you thought and felt about this person in the photograph.
2. Tell me about the relationship you had with this person when they were fat.
3. When he was fat, based on what you saw, how did he socialise with others?
4. When he was fat, are there any key incidents that stand out in your mind, that upset you?
5. When he was fat, are there any key incidents that stand out in your mind, that were pleasurable for you?
6. Tell me what you thought and felt as he started to lose weight.
7. Tell about your relationship with him as he started to lose weight.
8. Explain to me, from the impressions you received, how did this person change in response to losing weight.

### Second section.

9. (Using the after photograph) Tell me what you thought and felt about this person in the photograph.
10. Explain to me what differences have you seen in this person since achieving a thinner body.
11. Tell me about your relationship with this person now he has a thinner body.
12. Tell me about the reactions you have had to this person's weight loss.
13. How do you think his appearance has changed since losing weight?
14. Now he is thinner, based on what you have seen, how does he socialise with others.
15. Explain to me, from impressions you receive, the value of his weight loss.
16. Now he is thinner, are there any key incidents that stand out in your mind, that upset you.
17. Now he is thinner, are there any key incidents that stand out in your mind, that were pleasurable for you.