Preadolescent Girls, Media, and the Presentation of Self: A Dramaturgical Perspective

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how preadolescent girls view themselves and the influence the media have in their lives. A series of individual and focus group interviews were held with five nine- and ten-year-old girls to hear their stories. Erving Goffman's interactionist perspective of the theatrical performance provided the framework from which to study the lives of these young girls. The dramaturgical concepts of performances, teams, regions, and impression management were central to the thesis, and outlined how the five girls interacted with, and made sense of, their world and the role of the media in it. In addition, the dramaturgical metaphor was employed throughout the thesis itself. While there was very little literature which examines the ways in which preadolescent girls are influenced by the mass media, the girls offered testimonials which clearly indicate the power and influence wielded by media in manipulating young girls' perceptions of themselves.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the five young girls that I had

the pleasure to meet. The stories these girls shared offer powerful messages to all of us.

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Act I - Introduction

*We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the
same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired.
For...while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness,
the weight of that silence will choke us
(Lorde, cited in Albert, 1996, p.5)*

Scene 1 - Contextualizing the Drama

The Issue

At what age does a girl child begin to review her assets and count her deficient

parts? When does she close the bedroom door and begin to gaze privately into the

mirror at contortionist angles to get a view from the rear, the left profile, the right,

to check the curve of her calf muscle, the shape of her thighs, to ponder her

shoulder blades and wonder if she is going to have a waistline? And pull in her

stomach, throw out her chest and pose again in a search for the most flattering

angle, making a mental note of what needs to be worked on, what had better

develop, stay contained, or else? At what age does the process begin, this

obsessive concentration on the minutiae of her physical being that will occupy

some portion of her waking hours quite possibly for the rest of her life?...How can

she be immune to the national celebration of this season's movie star sporting this

season's body, to the calendar art in the neighborhood gas station, to the

glamorous model in the high-fashion photograph...? (Brownmiller, 1984, p.25)

.   .   .   .   .

An announcement in class one morning was all that it took to remind me that it

was time to further explore and write about body image and the role the media plays in its development. A workshop was to be given again, one that I had attended a few months prior and left feeling very frustrated. The workshop about body image and self-esteem, led by a nutritionist and a psychologist, focussed on healthy food choices for young people. Many people in the group wanted to connect body image with food, suggesting that if children ate well they wouldn't have body image concerns. "It's not about food choices," I tried to explain to the group of educators. They were concerned that their students were not eating nutritious snacks, and as a result were perhaps not as healthy as they could be. "It's much greater than that. It's about the power of the messages we receive, and how we interpret them, believing that who we are is not good enough. We have to be tall, beautiful, thin, and perfect." I felt that I was not heard. This thesis is an opportunity to present a different perspective about body image.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how five preadolescent girls view themselves and the influence the media have in their lives. The stories of these five young girls is one step in the process of examining the strength the media possess in shaping the self-esteem of females. The importance, indeed the necessity, of confronting the role of the media in our lives has been articulated well by American feminist Jean Kilbourne (1989):

> If one accepts these mythical and degrading images, to some extent one actualizes
>
> them. By remaining unaware of the profound seriousness of the ubiquitous

influence, the redundant message and the subliminal impact of advertisements, we ignore one of the most powerful "educational" forces in the culture-one that greatly affects our self-image, our ability to relate to one another, and effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate (p.10).

My decision to hear the voices of nine and ten year old girls is in part a result of my reading *The Girl Within* by Emily Hancock. Hancock (1989) argues that within every woman there is a sense of freedom of self, first articulated between the ages of eight and ten, that gets severed in the process of growing up female. As I recall my own story, I think of a time of change when my sense of freedom was lost or put aside in order to begin wearing the masks which were mirrored for me in the media. I was in grade 4. I was nine years old, the age at which most girls experience a drop in confidence (Ayers, 1994). Like the women in Hancock's research, I am now seeking to reclaim the freedom that I felt as a young girl. Talking with nine and ten year old girls and hearing how they make sense of their world today is part of my journey, a journey to reclaim the girl within me, to return to a time where there was much less pressure to conform to a presentation of self so influenced by messages projected in the media.

As Henry Giroux (1997, p. 3) notes,

...it is crucial to experience one's relationship to the present from the inside, as part of an ongoing dialogue between oneself, the past, and the emergence of a present that dispenses with obligation to remember. More specifically, it is crucial to remind oneself that any discourse about youth is simultaneously a narrative about the ideologies and social practices that structure adult society.

We cannot completely separate the experiences of young girls from the experiences of adult women, as the messages portrayed in the media are meant to influence all females in our choices and values.

Although I reject the stereotyping and devaluing of females that begins with girls of a very young age, this rejection is the basis of an ongoing struggle. The media are a strong and oppressive force which appear to have tremendous control over the lives of females. Many women and young girls participate in perpetuating the power of these messages by conforming to their dictates without even realizing they are doing so. Part of my intent in this thesis is to name this oppressive force as it has played itself out in my life, and to compare this with the contemporary stories of five young girls.

The Framework

This work is an examination of how five preadolescent girls make sense of their roles in society and the influence the media have in determining how these roles are played out. In presenting this perspective, it is important to outline the framework within which this thesis is housed, that of symbolic interactionism, and more specifically, Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy metaphor.

Symbolic interactionism is a microsociology which studies relationships between individuals and the social settings in which they interact. "As social participants, each individual establishes a framework in which interaction takes place" (MacKinnon, 1987, p.10). Accordingly, truth and reality are not objective terms, imposed upon us from an outside source. Rather, they are created by individuals, and adhered in accordance with

their usefulness to the individual, discarded or modified as perspective changes. Meaning is constructed by individuals as they interpret situations; it is not static. Symbolic interactionism "pretends neither to absolute truth nor to an exhaustive interpretation of society...symbolic interactionists portray knowledge as an active process rather than as a state" (Rock, 1979, p.2).

Just as meaning is seen as a social construct in symbolic interactionism, so too is the self. The self is viewed as a process that changes with circumstances. "The self is taken to be a social construct, emerging from language, which lends order to all interactions. It is man made conscious of himself as a social process, and its basis is a reflexive turning back of mind on itself" (Rock, 1979, p.102). According to Goffman (1959), the self "is a *product* of a scene...it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" (p. 252-253, italics in original). Self arises in the process of experience (Mead, 1977).

The three tenets of symbolic interactionism, as outlined by Ritzer (1988) are central to this thesis:

(1). A focus on the interaction between the actor and the world; (2) a view of both the actor and the world as dynamic processes and not static structures; and (3) the great importance attributed to the actor's ability to interpret the social world (p.172).

I have selected Goffman's interactionist perspective of the theatrical performance as my framework from which to study the lives of five young girls. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman utilizes the dramaturgical metaphor to outline how

individuals become performers, engaging in certain behaviours that serve to guide and
control the impression others have of them. He identifies six dramaturgical principles
that guide the organization of social life. Four of these are central to this study;
performances, teams, regions, and impression management. Each of these is explored in
Act III - Perusing the Stage.

Goffman believed that social pressures lead people to present certain images of
self while concealing others, switching back and forth between different roles, depending
on the audience (Ritzer, 1988). Douglas (1994/1995) concurs and argues further that the
mass media play a powerful role in directing how people present themselves.

Along with our parents, the mass media raised us, socialized us, entertained us,
comforted us, deceived us, disciplined us, told us what we could do and told us
what we couldn't. And they played a key role in turning each of us into not one
woman but many women-a pastiche of all the good women and bad women that
came to us through the printing press, projectors, and airwaves...This has been one
of the mass media's most important legacies for female consciousness: the erosion
of anything resembling a unified self. Presented with an array of media
archetypes, and given morality tales in which we identify first with one type, then
another, confronted by quizzes in women's magazines so we can gauge whether
we're romantic, assertive, in need of changing our perfume, or ready to marry,
women have grown accustomed to compartmentalizing ourselves into a whole
host of personas, which we occupy simultaneously (p. 13).

In addition to utilizing the dramatugical metaphor for this inquiry into the lives of

young girls, I have also chosen to employ the metaphor throughout my writing, giving the

reader glimpses into some of my performances in my roles as writer and as director, in

this "drama."

Media

The stories we tell, the interactions in which we take part are influenced by family

and culture. We are unable to claim one true self, as the self is reinvented through our

interactions with others and with ourselves (Lerner, 1993). The self is a social construct,

with a myriad of ways to name or claim what is "true" or "real". Just as the self is

socially constructed, so too is mass media:

> The mass media construct reality into their products in a similar way that, from
>
> the time we are born, we construct our own vision of the world around us, and
>
> give the world meaning based on our observations and experiences. When these
>
> same observations and experiences are prefabricated for us by the media, it is
>
> possible to see that they contribute to the construction of our reality (Martin,
>
> 1997, p.5).

We participate in the mass media and interpret their role in our lives through our

interactions. Our interpretations are based on our needs and desires, our concerns, our

attitudes, beliefs, and our family, educational, and cultural environments. "Both

consciously and unconsciously, at both the personal and societal levels, media makes an

unparalleled cultural impact" (Bibby and Posterski, 1992, p.279).

Engaging girls in dialogue about the messages they encounter in the mass media,

how they interpret them, and their impact on girls' lives is an important step if we wish to empower girls to critically review these images and develop a body image and sense of self worth that are much less self-condemning. Advertising through the mass media is one of the most powerful educational forces in society today. We receive on average more than 2000 messages every day through the media (Kilbourne, 1989). These messages are not just selling products, they are selling values, beliefs and attitudes that have a strong influence in shaping our lives. "We have learned to wear a hundred masks, and to live with the fact that our inner selves are fragmented, some of the pieces validated by the mass media, others eternally ignored (Douglas, 1994/1995, p.270). It is important to provide girls with the opportunity to redefine their relationship with media messages.

Much has been written about adolescent girls and the impact of the media in their changing images of themselves (Ayers, 1994; Douglas, 1994/1995; Friedman, 1997; Hesse-Biber, 1996), but the issue as it pertains to preadolescent girls has received much less attention. As I recall my numerous conversations with girls on the elementary school playground, and my observations of nine and ten year old girls worrying obsessively about their clothes, eating diet food, and dyeing their hair, it appears that young girls, like adolescents and women, are influenced by the images of females presented in the media. Girls as young as five and six years old are expressing concerns about being fat and not being pretty enough for boys.

One day a couple of years ago, as I stood bundled in a long warm coat, hat, scarf, and mittens while on playground duty in the middle of winter, I had a conversation with two girls in grade 2 who were dressed inappropriately and complaining about the cold. I

asked them why they had not come to school dressed for the weather. They responded that "boys don't like girls who dress weird." Where had these beliefs originated from at such a young age? I believe one of the most powerful transmitters of messages in society today is the mass media, and that, as Brownmiller (1984) stated, girls, like women, begin interpreting these messages very early on.

In the First Person

In keeping with the symbolic interactionism concepts of meaning and perspective, I would urge you, as you read the remainder of this thesis, to keep in mind that "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are" (Anais Nin, cited in Albert, 1996, p.77). Everyone will bring his or her own interpretation to this text, depending on one's experiences and perspective.

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...the sharing of personal stories has the power to
change actions and thinking through the linking of commonalities
that we all share in the process of living our lives
(Shields, 1997, p.168)

Scene II - The Writer as Performer: Visiting the Backstage

Recently a close friend gave me a bookmark that contained a detailed explanation of my name. She excitedly proclaimed that she simply had to buy it for me because the description was such an apt one for my character. It included statements like "extremely well-read and intelligent," "profound conversationalist." Throughout my life there have

been others like my friend who have used similar language to describe me, words such as competent, articulate, self-confident, all adjectives to describe my front stage performances before a variety of audiences.

While the front stage performances have been played out over the years with apparent confidence and self-assuredness, the back stage has included some very different stories, often painful, lonely stories, and stories that have brought me to the writing of this work.

I was the second of four children in a lower middle class home with traditional gender roles; the girls did the cleaning and kitchen work, the boys took out the garbage, mowed the lawn, and went on the hunting trips. Having a sister eleven months older than me proved to be significant in many ways, the least of those not being the development of my body image. Lisa was always considered petite and I was the one with the "big bones". I suspect that anyone who has been referred to as big-boned would cringe along with me at the mention of these words. I believed Lisa always looked cute while I looked frumpy. I always admired her, because she was my older sister, but also because she was petite. I'll never forget how great I felt when I could finally wear her clothes. I was twenty-one years old, just beginning a Master's degree in Deaf Education, 128 pounds, and surviving on a diet which included coffee, cigarettes and pineapple juice as staples. While I can name it now as one of the unhealthiest periods in my life (there were a few of those times), at the time I defined the situation quite differently. My reality was that I could wear Lisa's clothes, I had 'arrived'! I made it, finally, fitting the image of the slim woman! (The eating disorder at this point was based on long periods of denial of food,

followed by binges, but I managed to stay slim all year, what a feat!)

My self worth took a huge plunge over the next year. I moved to Cape Breton to begin my first job as a teacher of the Deaf. It was near the end of the year, three months after getting married that I had a telephone conversation with the Director of the School for the Deaf.

. . . . .

*The letter arrived on a Monday afternoon in May 1987. It basically said thank-you for your services but the teacher you have been replacing will be returning in September. I called Dr. O. the next morning, before my visit to a school in North Sydney. I was told that at that time there were no available teaching positions for the fall. While disappointed with the news, I knew anything could still happen with jobs, so I wasn't yet too concerned. But I could have been in no way prepared for what followed, "You've sure packed on the weight since you got married". The most horrible statement anyone had ever made to me up to that point. I was **devastated!** I had fallen, I was a loser and was no longer worthy as a woman because I couldn't control myself. I was fat.*

. . . . .

My first recollection of being unhappy with how I looked was about grade four. I was the tallest in the class, and while I was not fat at that time I was still the biggest and believed that I weighed much more than other girls, and girls were not supposed to be big, especially not bigger than boys. I remember clearly avoiding any conversations that required any disclosure of weight because I was too embarrassed to be compared with

friends and classmates and have everyone find out I was heavier than everyone else in the class.

I recall my grandmother taking Lisa and me on what I considered a big shopping spree just before school began in grade five. I was almost ten years old. I may have been the biggest kid in the class, but at least I had some of the best looking clothes. The plaid, wide-leg pants with the cuff were especially cool, everyone thought so. The message I believed was 'if you want to be somebody, if you want to be popular and have friends, you have to look the part'. So for many years after that I devoured catalogues and magazines, looking for the right look, dreaming of looking like one of those models who were staring back at me...the look that would enable me to carry out the performance and become somebody special.

I got my first job, delivering newspapers, when I was eleven years old. From that first job I worked for many years so that I could buy clothes, a lot of clothes. I recall having Levi corduroy pants in every color that was made, and shirts to match. My friends reinforced this defining of self based on presentation of clothing, so I continued on an elusive quest to be 'somebody'.

Of course that somebody had to have silky straight hair, so I fought with the curls for many years. She had to be tall (I fit that bill OK while growing up), and she had to be skinny, which I never was. The struggle to conform to this image, one that the media were selling and I bought into, was one that I would be battling for many years to come, a battle which took me through Weight Watchers, at home as a preadolescent, and as a full member at fourteen, the Scarsdale diet, the tomato vegetable soup diet, and through a

long list of other diet programs until I arrived at the last one, the Diet Centre, at about the time that my eating disorder was totally out of control at twenty-three. As a newlywed I managed to hide both the laxatives and the cigarettes from my husband (the cigarettes would also help in the battle of the bulge, according to the advertisements).

.   .   .   .   .

The worst times began in 1987, around the time that I got married. The spring of that year was so awful!!! [My husband] was working in Halifax, which meant we were only together on weekends. Through the week I was smoking, which I had stopped doing months before, and I was eating and obsessing over food constantly. Those trips from Cape Breton to Dartmouth were horrific. I made so many stops along the way, beginning at McDonald's then on to Tim Horton's before even leaving Sydney. Then after crossing the causeway I'd stop again to buy more junk food. Antigonish was the next stop. More junk food, more fast food. Truro provided yet another eating marker. By the time I arrived in Dartmouth I was so sick, so tired, and so filled with self-loathing. But I had to put on the "Happy New Bride" performance for both families, even though I felt like I was dying inside, feeling so gross and disgusting. The laxatives provided some 'relief' when I was alone in my apartment, away from the scrutiny of others. Those little pills. How deceptive they are. Looking at them one would perhaps compare them to M & M's candies, a little smaller and certainly not the bright colors of candy, but I swallowed them like candy. The difference was that I was not eating a few candies. I was sitting on the bathroom floor, crying

uncontrollably, praying that the handful of little pills would soon provide me with some relief, take away the awful hatred I was feeling. After taking the pills I'd sit on the couch, curled up in a ball hugging a pillow, try to sleep, and wait for the pills to start working. The cramps, the writhing pain that would come within hours was terrible, but it could still never compare with the pain and loathing I was feeling about myself.

I wanted to stick my fingers down my throat, force all the food that I had consumed back out of my body, but I couldn't do it. On so many occasions, after binges, I would kneel over the toilet wishing I could disappear in its depths, trying to convince myself to just do it, but I could only fill the bowl with my tears. As I crouched there I would berate myself for not even having the courage to make myself throw up.

. . . . .

About a year later I began to address the eating disorder and my body image issues. While I managed to overcome the bulimia/compulsive eating issues, the notion of looking the part in order to be 'somebody' continued to play a prominent role in my thinking about my place in the world. The clothes had to be notable, the nail polish meticulously applied, the image perfected, just as I had learned to do for most of my life.

Pam Houston's story (cited in Albert, 1996, p.64) brings to light the pervasive nature of the drama often played out by women:

I am walking down the street in Manhattan, Fifth Avenue in the lower sixties,

women with shopping bags on all sides. I realize with some horror that for the last fifteen blocks I have been counting how many women have better and how many women have worse figures than I do. Did I say fifteen blocks? I meant fifteen years.

Deciding to no longer play out this drama has been a process, not an event, and while I have come to a new place of rejection of the media myths, their influence is not outside of me. The messages have become a part of me and sometimes continue to yell loudly in my ears. I strongly believe that females of all ages need to dialogue about these issues. Together we can create new messages, redefine our perspectives to fight those that bombard our senses from the media.

Goffman explained that "the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude...the entire back region will be kept hidden from them." (Goffman,1959, p.113). My life has been fraught with contradictions between the front stage performance and the back stage. During the same time that I was privately bingeing and purging, living a life of desperation and self-hatred, in 'public' I presented as a successful young woman. I had just completed a Master's Degree in Education of the Deaf, and had been the only graduate hired that year to teach deaf children in Nova Scotia. Soon after I moved to begin my new career I was approached by the athletics coordinator at a local fitness facility to see if I would be interested in teaching aerobics because she was so impressed with my personality and how I presented myself. For a young woman who had grown up feeling fat and awkward, this invitation was quite an honor. During the same year I got married and, from the

audience perspective, my life looked quite idyllic.

While the front stage performances continued I was engaged in back stage rehearsals that continually contradicted these performances (Lauer and Handel, 1983). Away from the audience I felt frightened, confused, and alone.

The process of examining how I make sense of the world and my place in it has been, and will continue to be, one of redefining, which arises out of my interpretations of social interactions.

Recently I was involved in a personal conflict which arose when another person's feelings were brought to my attention. At the time I was considered, by this person, to be contributing to his struggle. I received the information with a myriad of emotions, all of which I struggled to contain while I worked to determine the source of my own feelings. In the course of my reflection, I engaged in an extensive dialogue with myself, consciously considering the possible ways I could interpret the situation. Initially I wanted to respond by selecting one of the masks I have been in possession of for many years, and immediately begin my performance. Instead, I spent time with each of these masks, examining the possible performances I could participate in and the implications of each role. I found that I had several characters to choose from, and a variety of scripts to accompany each performance. I could have selected 'the guilt-ridden persecutor', in which case I would have perhaps hoped for a degree of pity for acknowledging my apparently cold and heartless behaviour. I could have chosen the mask and engaged in the ensuing performance of 'the victim', having been misunderstood and judged harshly. Yet another character could have been 'the deflector', the individual who deflects back to

others rather than accepting any responsibility for her role in a situation. The deflector, as I have come to know her, is a character who blames others and hopes to make them feel guilty. The final role that I have become familiar with is the performer who presents as "apathetic," the character who plays the role of one whose attitude is essentially "I don't give a damn." This individual feels the need to remove herself from the situation because it has become too complicated or too painful. She must protect herself from her own feelings and those she perceives others are feeling toward her. This character has the well-developed capability to disassociate from the situation.

All of these possible performances were based on scripts that I had developed over the years, as a result of the ways in which I made sense of the world and my place in it; my perspective. In engaging in these performances I was, as Goffman describes, the "sincere performer", believing my own performance. "The performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is real reality" (Goffman, 1959, p.17). I was convinced that my performance was *the* way to be, and it was based on *the* reality. I didn't reflect on my *interpretation* of events, or the subjective nature of my "truth."

Now, while I spend more time reflecting and questioning my perspective, I often still find myself entangled in internal conflicts as I attempt to define my life around principles of self-respect. Many forces outside of me continue to influence my perspective. The struggle to not accept media messages is ongoing. Susan Douglas (1994/1995) has captured the essence of my struggle in the following passages:

Even when we are fully able to deconstruct these pseudoscientific sales pitches,

which would make any self-respecting snake oil salesman blush, there we are, a part of us still wanting to believe that we can look younger and that it's desirable to do so (p.251).

Although many of us have undergone this transformation in consciousness, we'd still rather have a root canal than appear in public in a bathing suit. As we consider the metamorphosis that millions of women, and men, for that matter, experienced over the past three decades, we immediately confront the well-known female yin and yang of solid confidence and abject insecurity (p.8).

For me, confidence is one of the defining features of the front region performance, while insecurity is part of the back region. I believe the task is to acknowledge and honor all aspects of my personality, and at the same time continue to challenge the messages I receive as a result of my interpretations of social interactions, with myself and others.

Act II - Preparing the Audience

Locating the barriers we need to speak beyond is the first
step in dismantling them (Lewis, 1993, p.4)

Scene I - Media and the Construction of Self

We live in a society that is powerfully influenced by the mass media. It is

pervasive, living in every corner of our world, its potential influence surrounding us. One

only has to look in bathroom medicine cabinets for the toothpaste that guarantees a

million dollar smile and a hot date with a gorgeous mate. Or the refrigerator, for the milk

that promises so much more than just a moustache. Of course, one would be remiss not

to mention the diet pop next to the low-fat yogurt, because we all need to lose those

unsightly pounds that make us so unappealing to our mates and to society.

Schaum and Flanagan (1992), in their summary of Erving Goffman's 1976 book,

Gender Advertising, explained that the role of advertising is about so much more than

selling a product or service:

> ...advertisements present more than just a static image or depiction of a product.
>
> Rather, they display an entire "scene" made up of the most minute elements -
>
> gesture, expression, posture, mood, placement - constituting a vivid script of
>
> social arrangements and behaviors. The reason advertising is so magnetic to
>
> viewers is that as social beings we are constantly engaged in the project of
>
> defining ourselves and our relation to others - a lifelong process of learning, so to

speak, who we are. Advertising attracts us, not because we have an intense fascination for toothpaste or floor wax, but because it sends out clear and vivid messages about how to act, feel, and be in any situation (p. 383).

About two years ago I was out walking in my neighborhood when a white car pulled up beside me. A man, probably in his mid-thirties and dressed in a white shirt and tie, was the only person in the car. My immediate guess was that he was a business person looking for a particular location. He reached over to get what I anticipated would be a piece of paper containing a map or a street name. Instead he presented me with a beautiful bouquet of cut flowers. As I stood on the side of the road with my mouth hanging open, this man proceeded to explain to me that he had seen me one day walking in town (he even described the clothing I was wearing) and decided that the next time he saw me he would have to give me flowers. **I had never seen this man before!** Everyone who heard my story after that responded the same way. He must have watched that commercial on television too many times, the one where the man rushes up to a strange woman on the street to give her flowers because her perfume made her so irresistible to him. It struck me at the time how influential the fantasies presented in commercials can be in people's lives. Had advertising influenced this man's definition of himself and his actions? Had he learned from television commercials how to meet women?

The television we watch, the newspapers we read, the movies we see, the magazines we peruse, may all have a profound impact on our lives, even when we are conscious of the corporate manipulation and work diligently to change its impact on us.

We are continuously engaged in interpretations of situations, making judgements and

forming opinions about our own identities, values, and social roles. Many of these

interpretations are based on images and role models we see in our lives, "and today much

of that data is conveyed through the media" (Schaum and Flanagan, 1992, p.334).

If the media were not having an impact on how we live our lives, the attitudes we hold,

and the decisions we make, corporations would not be spending billions of dollars every

month for advertising (Lee and Solomon, 1992).

The messages we receive through the mass media are socially constructed, we

interpret them according to their meaning in our lives. According to Blumer (1969), this

interpretation of media messages is an ongoing process:

> ...whatever influence is exerted by the presentations of mass media depends on the
>
> way in which people meet and handle such presentations. Their interests, their
>
> forms of receptiveness, indifference, or opposition, their sophistication or naivete,
>
> and their established schemes of definition set the way in which they initially
>
> receive the presentations. Usually there is a further intervening stage before the
>
> residual effects of the presentations are set in experience and behaviour. This
>
> additional stage is an interpretative process which, through analysis and critical
>
> judgement, reworks the presentation into different forms before assimilation into
>
> experience. This process of interpretation in the individual is markedly guided by
>
> the stimulations, cues, suggestions, and definitions he secures from other people,
>
> particularly those constituting his so-called "reference groups" (pp. 187-188).

The interaction between the performers in the mass media and the audience

reflects some characteristics which are similar to interactions that we have with others and ourselves in everyday life (Lauer and Handel, 1983). Our sense of self is defined through all of our interactions.

All of us, actors and spectators alike, live surrounded by mirrors. In them, we seek reassurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others, anxiously searching out blemishes that might detract from the appearance we intend to project. The advertising industry deliberately encourages this preoccupation with appearances (Lasch, 1979, p.92).

One of the consequences of our interactions with the media is an increased level of self-consciousness as we measure ourselves against the ideals presented to us. We scrutinize our performances in front of friends and strangers. Mass media and popular culture provide the performer with materials with which to construct her identity, while at the same time encouraging her preoccupation with the appearance she projects. Carpenter (1996) refers to this as corporate manipulation, whereby corporations work to create needs within consumers. The 1970s invention of "cellulite" is an example of such manipulation. Through the media, women were presented with creams and lotions to rid them of unsightly cellulite. Yet it was these same corporations that created and gave definition to the term cellulite in the first place. They created a market which was based on encouraging women to be preoccupied and dissatisfied with how they look, then they provided them with the tools to "fix the problem."

The notion of woman as body has been traced back to the fourth century B.C. when Aristotle espoused the idea that the role of men was to govern and the role of

women was to bear children (Currie and Raoul, 1992). This belief has been carried

forward to today's society, which continues to associate men with mind and women with

body. According to Greenspan (1993, p.164) "woman in contemporary patriarchal

society is fundamentally identified with her body." Many feminist theorists assent to this

belief, that women's identity is seen originating from the physical body, an object to be

presented for viewing (Currie and Raoul, 1992; Spitzack, cited in McKinley and Hyde,

1996; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann and Ahrens, 1992; Wolf, 1991).

From the day we are born, females are socialized to be concerned with our

physical appearance, "brought up to conform to an image of womanhood that places

importance on body size and shape" (Orbach, 1978/1988, p.xviii). This inordinate

attention to appearance often replaces emphasis on development of intellectual

competencies which would contribute more favorably to self-esteem (Laidlaw, Malmo et.

al., 1990; Pipher, 1994). Society places so much emphasis on beauty in women's lives

that it becomes a commodity that women believe is needed in order to survive (Irving,

1990; Pipher, 1995), "a psychic necessity for a woman's sense of self" (Greenspan, 1993,

p.169).

Cultural representations of beauty work to create a socially prescribed ideal body.

In Western culture the mass media have become one of the most powerful transmitters

and perpetuators of this ideal (Myers and Biocca, 1992; Pipher, 1995). The far reaching

peer pressure facilitated by the media diminishes the influence of individual standards

and values (Kilbourne, 1989). Women feel compelled to follow their peers, as they

witness other women striving for the ideal. As our culture increasingly demands

perfection - the perfect figure, the perfect weight, the perfect clothes, the perfect mate - women are judging themselves, trying to measure up to the perfect images they encounter in advertising and other media sources (Hesse-Biber, 1996). This narrow definition of beauty and desirability, created and encouraged by the mass media, has had a profound effect in the lives of women and girls. The result is a nation of females who are preoccupied with, and embarrassed or tortured by, their flesh (Pinkola Estes, 1995; Bordo, 1993).

Fashion is another source of preoccupation for women and girls. Clothing has become a mechanism for identifying status in North America. Decisions about pursuing relationships with others are frequently made on the basis of how one presents herself. Browmiller (1984) describes the pressures women feel to conform to the world of fashion,

> To care about feminine fashion, and to do it well, is to be obsessively involved in inconsequential details on a serious basis. There is no relief. To not be involved is to risk looking eccentric and peculiar, or sloppy and uncared for, or mannish and manhating, or all of the above (p. 81).

Advertising, television programs, movies, music videos, and women's magazines have been very effective in creating dissonance within females. While we are able to denounce sexism in the media on the one hand, on the other hand we continue to struggle against the notion that women have to be young, thin, and physically beautiful to be valued. The media is relentless in its quest to alienate women from their faces and bodies, and to equate ideal beauty with rewards, happiness, and success. Women

continue to "find it extremely difficult to resist the basic tenet that a face with lines or a thigh with dimples means you are worthless" (Douglas, 1994/1995, p.268).

According to Collins and Skover (1996, p.8), "each day of our lives, 12 billion display ads, 2.5 million radio commercials, and over 300,000 television commercials are dumped into our collective consciousness." We can no longer ignore the impact of the mass media on our lives when we are being bombarded with so many messages every day. The media are a force at work constructing reality, a reality that wants to tell us who we are as well as who we should be (Kilbourne, 1989).

Alison Carpenter (1996), a critical feminist, documented some of her own struggles which have been cultivated by the kinds of messages found in "women's magazines"

> As I look through "Mademoiselle", all in the same moment, I am thinking: **'she's so hot, she's so thin, I'm going to start working out, I'm going to cut out fatty foods, I hate this magazine, it makes me feel bad about myself, she actually looks terrible, emaciated, these cosmetic companies are evil, if only I could take off ten pounds, what am I doing reading the enemy's propaganda?!!!...'** This quote dramatizes the kind of struggle with which I, and many other critical feminists live. Reducing the power of these messages in my life would be simple if they were simply 'out there'. But they're not. They have taken a firm hold of me that is very difficult to shake. So difficult in fact, that I need to continually work at eroticizing my own body, and other bodies that aren't 'magazine' beautiful.(p.72) (emphasis in original)

Advertising explicitly targets the body image of women in their marketing of products and services, particularly for food and exercise. Their strategic use of well known celebrities such as Sarah Ferguson to promote Weight Watchers is a marketing tool that produces results. Advertisers present the ideal as being "out there," attainable by purchasing products and services that will improve a woman's body either through dieting, exercise, cosmetics, or, as is becoming increasingly popular, cosmetic surgery. Women strive to conform to this specific body type, an unattainable ideal (Orbach, 1978/1988). The job of advertisers is to continue to foster new needs and worries that can only be alleviated with the purchase of particular products. Advertising has become a multi-billion dollar industry in which consumers come to believe that they need to buy what is being sold to them (Davies, Davison, and Safer, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 1996).

The Gillette razor company is a prime example of strategic marketing. In the early 1900's Gillette decided that if they could influence the meaning that women give to hair on their bodies, they could then convince women to shave their body hair, and they could double razor sales, and messages were presented that female body hair was unattractive and non-hygienic. The sales pitch was bought by women, a new perspective regarding the meaning of body hair on women emerged, and now the notion of shaving has become one of the female rites of passage, an initiation into womanhood in North American society.

The ideal body that the media present is not a static one. In fact, the ideal has changed significantly during the past forty years. In the 1950s the sex symbols were women like Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. Their voluptuous bodies were considered

the ideal that women aspired to attain. That image of ideal began to change with the introduction of Twiggy in 1967. Her stick-thin body, which resembled that of a twelve year old boy, became and continues to be the ideal for many women and young girls. The voluptuous Marilyn Monroe size twelve of the 1950s has become the petite size six, 110 pound ideal of today (Poulton, 1996; Meadow and Weiss, 1992). As real women become larger the ideal body size becomes thinner and thinner. Mary Pipher (1994) cited an example of how advertisers have changed their presentation of this ideal: in 1950 the White Rock Mineral Water girl was 5'4" and weighed 140 pounds, today she is 5'10" and weighs 110 pounds.

The media are deliberately distorting that which is being presented to us, trying to influence our perception of the ideal body, making it increasingly more inaccessible to women. Yet they are becoming more and more convincing. A 1995 issue of Adbusters, a magazine dedicated to bringing a critical view of media advertising to the consumer, reported an example of what they labelled "cosmetic perjury." Michelle Pfeiffer, an actor, was featured on the front cover of a 1990 Esquire magazine. The cover, a two-page spread, read, "What Michelle Pfeiffer Needs...Is Absolutely Nothing." A Media Watch organization obtained a memo which listed the touch-ups that were done to the front cover. The following lists some of the touch-ups required before the magazine would present Michelle to the public:

> Clean up complexion, soften eye lines, soften smile line, add color to lips, trim chin, remove neck lines, soften line under ear lobe, add highlights to earrings, add blush to cheek, clean up neck line, remove stray hair, remove hair strands on

dress, adjust color and add hair on top of head, add dress on side to create better

line, add dress on shoulder, clean up and smooth dress folds under arm and create

one seam on image on right side... (Adbusters, 1995).

Through a variety of communication techniques, such as "innuendo, strategic

ambiguity, and crucial omissions" (Goffman, 1959, p.62), the mass media are skilled at

misrepresenting information to the audience. "By judicious camera angles and editing, a

trickle of response to a celebrity can be transformed into a wild stream" (p.62). Females

attempt to compare themselves to these celebrities and they are unable to compete

without tremendous effort, dieting, and deprivation. The result is increasing numbers of

women who are dissatisfied with their bodies. As media images becomes more computer

generated, we may soon see women who are entirely fabricated by computers, and the

elusive and often painful quest will be fruitless.

A number of researchers have examined the impact of media on women's

perceptions and feelings about their bodies. Downs and Harrison (cited in Myers and

Biocca, 1992) examined 4294 television commercials to determine the conveyance of

attractiveness-based messages. They found that 1 of every 3.8 messages was related to

attractiveness, and adults and children are exposed to approximately 5260 attractiveness

messages each year, 1850 of these directly dealing with beauty. Myers and Biocca

(1992) found that watching even 30 minutes of television programming and advertising a

day can effect a woman's perceptions about her own body.

Irving (1990) completed a study in which she showed women slides of thin,

average, and heavy models. She found that exposure to the thin models resulted in lower

self-esteem and decreased weight satisfaction. All 161 subjects experienced the greatest

amount of pressure to be thin from the media, more than either peer or family influences.

Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw and Stein (1994) performed a study with 238

female college students. They found a direct relationship to media exposure and

increased gender-role endorsement, which in turn led to greater ideal-body stereotype

internalization and increased body dissatisfaction.

In a 1994 study by Stice and Shaw, 157 undergraduates were randomly exposed to

pictures from magazines containing either thin models, average-sized models, or no

models. They found that exposure to the thin models created feelings of stress,

unhappiness, guilt, shame, depression, and decreased levels of confidence in the women

in the study. They reported the viewing of ultra-thin models had "deleterious effects on

the affective state and body satisfaction of female readers" (p.302). Klein (1996) reported

research findings which indicated that it takes just three minutes for women to be

traumatized by pictures of supermodels.

The findings of these researchers can be summed up in the words of Laidlaw et al.

(1990):

> Because so much of what is defined as successful for women depends on our
>
> physical appearance, we judge our worth largely on that basis. And because we
>
> can never achieve the ever-changing ideal, our appearance, and most particularly
>
> our body, is never acceptable as it is (p.22).

This emphasis on appearance as a central component of a woman's existence

serves to increase self-consciousness. She must consider, in her presentation of herself,

what will be attractive and pleasing to others. "She must observe and evaluate herself, scrutinizing every detail of herself as though she were an outside judge. She attempts to make herself in the image of womanhood presented by billboards, newspapers, magazines and television" (Orbach, 1978/1988, p.7). The result of this pressure to mirror images from the mass media is a cultural identity crisis, complete with contradictions and confusion.

According to Susan Douglas (1994/1995), as a result of interacting with, and being shaped by, the mass media, women are experiencing an erosion of a unified self as we are pulled in different directions by the mixed messages we receive. We are being forced to present certain images of ourselves while deliberately concealing others:

> Presented with an array of media archetypes, and given morality tales in which we identify first with one type, then another, confronted by quizzes in women's magazines so we can gauge whether we're romantic, assertive, in need of changing our perfume, or ready to marry, women have grown accustomed to compartmentalizing ourselves into a whole host of personas, which we occupy simultaneously (Douglas, 1994/1995, p.13)...We have learned to wear a hundred masks, and to live with the fact that our inner selves are fragmented, some of the pieces validated by the mass media, others eternally ignored (p.270).

Because appearance, unlike personality, is immediately evident to others, it has become a critical aspect of women's sense of self. Our culture's monolithic ideal of beauty has created a society in which women's bodies are seen as fragmented, something that they must carry around outside of themselves, each part in need of improvements or

repairs. Women have learned that who we are is never quite enough, and the result can

be a punishing relationship with our bodies (Coward, 1992).

Scene II - Media and Youth

When we consider the struggles of women everywhere, it comes as no surprise the

influence media messages have in the lives of young and impressionable children. The

messages they sell can have far-reaching and severe consequences in the lives of young

girls. To further complicate matters, young people deny or are often unable to

acknowledge the ways in which they are influenced by the media, even though the media

are influencing each of us, young and old. (Bibby and Posterski, 1992).

As Gilbert (1998) has pointed out, the literature pertaining to young children and

how they conceptualize their bodies is limited, even though the child's world is imbued

with dominant images of the body viewed through the media. In his research with five-

and six-year-old children, they indicated that they had already been reading fashion

magazines. "This meant that they were exposed to the cultural norms of western society

and greatly influenced by the fashion industry in which the notion of being slim is

fundamental" (p.66). The children tended to identify themselves with well-known

models and celebrities who were popular in magazines, posters and television advertising.

Gilbert concluded that

> ...the media, fashion and sports industries have influenced the ways in which
>
> children perceive themselves and how they want to be regarded in the world. It is

clear that children are constantly concerned about how they look, what they wear, and what others think of them. In short, children as young as 6 and 7 are already concerned with the image that they portray to others in everyday interactions"(p.69).

Young girls often have difficulty separating the public performance and their inner personality. They are, as Goffman would term them, "sincere performers," believing their own performances. Part of this performance, according to Friedman (1997), involves dissociation from the self, whereby they "become hostage to opinions of others" (p.33). She also found that girls have a one-dimensional model of perfection, based on physical appearance.

Young girls are bombarded with media messages about definitions of femininity and beauty. Weight loss is an issue for increasing numbers of elementary school children (Chernin, 1981; Davies, Davison & Safer, 1994; Doyal, 1995; Garner & Kearney-Cooke, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Kilbourne, 1989; Myers-Wall, 1989). Issues about body size are becoming more prominent in the lives of preadolescent girls:

> Today, 6- and 7-year-old girls are concerned about their weight. Standing at the cusp of puberty, 9-year-old girls talk about feeling fat before their bodies have even begun to change. At 10 and 11, feeling fat has been incorporated into their everyday language. It influences how they see themselves and the way they interact with the world (Friedman, 1997, 41).

Terry Poulton (1996) reported on a television commercial advertising a weight loss product in which two girls about seven or eight years old were commenting on how

slim one of their mothers was. One girl asked the other if she was jealous of her mother. The responses was "not as long as she tells me her secrets." From Playskool to Barbie young girls are taught to view themselves in very narrow, unrealistic, and potentially dangerous terms. They are sold the message that their body is their power (Greenspan, 1993). Friedman (1997) says that whenever she asks what they liked about each other, young girls struggle to get beyond "pretty" and "nice." The girls she has spoken to all want to have a body like Barbie, the perfect girl.

A University of California study showed that nearly 80% of fourth grade girls in the San Francisco Bay area were watching their weight (Kilbourne, 1989). Other studies report that dissatisfaction with body size and the belief that dieting is necessary can begin in girls as young as seven years of age (Doyal, 1995; Laidlaw, Malmo et. al., 1990; Myers-Wall, 1989). Kilbourne (1989) discussed a Wall Street Journal survey of elementary students at four Chicago area schools. More than ½ of the fourth grade girls were dieting, and 75% felt they were overweight.

Pipher (1995) cited a report from the March 1990 issue of *Teaching and Learning*, which included the following:

> ...preteens as young as 5 are preoccupied with dieting. The major worry of 8- to 13-year-old girls is their weight. By sixth grade, 79 percent of all girls want to be thinner than they are, and 59 percent have dieted. By age 13, 80 percent of all girls have dieted. On any given day in America, 56 percent of our women are on a diet (p.116).

Children, like adult women, measure their appearance against media images. A

complicating factor is their inability to critically examine and deconstruct the messages they receive. They put their trust in the media, because they see them as "the experts." If it is in a book or on television, it *must* be true!

There is in our culture an enormous emphasis placed on appearances at a very young age (Ayers, 1994). It has been shown that by age five children will select pictures of thin, good-looking people when asked to identify with particular images. Pictures of overweight or unattractive individuals are responded to negatively (Gilbert, 1998; Pipher, 1994).

A newly released publication entitled Kids is a fashion magazine designed especially for the seven to fourteen year old market. Children younger and younger are feeling pressure to measure up to the fantasy portrayed in the media. When they are unable to meet this standard for appearance they can be left "feeling profoundly imperfect and hopeless as well" (Ayers, 1994, p.81). Dieting and dissatisfaction with their bodies become normalized reactions.

Preadolescent girls are measuring themselves against the images they see in teen magazines, where they are told how to get and keep a boyfriend, and how to look great doing it. These magazines offer another arena for young girls to take up their obsession with their bodies (Hesse-Biber, 1996). The messages are that appearance is important for success and determines relationships with others.

Myers-Wall (1989) believes that the impact of television has profound effects on young girls at the grade three/four level. At this time they begin to have more freedom in selecting program choices. They move from a world of children's programming of

Sesame and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood to the prime-time milieu where the messages are clear and abundant: to be admired, women must be beautiful, thin, well-dressed, and sexy. By watching television, girls learn that being attractive is often the primary requirement to be considered successful. The fantasy portrayed is that "slim women date movie stars and marry millionaires" (Pipher, 1995, p.19). It is at this point that the self-esteem of young girls begins to take a plunge in their often ill-fated attempts to conform to the superficial albeit powerful standards of beauty that have been set for them.

Girls are socialized from a young age to be concerned with their appearance, and to find their bodies unacceptable. As girls heed the messages that inform them that feeling good about oneself is dependent on physical appearance, that elusive quest for perfection begins. "They are taught that there is something wrong with them if they are not constantly trying to improve their looks (Friedman, 1997, p.159). The media play a key role in making it progressively more unrealistic to attain the perfection that girls begin to seek because of the changing, ever-decreasing, ideal size for females. As they see young women in the media with protruding hip bones and ribs that can easily be counted, preadolescent girls in varying shapes and sizes come to believe they are overweight and need to change their appearance.

Kim Chernin, in her 1981 book, *The Obsession*, shared an experience she had at a health club locker room, in which she observed the behaviour of two girls who were about ten and eleven years old:

The taller one steps up, glances at herself in the mirror, looks down at the scale. She sighs, shaking her head. I see at once that this girl is imitating someone. The

sigh, the headshake are theatrical, beyond her years. And so, too, is the little

drama enacting itself in front of me. The other girl leans forward, eager to see for

herself the troubling message imprinted upon the scale. But the older girl throws

her hand over the secret. It is not to be revealed. And now the younger one,

accepting this, steps up to confront the ultimate judgement. "Oh God," she says,

this growing girl. "Oh God," with only a shade of imitation in her voice: "Would

you believe it? I've gained five pounds" (p. 21).

In a study of 494 elementary aged girls in San Francisco 31 percent of nine-year-

olds thought they were too fat and 81 percent of ten-year-olds believed they should be

dieting (Seligman, cited in Wolf, 1991). Jean Kilbourne (1989) reported on a study of

grade four girls in Chicago where one girl said, "But the boys expect girls to be perfect

and beautiful. And skinny" (p.8).

Giroux (1997) states that children are objectified and commodified in the media as

they define and create themselves in the same way that they are being presented, "their

bodies as spectacle" (p. 2). The fashion industry is the source of much of this

objectification. Girls as young as eight and nine become aware of the importance of

fashion in distinguishing themselves from younger girls. As Ayer (1994) has pointed out,

in each grade in school there are fashion choices that determine relationships with others.

Clothing can symbolize belonging, or be the source of rejection with peers.

Gilbert (1998) found that girls as young as five are influenced by the fashion

industry. It is indeed a powerful change agent that can shape young girls' perceptions of

themselves:

The images portrayed in the fashion industry undoubtedly influence the very basis of our society, as young girls, in particular, follow the fashion industry and the powerful statements that it makes through the medium of magazines and television programmes that vilify the young, slim, and athletic bodies (pp.65-66).

As Giroux (1997) has stated, any commentary about youth also requires an examination of the beliefs and practices that frame adult society. While there is not extensive research on the influence of the media in the lives of young girls, there has been a considerable amount of research which has indicated that adolescents and women, in their presentation of themselves, are profoundly influenced by the media. With more money and energy being directed to capturing younger markets one could expect to see greater numbers of preadolescent girls being influenced by the same mass media industry that has older girls and women engaged in a cycle of self-condemnation.

Act III - Perusing the Stage

A self is not possessed as a matter of inheritance or biology.
Rather, self arises in the context of symbolic associations
with other people (Skidmore, 1979, p.196)

Scene I - Symbolic Interactionism

In the writing of this work I, as writer, can in no way be sure how you, the reader,

will receive my work. How will you make sense of the words on these pages? When

you picked up this thesis and read the title, what thoughts came to your mind, and what

was their origin? Is there any way I can bring you to the place of experiencing and

understanding my work as I hoped you would? In this moment in time you are reading

the same words that I am writing as I sit here at my kitchen table with the spring sun

streaming in my window. Is it the time, where you are sitting, who you are, or why you

are reading this now as opposed to last winter, that may make the experience different for

you than for another? In introducing to you some of the tenets of symbolic interactionism

I offer you a "programme" to guide you in the forthcoming performance. It is my belief

that the information contained herein will assist you in developing a clearer image of the

metaphorical stage from which this performance emanates.

The origins of symbolic interactionism can be traced to George Herbert Mead, a

professor at the University of Chicago from 1894 to 1931. While Mead taught

philosophy, many graduate students in sociology took his courses. It was some of those

students who are responsible for spreading the tenets of symbolic interactionism through

their writings (Ritzer, 1988). The most prominent of these was Herbert Blumer.

Blumer (1969) coined the term symbolic interactionism and outlined its three basic premises:

> The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p.2)

My experience in coming to this thesis demonstrates these premises. About a year ago I attended two thesis orals within a week. At that time I was overwhelmed and intimidated by both the defendants and the process. When I began reading the written document of one of the two defendants I felt quite certain that I would never be able to produce a thesis of similar calibre, particularly because I had difficulty understanding the framework and methodology, of which symbolic interactionism was a part. At the time I had not yet begun reading in the field of symbolic interactionism, so the meaning I assigned to my interaction with the thesis and the author was based on my experience at the oral. My interpretation of the situation left me feeling insecure and afraid - that I was too stupid to understand, let alone ever try to write, a comparable piece of work. My response was not about the thesis itself, but about my interpretation of the situation. As I read the same thesis now, I have a very different feeling, a different understanding that therefore brings a different interpretation to the situation. All of my life experiences

between the time I first read that thesis and now have led me to a new interpretation. Meaning is not static, it is "a formative process" (Blumer, 1969, p.5). Although the thesis is the same document I first looked at last year, I am now a different person because I have had new experiences, and therefore I bring a new interpretation to the work.

Symbolic interaction contends that individuals are constantly in a state of becoming, and, in the process of interaction, are always undergoing change.

Each time we interact with others we come to share a somewhat different view of what we are seeing. We see what is out there in a new light. As we interact we develop a perspective as to what is real and how we are to act toward that reality. This interaction that gives rise to our reality is *symbolic* - it is through symbolic interaction with each other that we give the world meaning and develop the reality toward which we act (Charon, 1979, p.54).

Just as my experience of reading the thesis to which I have referred was quite different each time I read it, so too will your interpretation of my work be dependent upon all that you bring to the experience of reading this now, or your perspective. Perspective is one of the central concepts of symbolic interactionism. It refers to the ways we define ourselves and our world, and is constantly in a state of change. Perspectives are our guide to what we attend to, what we ignore, what we like, and what we dislike. They are applied to, and influence, our actions in that they are our framework for making sense of situations, and each of us has a multitude of perspectives, depending on the situation. When I am giving an inservice for teachers about deaf children my definition of self is different from when I am teaching children or when I am engaged in counselling with

children and families, and differs yet again from when I am sitting and having a glass of wine with my partner on a Friday evening. Perspectives are role-related and are continually being modified, replaced, or rejected (Charon, 1979).

Related to perspective are the concepts of reality and truth. Each of us views the world from our own unique position. The glasses I wear to view the world are tinted by my interactions, just as yours are for you. Each of has a distinctive prescription, and those tints will change as we interact with others. With each new perspective comes a new reality. "A perspective, then by its very nature, is a bias, contains assumptions, value judgements, and ideas, orders the world, divides it up in a certain way, and as a result influences our actions in the world" (Charon, 1979, p.7).

It follows then, that truth is relative to perspective. In symbolic interactionist research, truth is unique to each individual, and does not exist without the individual's interpretation. In the words of Thomas and Thomas (1928), "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p.572). Growing up I felt bombarded with messages about the importance of presenting myself in such a way as to be appealing to others. My mother's claim that my shoes and my purse were supposed to match served as a powerful metaphor for me for many years as I took great care in abiding by the rules of femininity, according to my interpretation of it; my personal truth. The need to present myself in the most favorable light was my reality, so I took great care in selecting shoes, purse, clothing, make-up, and nail polish, all in complimentary colors.

Truth is also based on its usefulness to the individual. It is a subjective process, one that is acquired through interaction and is transformed in the process of interaction

(Charon, 1979). In this way, it is socially constructed, and socially deconstructed. I no

longer make sense of situations in the same way as I did before. I have a new framework, a

new perspective, and in time I will have others.

Many of our most important truths are not physical truths, but truths that come

about as a result of human beings acting in accord with a conceptual system that

cannot in any sense be said to fit a reality completely outside of human experience

(Lakoff, 1987, p.296).

One of the most important concepts in symbolic interactionism is the self. Rock

(1979) postulates that the self "constitutes the very hub of the interactionists' intellectual

scheme. All other sociological processes and events revolve around the hub, taking from

it their analytic meaning and organization" (p.102).

The self is reflexive in nature, it is both subject and object, and arises out of social

experiences and communication (Mead, 1977). It is now 8:00 in the morning and I am

just beginning my writing for the day. I have, however, spent the first two hours of my

morning interacting with my thoughts and my notes. I have been conversing with myself.

Just as symbolic interactionists argue that thought precludes action, before beginning to

write I had to talk with myself about what it was that I wanted to write. I couldn't just sit

down, turn on my computer and begin writing without first thinking about it. Before

action there is thought and interpretation.

Blumer (1969) describes two distinct stages in the process of interpretation. The

first is the internalized social process of the actor interacting with herself. The process of

the actor engaging in communication with self precludes the action as the actor "has to

point out to himself the things that have meaning" (p.5). During the second stage of interpretation "the actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings of the situation in which he is placed, and the direction of his action" (p.5). My interpretations, the meanings that I assign to an action through self-interaction, help to guide my actions.

For symbolic interactionists, all objects are social objects. Just as the self is a social object, so too are objects outside of the self social in that they become what people define them as. Symbols are objects which are socially constructed. For example, the beauty and fashion industry is built around symbols and their socially constructed meanings. For girls and young women platform shoes are currently very popular. Their popularity is not based on practicality or comfort, but rather that they symbolize style, popularity with peers, chic, cool. In the not too distant future a new meaning will be constructed around this same item. One who wears platform shoes will be considered a geek, having no fashion sense. The girls I spoke with for this study spoke of "belly tops" as being one of the current 'cool' fashion trends. As they claimed, if the Spice Girls are wearing them, they must be cool! All objects are social objects whose meanings are dependent on the definition assigned to them.

Scene II: Social Life as Theatrical Performance

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman employs the metaphor of a theatrical performance as a framework for human behaviour in social

situations. "Goffman illustrates how we try to define the situation for others through presenting a favorable picture of our 'self' to others, or at least portraying ourselves in a way we choose" (Charon, 1979, p.141).

Goffman outlines six dramaturgical principles that guide the organization of social life. Four of these are central concepts to this thesis and will be discussed herein: performances, teams, regions, and impression management.

Performances

Goffman contends that when an individual plays a part she implicitly seeks to have others accept and believe the impression she fosters. In addition, the "sincere" performer is one who is "sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality" (p.17). The performer believes the performance she engages in and expects others to believe it as well.

Everyone is consciously or unconsciously playing a role, and it is in these roles that we come to know one another and ourselves. In carrying out the performance the individual is said to have a "personal front", the mask which one wears, which includes appearance and manner. Appearance refers to that which somehow indicates the performer's social status, and includes the "setting" - sex, age, clothing, physical size and appearance, posture, speech, gestures, and facial expressions. Manner refers to that which cues us to the interaction role the performer will play in a situation. For example, the indecisive individual will, as part of her performance, follow the lead of others when complex decisions must be made.

In presenting a performance an individual often conceals things from the audience, notably anything which would demonstrate a discrepancy between appearance and overall reality. For example, by the time an external examiner reads this thesis I expect it will have gone through several drafts and look quite different from when my supervisor initially reads it. In presenting a completed text to an external examiner many changes have already been completed. "Errors and mistakes are often corrected before the performance takes place, while telltale signs that errors have been made and corrected are themselves concealed" (Goffman, 1959, p.43).

In her desire to present an idealized performance the performer has to conceal some actions that contradict the performance. As a result certain practices may be engaged in privately. This is referred to as "secret consumption" (p.42). An individual who is bulimic will engage in socially acceptable eating patterns in the presence of others, but will binge and purge in secret. The binging and purging are inconsistent with an idealized performance, and so, are concealed from public view.

Teams

The second dramaturgical principle is teams. Goffman (1959) defines teams as follows:

> a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected
>
> definition of the situation is to be maintained. A team is a grouping, but it is not in
>
> relation to a social structure or social organization but rather in relation to an
>
> interaction or a series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the

situation is maintained (p.104).

The performance from a team may not express the specific characteristics of each team member so much as it is defined around the features of the task that is performed. The team members adhere to a definition of the situation that is specific to that situation, and cooperate to project a certain image.

Audience is part of the team, as audience members have a role to play in upholding the integrity of a performance. A team may also consist of one individual who acts as if there is an audience present. The individual who becomes both the performer and the audience engages in self-deception, in that the individual as audience will have to conceal from herself the unfavorable knowledge she possesses about the performance. All of the undesirable characteristics about the performer and the performance will have to be hidden from the self as audience. This concept of self-deception can be seen in individuals who have repressed memories, or those who dissociate. It also occurs when we reconstruct or retell stories from our past. In the reconstruction of the story I become both the performer and the audience, and as the audience I can deceive myself by believing only that which I as the performer choose to share in the retelling, even though I know the discreditable facts that are not being shared in the performance.

Another member of the team is the director, who "starting out as a member of the team, may find himself slowly edged into a marginal role between audience and performers, half in and half out of both camps" (Goffman, 1959, p.99).

The director may tend to see the performance in terms of whether or not it went "smoothly" and "without a hitch," and whether or not all possible disruptive

contingencies were prepared for in advance (Goffman, 1959, p.97).

<u>Regions</u>

Goffman (1959) states that all performances are constrained by some barriers to perception. These barriers are generally created by location, but are also limited by time. The place where the performance is given, within these barriers, is referred to as the "front region." When in the front region the performer emphasizes those favorable aspects of the activity, while other parts of the performance, which may in some way discredit the image the performer wishes to convey, are suppressed.

The back region is where the rehearsals and preparatory activities occur, the suppressed actions make their appearance, and impressions conveyed by the performance in the front region are often contradicted. The back region, then, is a place where the actors can "let their hair down." They can express feelings and thoughts that would ruin the performance if they occurred in the front region (Lauer and Handel, 1983, p. 135).

In one of our meetings, Faye spoke of her experience the day she came to school in new shoes unlike any the other girls in her class owned. A few of her classmates teased Faye about her "clown shoes." In our group meeting, as she told the story, she laughed and spoke nonchalantly as if she did not care at all about her classmates' opinions of her choice of footwear. This was Faye's front region performance. A few days after this meeting I happened to run into Faye's mother, and, knowing the topic of my thesis, she shared what happened when Faye arrived back home the day she wore the 'clown shoes' to school. Her mother informed me that Faye was devastated, and planned to never wear

those shoes to school again because she was so humiliated by her peers. Her mother unwittingly provided a backstage glance at Faye's performance.

There are many regions that function as both front and back regions at different times. A couple who are having difficulties in their relationship may present a certain front when they are in public together, but in their own home, the back region, they freely express their difficulties. However, when the couple hosts a dinner party at their home, it becomes the front region, and back region behaviour is suppressed.

> In general, then, it must be kept in mind that in speaking of front and back regions we speak from the reference point of a particular performance, and we speak of the function that the place happens to serve at that time for the given performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 127).

Impression Management

Impression management is one of the key concepts in Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of social interactions. It refers to our attempt as performers to control the behaviour of others and have them define the situation as we wish by managing the impression others gain of us (Lauer and Handel, 1983). In order for the performers to avoid embarrassment and successfully carry out their performance, certain attributes are required, by both participants and those who do not participate. These practices include defensive measures that must be employed by the performers to save their own show, protective practices used by the audience to assist the performers in saving the performers'

show, and performers' sensitivity to audience tact (Goffman, 1959).

The defensive measures used by performers in planning their show are loyalty, discipline, and circumspection. The circumspect performer will carefully select an audience who will not challenge the performance to the point of it being threatened. In preparing for my performance at my thesis defence, it is important for me to have committee members who will demonstrate dramaturgical loyalty and discipline, and be able to keep in mind the focus of the performance. At the defence my committee members will be both performers and audience. In their role as audience, to help save the performance, my committee members may engage in some protective practices, such as providing me with the opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge and understanding of my thesis topic by asking questions which will allow me to answer in such a way that will confirm my understanding. It will then be my responsibility as the performer to attend to the audience messages and respond to hints and modify that which threatens the success of the performance. In selecting an external examiner, I will, as the circumspect performer, "also attempt to select the kind of audience that will give a minimum of trouble in terms of the show the performer wants to put on and the show he [sic] does not want to have to put on" (Goffman, 1959, p.218).

Appearance is considered to be one of the tools of impression management. In the establishment of one's identity, and the desire to indicate to others the appropriate way to define a situation, appearance indicates understanding of a shared meaning. Clothing is one facet of appearance.

Actors enter the interaction with practical interests and preliminary definitions of

the situation. Their definitions are modified during the course of interaction, but may be modified prior to any verbal exchange. Through clothing, in part, individuals establish an identity and give indications of their value and mood (Lauer and Handel, 1983, p.165).

Fashion is used as a tool for impression management, particularly for those who seek to elevate their status. The argument is that appropriate attire is necessary to foster certain impressions of status. "...because of the meaning of clothes...people may use their mode of dress to convey to others the impression that they have sufficient status to be worthy of respect" (Lauer and Handel, 1983, p.138). In the world of impression management, clothing is an integral part of ascribing status to others, and pursuing interactions.

Scene III - The Writer as Director : Method

Rationale: Why Interviews?

The principles and assumptions which have informed my research are those of symbolic interactionism, and specifically the metaphor of social life as drama. The assumptions, that meaning is constructed through everyday social interaction, and that meaning is ascribed based on how an individual makes sense of it, bring with them certain implications for ways of engaging in research as a social act.

Qualitative interviews, both individual and focus group, were selected as methods that would best illuminate the ways others constructed their social lives. Qualitative

research enables the researcher to communicate with the participants to discover how they see reality (Krueger, 1994). Kvale (1996) has described the shift from the quantitative assumptions around one reality and knowledge as a mirror of this reality, to the qualitative assumption of viewing the world as individuals interpret and negotiate its meaning for them. Reality is a perspectival one, dependent on values and viewpoint. "Knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between person and world" (Kvale, 1996, p.44)

It is through language and interaction that we come to understand how individuals experience their world. Interviewing provides the researcher with an opportunity, through language and observation, to engage with the participant in conversation, dialogue, and meaning making. Interviewing offers an opportunity to contextualize people's actions so that the meaning of those actions can be understood. The way people interact in the world has its foundations in how they make sense of their experience, and "as a method of inquiry interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language (Seidman, 1991, p.7).

The Casting

One of the early thoughts: *I'll interview some girls so they can tell me what I feel I I already know. I'll read some books, I'll present my data....no problem.* It is clear now that I had no idea what would happen as I embarked on this process of thesis writing. Even the word "writing" is inadequate. There is so much more involved than I would have imagined. For a person like myself, whose motto is "just do it!" this process has

created more than a few hurdles to surpass. Doing it has not been easy, in fact it has been

extremely challenging every step of the way, and there are many times when I feel like I

have barely begun.

"Credibility" and "trustworthiness" are two words that have guided me throughout

the entire thesis process. What has to happen for these two principles to be honored? That

is a question that has been at the forefront of my mind since the initial fantasy of the thesis

as "no problem" ended. As part of honoring these two principles I have decided to include

a tour of the backstage, to offer a glimpse of the performance in preparation.

Once my research proposal had been accepted, it was time to select performers and

arrange the stage. An elementary school of approximately 275 students in a rural

community was selected as the site for the production. This school was selected because I

was familiar with the staff and students, and knew that it would be relatively easy to gain

access. Casting for actors began with two meetings, one with all girls in a grade four

classroom, and another with all girls in a grade five classroom. In both meetings we met

as a group in a large circle in the middle of an empty classroom. Most of the girls in both

groups had known me previously as a teacher and seemed to be both excited and curious.

The purpose of these meetings was to observe and to listen to the girls as we discussed the

words "body image" and "media". I was looking for girls who seemed comfortable

sharing their thoughts and who could articulate them.

A list of possible characters was compiled from these two meetings. I then

observed the girls in their classrooms and on the playground on two occasions. Before

making final selections I spoke to the classroom teachers to determine whether they felt

there was any reason for the girls not to participate.

When the tentative group list was established it included three nine-year-old girls from one class and two ten-year-old girls from the other class. The next step was to talk to each of the five girls individually to assess their interest and to obtain parental permission. The girls were informed of the nature of my research, and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. They were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality at all times. The girls were informed that neither their names, nor the name of their school, would be used in the study.

Taped interviews and transcripts were to be shared only with my committee, if necessary, and were to be destroyed upon the successful oral defense of the thesis. The girls were told they could review the tapes or transcripts, and we would meet again when the chapter telling their stories was written to be sure that the spirit and intent of their thoughts were captured in my writing.

Written consent of the girls and their parents was required before the research project began. All five of the girls volunteered with enthusiasm, and written parental consent was given without question.

Initial exchanges between performers and director

Initially I met with each of the girls individually. Unfortunately the only room available with any degree of privacy during the times I was in the school was a small windowless storage room. After the two individual interviews with each of the girls, a few of which included interruptions from students who wanted to use the room we were in,

and the review of the transcripts and my notes, I knew that something in the process would have to change. The room was not working for us, nor was the individual format. It was far too formal to be conducive to developing a trusting relationship. I spoke with each of the girls and they agreed to come together for future meetings.

Bringing the cast together

The initial nervousness that I witnessed in the girls during the individual meetings melted away immediately when they came together as a group. They had all known one another for several years and were comfortable meeting together. However, there was some initial uncertainty about my role in the group. The girls viewed me as a teacher in the school, the only role they were familiar with prior to this project. While I had never taught them, the dynamics of a relationship between students and teachers were at play, particularly during our first two group meetings. I was aware of the position of power that I was in and the importance of allowing the girls time to trust the group and my role in it.

We came together in a small room that had previously been used for special needs students. At the time of our meetings it was virtually unclaimed, although we had to pass through another room to get to it. While there were often remnants of someone's recess wrappings or used scraps of paper on the floor when we arrived, the room was largely empty. Sometimes there would be a few old desks, other times a table and a couple of chairs. The one window in the room faced south so one consistent feature of the room was the heat.

Our meetings began with us all sitting cross-legged in a circle or pulling together

some of the loosely scattered desks or chairs, depending on the day, but by the time we were ready to close the sessions it was not unusual to see footwear strewn around the room and bodies in a variety of prone positions on the floor.

I had anticipated challenges in working with girls of this age, but I was not fully prepared for the dynamics of an adult woman, who was viewed as a teacher, engaging in meaningful dialogue with nine and ten year-old girls.

Like Westerners doing fieldwork in colonized Third World cultures, or academics studying the urban poor, when adults research children, they "study down", seeking understanding across lines of difference and inequality. When research is within their own culture, the "studying down" comes swathed in a sense of familiarity. To learn *from* children, adults have to challenge the deep assumption that they already know what children are "like", both because, as former children, adults have been there, and because, as adults, they regard children as less complete versions of themselves. When adults seek to learn about and from children, the challenge is to take the closely familiar and to render it strange (Thorne, 1993, p.12).

This was indeed my challenge, to be in the presence of children and hear their stories as they wanted to tell them. When I interviewed each of the girls individually, there was a lot of nervousness on their part; they seemed anxious to provide the "right" answers to my questions. Only one of the girls seemed comfortable expanding on any of her responses. The other girls listened to the questions I asked, and responded with as few words as possible. During those initial interviews I experienced a myriad of emotions,

from jubilation, when I heard one sentence that I thought would be applicable for my study, to frustration when one of the girls provided me with one-word answers. During those early individual interviews I was keenly aware of the power imbalance and how it influenced the interviews. I quickly realized that the girls wanted to sound bright and intelligent and tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

With the first group meeting the dynamics changed almost immediately. The girls then had one another, and the power imbalance, although still evident, receded to the background. They brought so much energy to the group, and were eager to share their opinions.

Faye peeled sparkly red nail polish from her fingers as she spoke, her ponytail bobbing with her excited gestures. Alicia had much to contribute to that first meeting, and throughout the sessions was the most reflective of the girls. Alison sat quietly for much of the first meeting, intent on what was being said. When she spoke it was with calmness and thoughtfulness. Alex was the most uncomfortable and insecure in the group initially. I learned later that she did not hold a position within any of the 'inner-circles' to which the other girls belonged. The dynamics between Faye and Gwen were interesting. They had an ongoing competition for attention in the school, both wanting to be one of the most popular girls in the school, and they were constantly vying for exclusive friendships with the same girls. One of our sessions had to end sooner than planned because these two girls were finding it too challenging to be respectful to one another.

We had six meetings as a group. Each was taped, with the exception of the fifth session in which the tape malfunctioned. During the first meeting one of the girls

suggested they keep individual journals for the duration of our sessions. I was pleased with

the suggestion and encouraged it. However, the girls found this to be more of a

commitment than they were ready to make so the idea was abandoned. The girls wrote

during one of the sessions, and two of the girls shared a personal story they had written.

Another dilemma I encountered in working with children of this age group was their

frequent use of the third person. The girls often spoke of 'some girls' or 'most girls' rather

than speaking in the first person. In my role as the director, I spoke of this on several

occasions. During one meeting, when I once again talked about the importance of speaking

in the first person and telling one's own story rather than interpretations of other's stories, I

received a most surprising response. One of the girls broke down in tears as she disclosed

that it was she who was having a problem and not her friend, as we had been led at believe.

Her father had been arrested the day before on drug related charges and she had no idea

what was to happen to him or to her family. The tape recorder was turned off as we talked

through her fears.

As the girls became more comfortable, my role as director changed. I found

myself struggling, wanting them to stick to my agenda, yet fascinated by their interactions

with one another. The thesis student in me was hearing the self-talk in my head, 'this is

my data...I need themes... they have to stay on topic... MY topic'. There were times that I

just wished I could be the authoritarian leader and tell them to STAY ON TOPIC!!! I

wanted to direct, to control their actions. "The director may be given the special duty of

bringing back into line any member of the team whose performance becomes unsuitable"

(Goffman, 1959, p.98). I knew that if I were to carry out his role I would find myself in

the position of which Goffman spoke, that of the director being neither a member of the audience nor the performers, but caught somewhere in between.

After the performances

After each session with the girls, I listened to the tapes to review what had been said, and to determine which points to explore further. At the completion of the interviews, the tapes were transcribed and analyzed sentence by sentence. Each sentence was given a code word or words that best described it. From the these codes, themes were developed. For example, the codes "body size', "concerns regarding clothes", and "makeup" all became part of the theme "concerns about appearance".

Act IV - The Performers and their Performances

By listening to what girls say about their lives and becoming
familiar with the terrain, we can begin to leverage resources
and ensure that girls have access to the full range
of life's options (Golden 1994, p.54)

Scene I - The Cast

During our first group meeting the girls were eager to determine the fictitious

names they would use in our work. They each selected who they wanted to be in the

performance, as they were anxious to play an active role, to at least some extent, in

defining who they were to become in this drama.

Alicia

Alicia was nine years old, of average size and height, and had straight blonde hair

just past her shoulders. She tended to dress in athletic style clothing, which was

considered "cool," but not "preppy," by others. She was in grade four, where she was

considered quite popular and well liked by her classmates. Her teacher commented that

Alicia was a good student who was always eager to contribute to discussions. She was

the first of the girls to be interviewed, and I was quite impressed with her thoughts and

opinions. She was obviously conscious of presenting herself as thoughtful and reflective,

particularly during the two individual interviews before the girls came together.

Alicia was the middle daughter in her family. Her older sister was twelve years

old and her younger sister was four. She also had a baby brother. Alicia enjoyed pop

music, looking at magazines, and watching television, although her family didn't have

cable television since her parents didn't like it, because "there was so much

aggressiveness on it, like all the shooting and things."

Gwen

Gwen was ten years old, one of the taller girls in her class, and had fairly thick,

shoulder-length, straight blonde hair. She very much wanted others to see her as a

"prep," so she wore outfits that were well matched, such as a blue and white striped T-

shirt with Nevada overalls (one bib button undone and hanging), and a blue sweatshirt

tied around her waist. She was athletic and participated in intramural sports as well as a

community-based basketball program.

Gwen was in grade five, where she had been experiencing some struggles socially

with peers, and with her teacher, in part, I believe, because she was trying too hard to be

popular. She described herself as a good friend, but she felt that many girls at school

talked about her behind her back. She experienced a lot of peer pressure, was quite

influenced by others, and seemed prepared to go to great lengths to be one of the most

popular girls in the school. While she was thrilled to find out that her close friend Faye

was going to be part of our group, it became obvious during the course of the research

that these two girls spent a lot of time and energy vying for position of "top dog."

In our group meetings Gwen was very outgoing and willing to share her thoughts

and feelings, although in the individual meetings she was more hesitant with her responses to my questions. She seemed to gather energy and "front region confidence" when she was with her peers.

Gwen was the oldest child in her family, and the only daughter.

Alison

Alison was a petite nine-year-old who was in grade four, and was the middle in a family of three girls. She had long blonde hair that was often styled and braided with care (and, I imagine, with assistance). She would be considered cute and innocent, a happy and content young girl. She was quite thoughtful in her contributions to our discussions and often sat for long periods of time listening to others. Alison was shy; willing to participate when she felt she had something to say, but not needing to talk just because everyone else was.

Alison enjoyed school and was considered by her teacher to be a model student, pleasant, polite, and hard-working. She was an avid skier and competitive skater. Alison liked to buy teen fashion magazines, particularly YM magazine, and was conscious of looking her best. She was clear about what kinds of clothing were acceptable to her and what weren't. Alison and her mother did most of their clothes shopping in the city because they did not feel there was enough of a selection of good quality clothing in this area for Alison.

Faye

Faye was ten years old and in grade five. She was a little shorter than average for her age, had long dark brown hair and a dark complexion. While her build was more round than some girls in her class, she was by no means considered heavy, a title which she carried painfully in her earlier elementary years. She had a body which will probably never be able to accommodate itself to today's standard of "beauty" as portrayed in the media.

A popular girl and a leader in her class, Faye was very interested in clothes and fashion, and claimed to spend a lot of time thinking about her appearance. She was quite flamboyant and talked about her plans to be a singer or an actor. Her ambition was to become famous. Faye had one sister, a teenager with quite an opposite personality, which seemed to be the source of a lot of sibling rivalry.

In getting to know Faye through our meetings, I saw a lot of personality characteristics similar to mine at that age, with an intense desire to look different and to be seen by others differently than the way I perceived they viewed me.

Faye was quite an interesting performer, and her peers were willing and eager to participate in the performances. While Faye worked hard to project a strong, tough-girl image, she appeared to be a child in some pain, struggling with issues around body image and self-esteem. In our sessions together she alternated from being carefree and unconcerned with others' opinions of her, to disclosing feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing.

<u>Alex</u>

Alex was nine years old and in grade four. She was skinny, with fine, straight, shoulder-length, light brown hair with bangs, and wore glasses. She disliked wearing glasses, feeling that this put her at a disadvantage in peer relationships. Alex often found herself on the outside of small groups of girls, and she didn't understand why this was happening. She believed it was because of her physical appearance, which to me was average.

Alex was the most obviously insecure of the girls, hesitating with any questions directed at her, and dependent upon the responses of others. When she responded, she rarely used the pronoun "I," rather using words such as "you," "some girls," or "most girls." She clearly had not had the life experiences that the other girls had, and was sometimes left out in discussions because she did not know what the other girls were talking about. When the girls spoke about specific television programs or magazines it was obvious to me that Alex was not familiar with them. After a few meetings she began to ask for clarification, saying "I know this sounds stupid, but what does _____ mean?" Usually Faye and Gwen were the first to respond with their explanations.

Alex enjoyed participating in a variety of sports, particularly figure skating and soccer. Her television viewing was carefully monitored, and rules in her home strictly enforced. She was the oldest of three girls and described her home life as difficult.

Scene II - The Performances

In the following section you will hear the voices of the performers as I, the writer and director, have chosen to include them. You will also hear my voice, as I give you my interpretation of the performers' scripts. The performances will be presented according to three primary themes: self in relation to others, appearance, and media.

You will also hear my voice as a performer, as I provide you with back region glances of some of my own childhood experiences, memories sparked by the voices of the girls.

Self in Relation to Others

Not feeling good about oneself: struggles with self-esteem.

Three of the girls spoke about struggles with self-esteem, each of them connecting self-esteem with physical appearance. Alex, Gwen, and Faye expressed a feeling of being different from other girls and wanting to change some aspects of their physical appearance as a way to improve their self-esteem.

Alex felt that if she had different clothes, more like those which some other girls wore, she would feel better about herself.

> *Alex:* *Some people they think they're pretty because they have different clothes from everybody, like some girls they try to wear really fancy-like belly button shirts, and in the summertime they always wear short, really short shorts and like they think they're really cool and pretty like that.*

Lori: Do you think that has an effect on girls?

Alex: Well they think they're better because they wear different clothes than
everybody else, then they think they're better.

Lori: How does that effect you and your self-esteem?

Alex: Well, it's kind of annoying when you have, when everybody has different
clothes than you and everybody makes fun of you because you don't have
the same clothes as they do, and they treat you differently because you
have, um, different clothes than they do.

Lori: Has it happened to you?

Alex: Yeah, sometimes.

Lori: And so how does that effect you, your self-esteem?

Alex: Well it kind of bugs me because they, like some people they don't play with
people because they dress differently.

Lori: Has that happened to you also?

Alex: Sometimes.

Alex talked a lot about comparing herself to other girls at school and feeling badly

about herself because she wasn't as pretty as other girls. She wanted to change her looks

so she could be more like others.

Lori: So how would you compare yourself to other people?

Alex: I think a lot of girls in my class are a lot prettier than me.

Lori: And how does that effect you and how you feel?

Alex: Well, some girls try to make a big thing around being pretty. Like they
spend hours on their nails and hair and stuff like that.

Lori: How would you describe yourself?

Alex: *Well, a lot of people seem to ignore some people because they have glasses, and a lot of people ignore me, and there's this other girl in my class and she has glasses too and they like her and they don't ignore her but they ignore me and we both have glasses.*

Lori: *You think they ignore you because of the glasses?*

Alex: *Well they haven't said that they don't like me cause I wear glasses but it comes to me like that.*

Lori: *So talk a bit about how what a girl looks like effects how she feels about herself.*

Alex: *Basically if she has no glasses and she's pretty and if she has long hair she's pretty.*

Lori: *So you think how a girl looks really affects how she feels?*

Alex: *Yeah.*

Lori: *And if you looked different do you think you would feel differently?*

Alex: *Yeah, probably.*

Lori: *Would you want to be different?*

Alex: *YES!*

Lori: *What would you want to change?*

Alex: *I'd have long hair and have no bangs or glasses.*

Gwen also felt different from other girls, and talked about not feeling as pretty as other girls even after buying new clothes.

Gwen: *Yeah, um, like sometimes I don't think I'm as pretty as the other girls too and stuff, and like my mom and I we go to Frenchy's to get stuff, and I do like the clothes that other people wear and stuff, sometimes I just don't think I still look like them, and sometimes I feel I don't.*

Lori: Do you feel that effects your self-esteem?

Gwen: Yes, sometimes it does.

During our early meetings, when Faye and I were meeting alone, she spoke of her experiences of having low self-esteem when she was younger, related to her desire to be thinner and more physically attractive.

> *Faye: Well I felt the same way in grade three because a lot of people would call me fatso or something like "really big" or anything they could think of or a "big wrestler," but, um, and I used to like always want to wear the same things, or if I had one wish I'd wish to be thinner or prettier or something like that and it lowered my self-esteem. I was really, it was really bad in grade three.*

From grade three to grade five Faye described a change in her attitude about herself.

> *Faye: Grade four I had more friends and they would tell me there was nothing wrong with me or anything like that. Grade five I just kind of forgot about people and learned to like myself, so I don't really care anymore and I had pneumonia a couple of times and I did get thinner, but that doesn't really matter to me really. I have lots of friends, it doesn't matter.*

In our group meetings, which occurred later, Faye disclosed a different story. She talked of feeling like she was not even a real person, that she was just performing all the time. For her, the desire to become someone else was very powerful.

> *Faye: I feel that I am not a real person. I am nothing but a big show. I feel really bad almost all the time about who I am. I feel sad, I'm upset, but I can't, I never show anyone...I just need something. I just really want to be something else other than myself.*

She wrote the following journal entry, which she shared with the group, about her strong desire to become someone other than herself. She acknowledged the performing, the selection and imitation of a media celebrity, and wanted to be able to stop playing out

the drama.

> *Stop the act! This is different. I do this all the time. It starts with*
> *something small that's mean, but not taken cause of that certain person.*
> *Well, a little while ago my book buddy said "you've got fat legs!" But then*
> *it was mean, but I didn't take it because he's little, but later on I think*
> *about it. Now I don't know this, but my body wants to be thin so I pick a*
> *cool show that I could play with my friends! Now I do that to make myself*
> *look great, and I want my friends to tell me that I'm this person. And then*
> *I felt "whoa I'd die to be that person, but hey I am" which makes me fight*
> *to be that person with my friends because I need to be her to feel good, to*
> *be great. (I can't have that taken away.)*

. . . . .

I can recall feeling like Faye, wanting to be a different person, one who was

smaller, with a flat stomach and skinny thighs. I was in grade five, and the tallest girl in

the class. Most of the other girls were still petite, I was already wearing junior size

clothes. Clothes that were given to me by some teenager who had outgrown them. I just

wanted to blend in better, not stand out because I looked bigger and older than my

friends.

. . . . .

Alicia accepted that she cannot change who she is, although she had tried to be

more like her older sister because she felt her sister was receiving more attention than she

was.

> *Alicia: She was playing the clarinet for the band and then, um, there was two*
> *other girls and they got the saxophone. And so she wanted a saxophone*
> *too, so she asked [the music teacher] for a saxophone and he said he*
> *would look for one because he only had two. And then she got one the*
> *next day and then she brought it home and my parents were all really*
> *excited. And well, um, she just like, I tried to sort of act like her. I can't*
> *really explain it but I tried to sort of be like her but nothing really sparked*

or anything. So, I'm sort of unique in my own way. I can't be anyone else. I can't really change being who I am or what I am. I can't really change, I can change my looks and everything but I can't really change my personality.

Alex, Gwen, and Faye expressed fairly strong desires to change some aspects of how they believed others saw them. Their feelings about themselves came through clearly in their voices, and these feelings seemed to be impacting negatively on their self-esteem. Alicia wanted to be different because she hoped then she would receive more attention, like her sister did.

Differences between girls and boys.

Four of the girls expressed their beliefs about life for boys as compared to girls. They spoke of gender differences and the roles that boys are socialized to play. Alex felt that boys, unlike girls, don't care or worry about how they look in public.

> *Alex:* *There's this one boy...and he always comes to school with his hands dirty and like all scarred and everything and like girls wouldn't come to school like that... [boys] come to school with dirt in their nails and everything and its really yucky!...they don't really try to make themselves dress or anything, or they don't brush their hair or anything.*

Gwen said boys have an easier time than girls because the rules are different for boys. She believed that boys "don't have anything on their looks" and never have to worry about the things that girls worry about.

> *Gwen:* *I think boys have it easier in a way because my mom after supper, she has to wash the dishes and stuff and my dad goes "why don't you help her?" And he's just lying on the couch just watching T.V. Like they kind of have it easier a little...well, like sometimes he [dad] says "I'm going to take [brother] to the hockey game with me 'cause girls aren't interested in hockey." Like even when you are or something...yeah, and I guess they*

think girls are more weaker than boys in a way.

Faye: *Girls they think they need to be thin and boys think they should be fat*
cause it shows how strong they are, or if they're skin and bones they're
not very good. It's like the opposite.

While she stated her belief that there a differences between boys and girls, Alicia

was less clear of her distinctions between the sexes.

Alicia: *Boys just walk around thinking they can be big jocks and that they can*
rule the world in a way, and girls just sort of do their own thing, like
they're more girly. Like they laugh really weird and some of them just act
like a boy, like they're sort of a tomboy and um, well some boys, like some
of them can be really sensitive and, um, caring, and some can be just like
big idiots sometimes.

All of the girls agreed that life was easier for boys than for girls, even though they

struggled with articulating their reasoning.

Peer pressure.

The girls all spoke of feeling pressure from peers to conform and behave in

certain ways. Body size, clothing, and physical appearance were all areas in which the

girls either experienced pressures from their peers or witnessed pressures in other

relationships

Faye: *A lot of times if someone is overweight or something like that they'll go,*
"oh my gosh she takes up the whole world." And then so no one can go
around her. And if you go around her to say "hi" because she's nice to
you or something people go "oh my God what are you doing with her you
must be a freak like her."

Gwen: *And then they'll say something like traitor or something like that and then*
they walk away from you and go like...

Alex: *Like if someone looks a different way and you say "I like your outfit" and*

they go "you like her outfit?" There's a girl in our class and she has a lot of nice shirts and everybody thinks she's ugly but like...well they say, people liked it too but they didn't like her so they'd say it was ugly.

Alicia: *Or maybe it's like they're older or younger than you then they're the same way.*

Alex: *Like "you're talking to a little kid."*

Gwen: *Sometimes people wear... like they'll call you up on the phone and they'll go "wear this" and then when you come to school they're wearing something totally different and they start laughing at you.*

Alicia: *They sort of set you up and maybe someone asks you to wear something and then another person asks you to wear a totally different thing and then you don't know what to wear so you just wear something of your own and so, and then you sort of get those people upset at you because you didn't wear anything they wanted you to wear, so people should just sort of give you a break because its not very fair.*

Alex: *Some people they go and get the kind of clothes that other people wear, like belly tops, and then they don't like them because they come to school and you go, "oh you look good in that" or "you don't look good in that. That's not your type of clothes."*

Faye told the group a story about a classmate who was excluded by her and her friends because of the way she walked. They referred to the girl as Barbie because she walked on her toes, and they gave her walking lessons so that she would be able to conform to the group's expectations. The girl invited Faye and her friends to a party at her house, and she was later accepted by the girls.

Faye: *Like there was a party and we went to her house, and like "oh my God you have awesome clothes." Like she has Adidas dresses and she doesn't wear them 'cause she thinks its just not her or something.*

Lori: *So did it make a difference when you found out what kind of clothes she had?*

> *Faye: Yeah! I really liked her clothes. Like she has the clothes and she's cool now.*

Faye's acceptance of her new friend seemed to be conditional upon discovering that this girl had the right kind of clothes. Even if she chose not to wear them, this girl was now considered "cool," a title that had been withheld from her until her clothes were examined.

Gwen acknowledged feeling pressure to engage in things that may not be what she would choose for herself. She was afraid that this pressure would accelerate as she heading toward adolescence.

> *Gwen: I do get pressured into doing things that I don't want to do and I'm afraid when I get older I'm afraid I'll get pressured into taking drugs and getting drunk and smoking and all that gross stuff.*

Alicia spoke of feeling pressures around appearance and having to look like others.

> *Alicia: Do you know how I feel pressured? Its when there's grade six's and my sister plays a lot of basketball and she plays on the girls basketball team. And we were downstairs because we had to go to a game one day and we had to leave early and we both felt pressure I think because there were all these grade six girls and like they kept looking at me like what's your problem, why are you here? And its not really fair because they don't even give you a chance. They just count you out for what you look like now.*

Alicia also shared her dilemma around her friend having makeup, and the concerns for her if she doesn't share her friend's interest.

> *Alicia: She brings makeup to school. She wants me to borrow it from her.*

> *Lori: Are you interested in the makeup?*

> *Alicia: Not really.*

Lori: *Do you feel any pressure to put on makeup?*

Alicia: *Well its my choice really. She shouldn't go, "here you can borrow this for a couple of days" so like I can't really say no because then she might not like me because I don't like her style.*

Alex was quite clear in her pronouncement of avoiding certain clothes because she believed that if she did other girls would not like her. She claimed that most girls would not wear pink because it was not acceptable to other girls, and they would be shunned if they did so.

Admiring others.

Each of the girls was asked individually to talk about people who they admire. Alicia spoke about her sisters, but then decided she envied rather then admired them for the attention they received from their parents. Gwen, Faye, and Alex all responded with references to people who they admire based on physical attractiveness.

Alex: *Well, there's a lot of nice girls on my skating team, like this girl she's a teenager.*

Lori: *So what is it about her that you admire?*

Alex: *One thing that's really neat about her is every week she has different nail polish on, like she always draws pictures on her nails and everything.*

Faye: *The girl on No Doubt, she's cool. She's pretty, she's got nice clothes, she has a nice voice and I watched one of her meetings of her like when they're interviewing her.*

Lori: *Would there be anyone in, say, in this school you would say you admire?*

Faye: *Probably [two girls in her class] because they love all the fashions and*

their parents always give them the money to go and get them, but like usually I have to like get from a used clothing store or something. But like that doesn't bother me because I just get them after they get them. They just go out and buy them right away. I just like the way they like to put themselves together.

Alison: I like Kristie Litchie.

Lori: How old is she?

Alison: Right now, she's about fifteen.

Lori: What is it about her that you admire?

Alison: She's pretty and I like how she acts in movies.

. . . . .

For me at that age I wanted to be Susan Partridge or Nancy Drew, because I thought they had such exciting lives, they were cool, and beautiful. I spent a lot of time wishing I was Nancy Drew and admiring her because she was pretty and smart, which I believed were the two most important qualities for a girl to have.

. . . . .

Gwen mentioned famous people, acquaintances, and strangers who she admired, all based on physical attributes.

Gwen: Well, on Full House, I really think B.J.'s pretty, yeah and on Black Stallion or something like that, I forget her name, but the girl with the crimpy hair, I think she's pretty. Probably those two.

Her response about famous people was followed with this exchange:

Lori: What about people that you know or people that you see, I mean kids, teens, adults...

Gwen: Well, there's a lot of teenagers that I think are pretty. Like just in our

school and stuff. I just walk through the halls and I see these nice
teenagers and I like them. Like our babysitters and stuff, they're really
nice. They're like pretty too...yeah like just people I don't even know or
just walk by that I just kind of think they're pretty. Sometimes like in
Annie, like there's an orphan that I think is pretty. She has really long
hair and parted and it's black and I think she's really pretty. She has a
good voice and stuff like that and I think she's pretty so I liked her.

Lori: *Anybody else?*

Gwen: *Well, not really that I can think of right now.*

Lori: *Any adults whom you admire?*

Gwen: *Well, I like your hair. And there's a lady I don't know, but she hangs*
            around with my mom sometimes and I like, her hair is really straight and
            it has kind of curls in the front and then its straight in all the back. I like
            that...well, there's a lot of teenagers that I think are pretty

My question about who the girls admired was a very general one: "Tell me about the people in your life that you admire? Tell me about them." It was most interesting to note that they responded to the question with references to physical qualities that they admired in others, even though the question was left open. They all interpreted it in the same way.

Beliefs about what men and boys like.

The girls raised the issue of females as the objects of males' desires, and drew strong connections between physical attributes of females and boys' and men's desires. They expressed beliefs that males want to be with thin, beautiful, blue-eyed females, and that females feel pressure to respond to these perceived desires.

Alex: *Boys expect you to be like this (gestured flat stomach, skinny)...some boys*

think you have to have blonde hair, blue eyes, all this perfect stuff. Some boys think you have to be so perfect you have to have the right clothes, you have to have the right body, you have to like...like they sort of like a perfect body, perfect clothes, long eyelashes.

Gwen: *Well I think they like girls that are cool, in the cool group. Like they have to be popular to go out with.*

Lori: *Alex made the comment that she believes that boys like skinny girls.*

Faye: *They do.*

Alison: *They don't like any fat girls. They like exactly pretty. And it makes some girls feel like, it makes them feel like they have to dress perfect and they can't dress like what they want anymore. And they have to dress a certain way and they tan and put their hair in a certain style and they have to look in the mirror and say "like do you think I look nice?" and stuff.*

Alex: *It's sort of like as soon as you hear that someone likes you you're sort of like, "oh no flirt alert," you know.*

Gwen: *Well, you know that old saying, there was this guy that said the only people that have the right to live on the earth are people with blonde hair and blue eyes. I think that effects a lot of people.*

Lori: *Where did that comment come from?*

Gwen: *I don't know.*

Alex: *Every boy thinks you have to have soft, sexy, luscious blue eyes.*

Alicia: *Yeah, like some boys or men think you're always supposed to wear a bikini to the beach and you're always supposed to be skinny or else they'll dump you.*

The girls have already been immersed in the messages that have participated in their enculturation of traditional gender roles, and the pressures of girls and women to be beautiful and perfect for their mates. They made these comments after a session where we looked at advertisements in magazines, and many of their comments were directly

related to, and followed from their viewing of the advertisements. They are clearly

interpreting messages in popular culture that encourage females to succumb to female

passivity and the sexualization of appearance.

Appearance

At the beginning of one of our group meetings I asked the girls to individually

write about what the word beauty meant to them.

Alison wrote:

> *I think beauty is what's inside, like, if you're beautiful they*
> *should be kind and the same as if they're beautiful.*
> *Everyone is beautiful. It's just that there is beautiful in*
> *different ways. Also beautiful is not really that you're*
> *glamorous, it's that you're kind and that you dress what*
> *you like because almost everything you see is beautiful.*
> *When you were little you always thought that beautiful is*
> *pretty but its not really.*

Gwen wrote:

> *I think beauty is someone who has a good heart and is nice*
> *and not bossy. I think pretty is someone that usually has*
> *more money than other people so they can afford nice*
> *clothes, shampoo, makeup to cover things they don't like on*
> *their face like zits! But mainly someone that is nice to you.*
> *I don't think beauty is whether you're bigger, fatter,*
> *smaller, or skinny.*

Alex wrote:

> *hair: blonde, no bangs, long.*
> *face: long eye lashes, soft blue eyes*
> *body: slim, one kind of clothes*
>
> *Really it does not matter how beautiful you are or sexy. It*
> *matters how you feel about yourself.*

Alicia wrote:

> *personality counts!*

Trust yourself
Beauty is inside
feel the way you want to
no more sex ads
don't believe what other people say
everyone has beauty inside
I think everyone should have a part in a magazine instead
of girls who have TOO much makeup on.
All girls have a problem but too many of them don't want to
share it.

Faye wrote:

A pretty face!
Beauty is :
A cover girl on a magazine profiling her best beauty for
money, fame or fun
Her life makes me:
jealous, full of envy, hope and jealousy to look and be that
face!
Because:
if you can think of all that by looking, then so will everyone
else!
But:
It should be for how you are and your inside. But for as
long as that face is on the magazine you can't!

After completing their writing the girls were invited to either share what they had written or simply give their papers to me. They all agreed to share what they had written with the group, although they all began with disclaimers about the quality of their writing. The girls remained fairly noncommital as they listened to one another, until Faye, who was the last to share, began reading. All of a sudden emotions erupted as all of the girls chimed in about how true Faye's thoughts were and how they felt so similar. After hearing Faye's thoughts two of the girls asked if their writing could be discarded because they thought Faye's ideas better explained how they really felt.

The girls, at that moment, provided me with one of their backstage performances, as they pulled back the curtain and shared how they were really feeling, as opposed to what they had put on paper; the more intellectual, "in an ideal world," thoughts.

Body size.

Both in our individual meetings and the group gatherings the girls discussed concerns regarding body size, ranging from issues about not being tall enough to worries about weight and being the "wrong" size. The girls all revealed feelings of embarrassment around their bodies when they were with friends, comparing themselves to others and believing they didn't quite measure up. When Faye confessed that she lied about her weight during a class ski trip because of her fear of being ridiculed, the other girls joined in with confessions of their own, all disclosing their worries that they were the wrong body size. While Alicia, Gwen, Faye, and Alison discussed their feelings about their belief that they were too fat or too heavy, Alex expressed her frustration with being too skinny and "bony."

Gwen initially seemed reluctant to become too specific in her commentary about herself, but during a later meeting she talked about feeling embarrassed about her weight.

> Gwen: *Like I use to be really plump in grade two but I guess it all kind of takes shape when you get a little older. Like it starts to slim down a little.*

> Lori: *Do you worry about that, about getting bigger or wanting to be skinnier or anything?*

> Gwen: *Well I think right now I'm fine with who I am and stuff like that. I don't think I'm that fat, but I might want to lose a couple of pounds.*

Lori: What about gain a couple of pounds?

Gwen: Well, I wouldn't like get all upset and start screaming about it. I guess I
        wouldn't, I guess I could like eat and then for Lent I might give up
        something, like cut back on the sweets a little or something like that.

At a later meeting when Gwen was asked to describe herself she again mentioned

body size and weight.

Lori: How would you describe yourself now?

Gwen: Uh...like there's stuff I'd like to change. I think I could be skinnier and
        stuff, and I'd like my nails to be longer and I want my hair to be a little bit
        longer.

Lori: You said you thought maybe you could be a little skinnier, do you weigh
        yourself?

Gwen: Well, like when I go to [friend's] house I kind of get embarrassed in a
        way cause she weighs like sixty some, sixty-nine or something like that,
        and like I kind of realize that I weigh like around 80 or 79.

When we were meeting in a group Gwen became more direct with her opinion

about herself.

Gwen: Yeah well I think I'm too fat!

.   .   .   .   .

I HATED Canada Fitness Awards. Beginning in grade four every year I dreaded

the time when we would start participating in this program, because one of the first

things we had to do was step on scales in front of whoever in the class happened to be

standing there. I always felt like the whole class was trying to see how much I weighed

as I stood on the scales. During those times I hated my teacher, I hated gym, and I hated

myself for being bigger than the other girls!

.   .   .   .   .

Alicia spoke of her own belief that people are all the same regardless of size, but at the same time she didn't like it when others called her flabby.

Alicia: Fat people are like skinny people, they aren't any different.

> *People look at me and they go, "flabby, flabby." I'm not a great nutritious person but I eat nutritious food and even though I do that people go "look at you, you're really flabby." But like I eat enough vegetables, what am I supposed to do?...I play basketball right and everyone goes "your legs are so flabby" but they're really not, it's really muscle. I mean you can't get rid of it.*

During my first meeting with Alison she expressed a desire to be skinnier, even though she was quite a tiny girl.

Alison: I'd like to be a bit skinnier.

Lori: You would?

Alison: Yep!

Lori: What sort of thoughts do you have about that?

Alison: Well, I use to be just so skinny and my body would just sort of be nice and skinny and then stuff like that and... I'm not that skinny anymore.

Lori: Who would you consider a skinny person? What size would you want to be to be skinny?

Alison: Well I'd like to be about that size (gesturing with hands).

Lori: You'd like to change your clothing size, go to a smaller size?

Alison: People say I'm skinny but I don't think that I'm that skinny.

Lori: How do you feel about that?

Alison: Um, well I don't think I'm fat, but I just want to be a bit skinnier.

Alison also stated her wish to be taller because every year she has always had to be in either the front or the middle row for class pictures. She despised being in what she called "the shortest row."

What was interesting to me was Alison's comment during our second meeting about ideal weights and how she compared to that. Her thoughts on her size in relation to others flip-flopped back and forth, as she sometimes claimed to feel that she was too skinny, and at other times said she would like to be a bit skinnier.

Lori: Do you ever weigh yourself?

Alison: Well yeah sometimes.

Lori: Is there a good weight?

Alison: Well I only weigh 65 pounds and most girls in my class weigh 80. I think
about 70 or 75 would probably be a good weight.

Faye talked about her feelings about her size and weight and how many of her friends were much smaller than she was, and about how some of her friends would say they were too fat as well. Faye believed for some girls this was a way to get attention from peers.

Lori: Do you ever think about your weight?

Faye: All the time.

Lori: What kinds of things do you think about?

Faye: If, I don't know. Like a lot of people will tease you if you're really fat. I
hear some people teasing people.

Lori: *Have people teased you before?*

Faye: *Yeah.*

Lori: *What kinds of things have they...?*

Faye: *Like "here comes Yokozuno," or somebody really fat...yeah that was when I was in grade three and probably weighed about, oh I don't know, 92 pounds.*

Lori: *Do you weigh yourself?*

Faye: *Yeah.*

Lori: *Very often?*

Faye: *Oh, twice a week.*

Lori: *You said that you think about it (your size) a fair bit, so what kinds of thoughts do you have?*

Faye: *I don't know. Well a lot last year...I learned [sic] to be a lot thinner in the waist cause there I was just...I was getting over grade three where I wasn't really fat anymore, but I guess it was almost like you would be really cool almost if you were thinner.*

Lori: *Do you think a lot of people believe that?*

Faye: *A lot of people.*

Lori: *Do you believe that?*

Faye: *If it was my choice not really. I wouldn't think you'd have to be thinner.*

Lori: *But do you believe you have a choice?*

Faye: *Most of the time, yeah*

Lori: *All of your friends think about that?*

Faye: *All of them. Yeah, like I'll look at myself in the mirror and I'm like "whoa*

I look a little big today," and they're like "no you don't you're not fat."
They just say those kinds of things. But if [friend] sucks in she's like a
piece of cardboard, really she is. She doesn't really...we even measured it
like this way like she's really small. But it's just like, I guess it's because
you want to be thinner so you can fit into different kinds of outfits. I guess
you could say, like belly tops look better on you, but it doesn't really
matter. I just wear belly tops if I want to right, but um... or just like you
could wear smaller outfits...but I don't see the point why you want to wear
a small outfit, but they never talk about anyone being fat.

Faye later said size was not a function of the scale so much as it was of appearance.

BUT there is no certain weight, there is a certain look. If you look...you
could be skinny and weigh 1000 pounds but they only care that you look
skinny I guess. It's not really your weight.

Alex, who has always been very slim, stated that "it's not really a bad thing to be

fat. People always think they're not perfect because they're fat." While Alex had never

worried about being too fat she complained that "I'm a little too tall."

All of the girls indicated that, given the opportunity, they would change their body

size. I wonder, at that age, if any part of the discontent with some girls is more about

sharing the dominant cultural message; that as a female you are supposed to be

dissatisfied with your body?

Clothes.

The girls all believed that clothes and fashion are important to girls their age, and

there is some pressure to have particular kinds of clothing and to look good wearing it.

For Gwen, more care is required in selecting clothes at her age than was when she

was younger.

Gwen: You try to dress really WOW, and you try to match things and stuff 'cause
like when you were younger you didn't really care what you wore. You'd

just throw on that. You'd just say "oh, I love this shirt, I love these pants," and just put them together. And it's really weird because before you didn't do that. You didn't go "oh no I don't like that, I need something to match." Like when you were five, or six, or seven or something.

Gwen, Alex and Alicia shared similar stories about the influence of peers on clothing choices, and how difficult these choices can be.

Gwen: Like sometimes people wear...like they'll call you up on the phone and they'll go "wear this" and then when you come to school they're wearing something totally different, and they start laughing at you.

Alicia: They sort of set you up and maybe someone asks you to wear something, and then another person asks you to wear a totally different thing, and then you don't know what to do so you just wear something of your own and so...and then you sort of get these people upset at you because you didn't wear anything that they wanted you to wear. So people should sort of just give you a break because its not very fair.

Alex: Sometimes when you get a really nice outfit and you go to put it on, and you think you look so great, and then you go to school and they're just like "get away from me, you're scaring me."

Not only the style of clothes is significant to these girls and their peers. Where the clothes are purchased is an important factor as well. Clothing that is considered "acceptable" can quickly lose its status when it is found out that the article was purchased at a department store or a used clothing outlet.

Alex: There's this girl in our class, and a lot of us go to Frenchy's, and we get a lot of cool clothes, and she likes them...and she goes "where'd you get 'em?" and we go "Frenchy's," and she goes "um, they're not that great."

Alicia: There's this girl, and she goes to Toronto to get most of her clothes, and like so, and I bought this really cool shirt and it was from Zellers, and she goes "where did you get your shirt?" and I go "Zellers" and she like started to hate it because it came from Zellers.

Gwen: *At Suzie Shier and stuff, I like their stuff. They have all this nice nail polish and stuff and belly tops and stuff like that. Bell bottom pants and those shoes with the heels is what I'm into right now.*

Alison: *Like we usually go to Mic Mac Mall to buy clothes and stuff...I like clothes from the Gap. And I like some shirts from Suzie Shier. There's a catalogue called Land's End and I like to get clothes from that.*

Faye has to wait a little longer than her friends to have clothes that are in style

because she has to get them from a used clothing store, whereas they can buy them as

soon as the styles are in stores.

Faye: *[friend] and [friend] love all the fashions, and their parents always give them money to go out and get them. But like usually I have to like get from a used clothing store or something.*

Girls can find themselves excluded from groups if they don't have "cool" clothes.

Alicia: *Like sometimes if you're sitting in a room and there's not anyone exactly like you, you sort of feel different because, sort of like what [Gwen] said, like sometimes someone will be wearing something and well a lot of people are wearing the same things, like a trend, and then you don't have it, so you sort of feel left out.*

Lori: *So does anyone else feel that way, the way [Alicia] is describing?*

All: *Yeah!*

Alex: *Like sitting in a room and all these girls are wearing these belly button shirts and you're there wearing this sweater with blouse and skirts and panty hose and stuff like that.*

Lori: *So how does that make you feel then?*

Alex: *Well it kind of makes me feel like weird because everybody's wearing this kind of clothes and like you're not wearing those kind of clothes.*

Alicia: *Sometimes you get excluded because of it. Sometimes I do that by accident, like I exclude people.*

Alex has experienced this discrimination firsthand.

> *Alex:* *Well it's kind of annoying when you have...when everybody else has different clothes then you, and everybody makes fun of you because you don't have the same clothes as they do, and they treat you differently because you have, um, different clothes than they do.*
>
> *Lori:* *Has it happened to you?*
>
> *Alex:* *Yeah, sometimes...well it kind of bugs me because they like...some people they don't play with people because they dress differently.*

. . . . .

I was ten years old in grade five. We had a snowstorm in May. My mother made me wear a white fur pile jacket with a hood that made me look like a teddy bear. I cried and fought, but to no avail. I'll never forget standing at the bus stop wishing I could bury myself in the snowbanks because I was so humiliated by that jacket. I was sure that everyone would laugh and make fun of me.

. . . . .

Faye claimed to be able to ignore the pressures around wearing certain styles of clothing and make her own decisions. She also admitted that she has participated in pressuring others in her judgements of their clothes.

> *Faye:* *I just wear the way I like to look. There are sort of pressures, but it's not really bothering me. I just wear different stuff and I can see changes in what I wear and stuff.*
>
> *Faye:* *Um, everyone likes what I'm wearing. But I don't really care what they think of what I'm wearing. I wear what's comfortable. Sometimes I wear what other people like.*
>
> *Lori:* *Do you find yourself looking at other people and judging?*

Faye: Yeah, a lot of people do that [judging] in my class. Like in gym class they just kind of 'like you, like you, hate you" or "like your outfit, hate your outfit, like your outfit, don't like your outfit." "Like it, like it, like it," they can do stuff like that.

Lori: Who decides what's a good outfit?

Faye: The kids in grade six. They always do. Like they decide that platforms are totally cool and if you don't have them then you're a geek or something.

There is a lot of pressure for girls to have the right clothes and to be up on the latest fashions. Alex seemed to be most conflicted around issues of clothing, because her parents were not supporting her desire to have the same clothes as her peers. She experienced some ridicule from peers because of this. Having "cool" clothing was one of the most important factors in peer groups for these girls. They were prepared to go to great lengths to dress in the latest fads, and to be acknowledged for doing so.

Concerns about appearance and desire to change it.

When I posed the question "Is there anything about yourself that you would like to change?" each one of the girls had something to say about her appearance and the changes she would like to make. The changes were based on the desire to be "pretty."

Hair was an issue for the girls, from "working with it" to wanting to change its color. Everyone in the group had family members, friends, or knew of other girls who had dyed their hair, and that seemed to hold a lot of appeal to the girls.

Gwen was most interested in changing her hairstyle and color, but her preferences changed frequently. At one time she expressed a desire for black hair, and at another

time brown became her choice.

> Gwen: *Well there's a lot of things I'd like to change, like I want to dye my hair and grow it a little longer on the top.*

> Gwen: *[friend] she just got, like her hair is the same as mine and she just got hers dyed black and hers is parted too. Like it looks really good, like it looks original. So I like that.*

> Lori: *You don't like blonde hair?*

> Gwen: *Well, I don't mind it, but sometimes you just want to try different things. Like I'd see what black actually looks like. If I really don't like it, I'd probably change back to a different blondish or something.*

Later in the same meeting she became less clear about what the specific hair

changes would look like.

> Gwen: *Yeah, well, I really think about when I grow up. Like what will I look like, and what kind of stuff will I be into? The only thing I'd probably want to change is probably my hair. I'm fine with everything else. I don't mind the color or anything, like I just want like no bangs or something like that. Like when my bangs are long I might not want to dye it black. I might want to just keep it blonde, but I don't know yet.*

> Gwen: *Well actually I want my hair to be brown.*

Alex was also anxious to change her hair color. Unlike Gwen, she was very clear

that she wanted to become blonde. She thought that if she became a blonde she would be

prettier, which was important for girls in her class.

> Lori: *What would you do if you could do anything different?*

> Alex: *I'd change my hair, I'd get contact lenses. I want to bleach my hair.*

> Lori: *What thoughts do you have about bleaching your hair?*

> Alex: *Blonde. I love blonde. Not like white blonde, just dirty blonde.*

Lori: And do you think your life would be different if you had contacts and blonde hair?

Alex: Well some people...I wish my hair was longer too, but some people when they have short hair and glasses people don't like them for some reason.

Lori: Do you think your life would be different if you had blonde hair and no glasses?

Alex: I don't know. I just think I would be prettier maybe.

Faye, Alison, and Alicia spoke about their desire to have hair styles like those they see in magazines, and how difficult, if not impossible, these styles are to attain. They felt that self-esteem is effected by this unattainable quest for perfect hair.

Alicia: Sometimes they (magazines) make you feel really crappy, because you see their hair and you think "oh my God I wish I had that hair color, I wish..."

Faye: And then you go and spend money on it and then you say "I really like this" and then you get to school and you think everyone's gonna love it, and then they go "I hate it" and then you feel like you spent your money on nothing and you start to hate it because of the way people think about it.

Lori: And then how do you feel?

Alicia: And then you feel really crappy.

Alison: Sometimes there's something really good in magazines and then you're like, you think you can never compete with a person.

Alison: If everyone just looked normal without all these makeovers then we'd all just look the same and it wouldn't matter that much.

For Faye and her friends doing their hair was a favorite pastime. They came up with some creative ways to experiment with different styles using washable markers.

Lori: *So what other kinds of things do you do? Anything else with your friends?*

Faye: *Do our hair.*

Lori: *How do you do that?*

Faye: *We put different kinds of clips and stuff in it, or maybe take a little marker and put the side of your face with marker just to see what it would look like. Just a little bit, not like the entire head, just maybe that much (shows with a few strands of her hair).*

Lori: *With marker?*

Faye: *Washable*

In addition to their concerns about their hair, the girls all had other aspects of their appearance with which they were unhappy and would like to change. Alex was unhappy with her "hairy arms." She said that some kids at school called her "ape." She also believed that if she didn't have to wear glasses she would get more attention instead of being ignored.

Alex: *Well a lot of people seem to ignore some people because they have glasses, and a lot of people ignore me, and there's this other girl in my class and she has glasses too and they like her too, and they don't ignore her but they ignore me, and we both have glasses.*

Lori: *You think they ignore you because of the glasses.*

Alex: *Well they haven't said that they don't like me cause I wear glasses but it comes to me like that.*

. . . . .

I began wearing glasses in grade three. They were little round, wire-framed "granny" glasses. I thought they made me a little "cool" especially because my sister, Lisa, was jealous because I got to wear glasses and she didn't (she got hers a year later).

There was never any issue about being teased because of my glasses, although I do

remember a boy being teased because he had to wear glasses.

It wasn't until I was a teenager that glasses were no longer "cool" and the time

came to save my money to buy contact lenses.

. . . . .

Alicia talked about the desire to have others stop referring to her thighs as flabby.

She was bothered by this, and claimed, "you can't get skinny in a day."

Gwen admitted that, while she knows it should be what is on the inside that is

important, she is concerned with her outside appearance. She wants to look good at all

times.

> Gwen: *I think I could be skinnier and stuff, and I'd like my nails to be longer, and I want my hair to be a little bit longer so I can put it up in those clips you know, those clips, and stuff like that, and I don't want bangs, like I'm growing them out.*

Faye did not like the scar that she claimed to have on her nose from falling (it was

unidentifiable to me). She felt that it always showed up, so she used a little makeup to

cover it.

Alison was worried about her freckles and whether or not they would disappear.

She also expressed a concern about being so skinny that her backbone sticks out when

she sits down, even though at another meeting she talked about wanted to lose weight.

> Alison: *I don't like freckles and I'm afraid they won't go away, 'cause my dad had them when he was little and they covered his whole face that you can't notice it. Then my mom, she had freckles only in the summer and then they went away and then they came in the winter and then they went away, ...and I'm not sure if this is like winter and then going away, and I'm*

really worried because I don't like freckles.

Lori: Do you worry about how it (your body) looks?

Alison: I think I'm the right height but I'm really skinny and my backbones they stick out. Like its embarrassing like when I'm sitting or standing they stick out sometimes, and when you're wearing a tight shirt that really bothers me. So I want to get more skin on me.

Making changes in hair styles and color was the most common wish for the girls. Coloring hair had become a fashionable and admirable activity for girls at this age, although up to this point none of the parents had agreed to allow their daughters to do so.

Alex made a clear connection about her struggles with peers and her wearing of glasses. Changing her physical appearance, she believed, would eliminate her challenges with peers.

The girls all agreed that it is important to look good to others, although if there wasn't so much influence from media they would be able to be less concerned.

Media

Media pressure.

The girls all expressed a belief that the media is a powerful force in their lives. They spoke about the unattainable images of perfection portrayed in the media, and the impact these images have on young girls. They shared their concerns about how messages about body size, clothes, and beauty encourage them to be critical and less accepting of themselves because they "don't measure up."

Lori: Do you think T.V. and magazines put some pressure on you?

Gwen: Yeah, a lot.

Lori: Do you feel pressure from stuff you see on T.V.?

Gwen: Well not necessarily. I think more on magazines.

Lori: How so?

Gwen: Because on T.V. the only girls that they naturally have, like in the magazines, would be like only to do with the shampoo and stuff. But in magazines they have it on clothes and modelling and hair, your lips, your eyeshadow, stuff like that. I get more from the magazines, from that kind of stuff.

. . . . .

I didn't have access to the magazines the girls have until I was in grade six and had money from delivering newspapers. Then I started purchasing teen fashion magazines on a regular basis, and dreamed of becoming pretty and slim like the girls in those magazines. At nine and ten the Simpson's catalogue was my fashion consultant. I wanted to look like, and have the same clothes as, the models in the Simpson's catalogue.

. . . . .

Alicia, Alison and Gwen believe that actors and models determine how girls should look.

Lori: Who decides what girls should look like?

Alison: Probably all kinds of actors and stuff like that.

Lori: So, T.V.? People that you see on T.V. kind of set the tone?

Alison: Yeah.

Alicia: On television and the magazines...the messages they give are sort of on them sometimes.

Lori: How so?

Alicia: Well some of them like...um, maybe they'll say one day you wear...in a magazine or on television maybe they'll say like wear purple jeans and a black shirt, and then you go to school and people think you're really weird, and so some people blame it on the magazines, some people blame it on themselves for listening to that and...

Lori: Do you think a lot of people believe those messages and follow what T.V. and magazines say?

Alicia: Yes!

Lori: So then movies and T.V. shows make you want to do things like them?

Faye: Yeah. Like they just put something on and they're so perfect.

Alison and Alex stated that the media encourages girls to value being pretty, and to feel badly if they are not.

Lori: Who gives these messages to girls?

Alison: Um, probably magazines and stuff, and maybe like your friends heard about it from a television show, so I'll be so pretty and stuff.

Lori: So you start to value being pretty?

Alison: Yeah.

Lori: Do you ever compare yourself to girls on T.V.?

Alex: Sometimes. Some girls are really pretty, like the girls on T.V., and it kind of makes me feel bad because you're not as pretty as they are.

The concept of body size was a repeated theme in the girls' reflections about the media. It was clear in listening to them that they have learned how the media connect

beauty with thinness, as only thin models are evident, unless, as Alison pointed out, they

are referring to facial photographs, which are sometimes of heavy girls.

> *Faye:*   *Well in magazines they aren't really real. Well they are real people, but they only take the ones that are thin, that'll look good in this outfit and stuff like that, so you obviously know that not everyone would look like that.*
>
>   *Because like television like wouldn't take a big fat person with no good looks because they're afraid people won't watch their show.*

> *Lori:*   *Have you ever seen fat people in magazines or on T.V.?*

> *Alex:*   *No, not really.*

> *Lori:*   *So, what kind of message do you think that sends to people?*

> *Alex:*   *Well most people think that if they're fat no one likes them, and they think they're ugly.*

> *Lori:*   *Do you find that there are lots of messages on T.V. and magazines like if you're a girl you have to be pretty, you have to be beautiful?*

> *Gwen:*   *Yeah, 'cause like in that kind of stuff they don't take...like I never see more of a bigger girl on it like, and I don't think that's being right, 'cause I don't think it really matters what size you have to be to be on a commercial or something.*

> *Lori:*   *What kind of message does that send to girls?*

> *Gwen:*   *Like you have to be kind of skinny to be on stuff like that, to be popular and stuff.*

Alicia was angry at how the media portray fat people on television.

> *Alicia:*   *The media doesn't seem to allow the... not fat people, but people who have a bigger build. They don't seem to let many people of those types in. Like there's that lady on the Drew Carey Show.*

> *Faye:*   *I love her makeup. It's cool.*

Lori: But do you think they are making fun of fat people?

Alicia: Yeah in that muumuu.

Alison: They make her up so that she's all stupid.

Alex: It kind of makes her seem like a dunce.

Alicia: They sort of make you think that all bigger people are like that. But I
don't think they are because I had a friend once and she was fat, but like
fat people are like skinny people. They aren't any different.

Alison shared her interpretation of some magazine messages, that they encourage

dieting and exercising, and that fat girls should go on a diet.

Alison: The magazines, they say like, um, "have a diet on this and you'll be so
skinny. "...but some models are sort of fat, but then they have to go on a
diet first.

Lori: Have you seen fat models in magazines?

Alison: Well sort of broadish. Like maybe out to there and stuff but not really big
fat ones.

Lori: What about on T.V.?

Alison: Well sometimes because some fat girls, they like put their hair in buns and
put lipstick on and then go out, like there's some pictures of them on
magazines, on the cover, of their faces and stuff.

Lori: Of fat girls?

Alison: Yeah, like their faces and stuff but not their bodies. Like they don't do
that like other models do.

Lori: They don't pose.

Alison: Yeah.

Lori: What's your opinion about that, that there aren't...

Alison: Fat models? I don't know because like, well I wouldn't really like to be fat myself, but it wouldn't really matter that much because like, unless they're pretty and someone picks them. Because someone could go up to someone and say "get on a diet and I'll have you as a model soon" or something like that.

Lori: So you think that's what they should do if they want to be a model?

Alison: No, but if some fat people want to be a model they could sort of listen to things in magazines that aren't hurtful or something, that are really useful.

Lori: What about on T.V.?

Alison: Um, well sometimes in commercials there's fat people, but like in Cover Girl and stuff there's all kinds of skinny people.

Lori: What kinds of messages does that send to girls?

Alison: That sends sort of like "be pretty and use Cover Girl, and be all skinny and you'll be pretty" and stuff.

Lori: Do you think that makes it difficult for young girls?

Alison: Yeah because they think "oh I'm not really pretty because I'm not skinny" and stuff like that. But sometimes they are pretty.

Faye talked about seeing girls and young women in the media and wanting to become them because they were so happy and had so much control over themselves. She has tried to follow behaviour patterns of some actors that she has admired.

Faye: Well when you see a person who's really thin, and you're here like "well I'm not really all that thin," and so when you try to be that person you might go "well they don't finish all their supper, they eat half of it and that's probably what makes them thin" and so you try that.

Lori: Do you feel that you want to look more like them?

Faye: Yeah. If you eat that way then you'll look like them.

Lori: *What about commercials that you see in magazines, commercials that you see on T.V.?*

Faye, Alison, and Gwen (in unison): Cover Girl

Gwen: Probably everyone's seen that commercial.

Faye: (sings jingle from ad) It makes you want to be them 'cause they run out with these pure faces, and they run onto a boat and they sail away, and they're all friends, and they're all happy.

The media values of thinness and beauty are clearly evident to these girls. They have each chosen to accept the messages to a different degree, but are all aware of the impact of media messages in their lives.

Influences of television.

Television has been a powerful influence for the girls, so much so for some of them that they take on the role of a television character in their everyday lives, and do everything they can to "become" that person. Gwen suffered physically from her efforts to imitate one of her favorite singers from a music video. She wanted to look just like the main singer from the group No Doubt, the girl whose name she chose for this thesis, so she used nail polish to paint the side of her face, around her eye. When she tried to remove it she used nail polish remover, and burnt the side of her face. She was quite embarrassed by the results, but said she wasn't going to stop trying to look like her favorite television personalities.

Gwen and the other girls were aware of the importance of fashion as portrayed on

television. Gwen said she gets some of her ideas for her clothes from television,

particularly music videos. Faye also claimed that girls get their fashion ideas from

television.

> *Faye: They (girls in grade six) watch the show on fashion that got them into being ahead of fashion. So they kind of like, they kind of say "well its in fashion to wear this and if you don't wear this then you're not in fashion." And they want to be in fashion, so they don't like you if you're not.*

Faye believed that movies and television have a large effect on girls' feelings

about themselves. Alicia found the way some women behave on television stupid and

confusing.

> *Alicia: They're selling something that they shouldn't be.*
>
> *I don't want to be influenced by them.*
>
> *Yeah, and then on T.V. shows, whenever someone gives...a man gives them a tip they stick it down their shirt into their bra, and then when they're paying for something they just take it out. That is really stupid, I mean that's...why do they do that? What influences them to do that and why are they doing that?*

Alex related to the people on television who are teased because they are not pretty

enough. She believed that, even though girls admire and want to look like television

personalities, a lot of famous stars probably still aren't happy with themselves. Alison

agreed, saying that the pressure girls feel to look like famous personalities returns to these

people, so that they feel they can't even go for a walk without looking perfect for fear that

their fans will be critical.

Gwen, Faye, and Alex spoke about the images projected from television, and their

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strong desires to live like they believe television stars do, because they look perfect and, if

they have problems, they are solved in thirty minutes.

Lori: So then movies and T.V. shows make you want to do things like them?

Gwen: Yeah, like they just put something on and they're so perfect.

Faye: Yeah, their lives, even though they have problems and stuff they're usually
        fixed in a half an hour.

Gwen: The stars' lives are so perfect because usually they get all the nice clothes
        and...

Faye: They make you feel like a piece of junk.

Lori: And what about that Clueless show? We talked about it last time and
        didn't get it on the tape about how people feel. Is there anything more you
        want to share about that?

Gwen: Well sometimes it makes you feel like you're lower class. Like they all
        have these perfect clothes and everything's so perfect for them, and their
        lives are so nice, and they have all these clothes that match. And you wish
        you had that, and it just makes, sometimes you feel so bad.

Faye: It can make you feel really frustrated because you try to have a computer
        that can draw [Clueless girls have a computer that organizes and plans
        their wardrobes] all your stuff and you work and work and you get in
        trouble because you don't really care about anything else anymore.

Alex: Sometimes it makes you feel really like, makes you feel kind of bad about
        yourself because you don't have all that cool stuff that they do. Some
        people think that then they're not cool.

Lori: And you had talked last time about how it makes you really want to be
        them, want to look like them, want to have the same things. And if you
        can't, then how do you feel?

Faye: You fight for it. You want it!

Alex: It's sort of like you're saying if you don't have the kind of clothes you're
        wearing, you're not the person you are.

Faye: It's not the clothes thing. It's like I hate myself. Like I don't have, there's nothing good about me, so I've probably been through sixteen million shows, not just Clueless.

Lori: So you look to a lot of shows to try to get an image to help make you feel better?

Faye: Yeah.

The girls all agreed that if there was no television the pressures to conform to the blonde hair, blue-eyed look of stars from Sabrina and Clueless would be much less. Gwen and Faye said that they sometimes feel that they no longer want to be themselves, they begin to hate their own lives, and will do everything like the stars to become more like them. Although Alison reminded everyone that individuals in the entertainment industry are people just like the girls themselves who happened to be dressed up, Gwen, Faye, and Alex were convinced that the lives of stars *must* be wonderful. Faye was so convinced by television stars that she claimed that she couldn't go back to her own life so she "switched" and did everything like the media personalities she emulated.

Influences of magazines.

Alicia was the only one of the four girls who, in our individual meetings, reported not being terribly interested in magazines. However, during one of my meetings with Alex, she said that she and Alicia get together to look at magazines which Alicia buys, and select clothing and shoes that they would like to have.

Alex: Well sometimes when we have friends over, when I have friends over, we usually look in the magazines, just like to get other people's opinions, to

get what kind of clothes you like and stuff.

Lori: *What kinds of magazines do you look in to get those ideas?*

Alex: *Well sometimes I look in Sears magazines, but sometimes our friend, some of the other girls, like [Alicia], she brings the teen ones and I really like some of the clothes in there.*

Lori: *Do you get any other ideas from magazines?*

Alex: *Well sometimes I do, like how to do your hair and stuff. How to put it up and stuff.*

Alex saw Alicia as the trend-setter, after getting her ideas from magazines.

Alex: *Well the first person to start wearing those kinds of clothes is [Alicia].*

Lori: *Where do you think [Alicia] gets her ideas from?*

Alex: *Well she looks at a lot of teen magazines.*

Lori: *Do you ever look at those magazines?*

Alex: *I don't get them, but sometimes I borrow some from her.*

Lori: *Do you think the magazines really decide what kinds of clothes girls should be wearing?*

Alex: *Yeah.*

Alison told me that she liked to read teen magazines, especially YM. She said she gets ideas for hair styles and clothing from this publication. They also offer advice to young girls.

Lori: *What kinds of questions would they (girls) ask about appearance?*

Alison: *Well they say, some people say, "I'm too fat and like I can't get any skinnier" and stuff. And then YM, it tells them how to like keep themselves skinny and get on a diet. They say, like, diet sometimes isn't good for you, and diet plans aren't good for you and stuff like that.*

Lori: So, do they offer diets?

Alison: No, they don't really offer them, but they tell them which diets are good and stuff like that. So they can go out somewhere and buy something, but it's good for them. It's not like some diet foods that have some sugar and stuff that isn't good but no one knows it.

In addition to diet advice, Alison outlined a number of other things that she looks at in her magazines, including information about hair care, lipsticks, and items one can order, such as perfume to put behind your ears to help you sleep better, and something to put under your eyes to "help you have sweet dreams and not like nightmares." The Zodiac column was also a favorite of Alison's because it provided her with advice about what kinds of clothing would be suitable for her "sign," and good sleeping positions.

Gwen said she likes to get ideas from supermodels about how to do her hair and what kinds of shampoo to use. Her clothing choices were effected by magazines as well.

Gwen: Like sometimes they have these nice outfits, like the kind of stuff I'm into.

Lori: So is this where you get your ideas for what you're going to wear, from these kinds of magazines?

Gwen: Yeah.

Faye: The reason me and my sister get them is because they have little things like in school, quizzes. That's why we like them. And we like looking through the outfits and saying "oh that's a cool one," and then when we get enough money we can go out shopping for the ones we like, not what anyone else likes, we just pick out different stuff.

Faye loved looking through teen magazines to find ideas about nail polish colors, fashion, and "neat ways how to do your hair," and even received a subscription to one of them. She also talked about little columns concerning dieting, and about "some of the

models that starve themselves to be thin."

When we came together for our second group meeting, Alex brought a bag full of magazines for girls and young women that she had found on the side of the road. These sparked an animated discussion, as the girls looked at pictures and advertisements and offered their interpretations of the messages being projected:

Alison: *"Dress like this and you'll look perfect."*

Alicia: *That says "pick me up hot stuff." That's sort of weird, like it says "if you don't wear this you're not hot and sexy" sort of.*

Alison: *Like people should be able to pick their own colors, and magazines are going "wear black and you'll be so cool."*

Alicia: *Look at this ad. It says "be a sexy babe and you'll get a boyfriend that has a new car, and tattoos."*

What is it selling?

Lori: *What do you think it's selling? What message is that giving about girls and women?*

Alicia: *That says "pucker up baby."*

Lori: *Does it say anything about intelligence?*

Alicia: *No, that says sex, sex,*

Alison: *See these boys, and look how much they are into that girl. And then they're like, giving her a rose and stuff.*

Lori: *So what is that telling girls?*

Alex: *"You need a boy to be sexy."*

Alicia: *This is supposed to be advertising Special K, but instead it's got a bathing suit.*

Alex: This would get boys really going.

Lori: What does that mean to you?

Alex: If you buy this it seems like you get a free bikini and boys will hoot and holler for you.

Faye and Gwen chose not to offer any critical comments about things the girls were seeing in the magazines. They instead continued looking at the outfits and makeovers.

At one point Gwen and Alicia were engaged in a heated argument about Abmaster. Gwen identified its benefits, because her mother has one, and the advertisement said it would make your waist smaller, while Alicia stated that the woman who was in the advertisement was skinny, and would make people want to buy an Abmaster to try to look just like the model. The girls were unable to come to agreement on their opinions. After a while we all joined in the discussion.

Gwen: I just think people need to do sports. We have it (the Abmaster), and it makes you stronger, you build muscles. It does change your body shape.

Alison: You just get it because there's pretty women using it and they're all perfect.

Gwen: They're strong.

Alex: Yeah, but they're not just strong, they're slim, they're sexy.

Lori: Do you think it would sell as well if the woman in the advertisement had muscular abdominals but she wasn't pretty and sexy looking?

Faye, Alex, Alison: No!

Faye: 'Cause people wouldn't buy something to make them look better if they were going to look ugly.

Gwen: Well maybe if they advertised it a bit better.

Alison: If somebody ugly was showing an ad for Abmaster more people wouldn't get it.

They have pretty girls using them, and they get them to look all slim and sexy.

The girls have already begun to recognize the mixed messages projected in the media. These contradictions were reflected in their dialogue. On the one hand they argued vehemently against the manipulative tactics of the magazine advertisements, while on the other hand they had previously talked about the ideas for makeup, hair and nail care, and fashion that they got from these same magazines.

Act V - As the Curtain Closes

I have not ceased being fearful, but I have ceased
to let fear control me...I have gone ahead despite the pounding in my heart
that says: turn back, turn back, you'll die if you venture too far
(Jong, cited in Albert, 1996, p.141)

Scene I - Critique of the Performance

As I begin the final chapter, the curtain of this text slowly closing, I am reminded

of the feeling I've had on more than one occasion after attending a Shakespearean drama.

The performers are taking their final bows and I plead with the universe not to send any

seasoned Shakespeare theater-goers my way for a bit of friendly dialogue and critique.

But of course, where are my opportunities for learning if these well-informed and

enthusiastic people do not challenge me with their inquiries of my opinions? Will I be

able to engage in meaningful dialogue? Will I be able to articulate my thoughts in a

coherent manner? I proceed with my performance...but my heart continues to pound.

In this final act I review the performance and the connections between

performances, the literature, and the theoretical drama metaphor.

Performances: Media Influence on the Presentation of Self

Goffman (1959) identified the personal front as the mask one wears to carry out

performances. The mask encompasses all aspects of appearance, including physical size,

posture, speech, and expressions. During our meetings the girls all wore masks reflected

in the mass media. Their clothes were the latest styles as dictated by teen fashion

magazines, their mannerisms and expressions similar to those of female teen celebrities.

Faye spoke about how far she would go to be like celebrities who were thin and beautiful. She was attempting to recreate herself in the image of her favorite television celebrity by dressing the same, speaking the same, and having her friends address her by that name. Faye looked to the media to create a definition of self that she would feel comfortable presenting to those in her world. As Douglas (1994/1995) has pointed out, the media contribute to the alienation of girls and women from themselves. Faye was determined that the girl she would present to the world would be as close as possible to the media stars she emulated. She seemed diligent in her efforts to conceal from her audience any discrepancies between appearance and reality, wanting her audience to believe in her performance, and to accept her performances as who she really was. Her peers were completely taken in by her performances. For the most part, Faye seemed also to be taken in by her own performances. She was a "sincere performer" (Goffman, 1959, p.17). When challenged to review her performance Faye became aware that I was not taken in by it, and the discrepancies between appearance and reality were not well concealed. With great frustration and sadness Faye admitted to being " a fake," unhappy with who she was and would do anything to become one of her idols in the media.

Gwen was also influenced strongly by the media, as was evident in the use of nail polish to paint her face so that others would identify her with a singer from the group No Doubt. Gwen's presentation of self included an identity constructed from materials and ideas supplied by the media. She, like the other girls, spent a lot of time preoccupied with her appearance and how she could present herself in such a way as to impress others

and win attention. This concern with appearances, Gwen's desire to identify with famous girls, is intentionally encouraged by the mass media (Lasch, 1979). Gwen, like the other girls, talked about the self-consciousness she felt as she compared herself to media images. The girls all described their feelings of pressure to conform to the images they encountered in the media. Giroux (1997) noted that the bodies of young people are objectified by the media, treated as commodities. The girls were able to identify this objectification and sexualization of females' bodies in magazines, but they remained caught up in the drama, looking to famous media celebrities to help them construct their own presentations.

Teams: Self in Relation to Others

The girls in this study together formed a team, defined around the task of participating in our group meetings. While outside they socialized with others, within the boundaries of the group the girls cooperated to project a certain image. As the director I was also a member of the team, although my position was one of being on the fringe, between audience and performer. I was part of the meetings, but I was also responsible for making sure the performances went smoothly. This was difficult at times, as I wanted to impose my agenda, to keep the performances in line with my own vision.

In my role as the audience, I was responsible for upholding the integrity of the performance. There were occasions when I wanted to challenge the front region performances after getting glimpses into the back region, but drawing attention to discrepancies may have jeopardized the performances. When I observed differences

between what the girls said and how they actually presented themselves, I resisted

challenging them because I did not wish to question their integrity in front of their peers.

Frankly, I wasn't sure that even if challenged the girls would be able to identify the

discrepancies within their presentations.

Teams are defined around interactions with an agreed upon definition of the social

situation (Goffman, 1959). The girls all spoke about the qualities required to be part of a

desired team of peers. As Ayers (1994) and Hesse-Biber (1996) both reported, girls

believe they must look a certain way to have friends, and they feel hopeless and imperfect

when they can't measure up to the team's expectations. Faye shared with the group a

story of a classmate who was ostracized because of the way she walked. She did not have

the physical qualities to fit the team's guidelines, until Faye had the opportunity to go to

her home and discovered that this girl had a closet full of fashionable clothes. From that

point on her status with the group was established. She became a part of the team.

Alicia described conflicted feelings about her friend's desire to have Alicia wear

her makeup. Alicia believed that if she refused to wear her friend's makeup their

relationship could be in jeopardy. This peer pressure, experienced by Alicia, and

facilitated by the mass media, reduces the influence of individual values (Kilbourne,

1989). Alicia wanted to be part of the team and to her that meant participating in a

presentation of self based on media standards.

The girls shared their feelings about what boys wanted. Their conclusions were

the same as those reported by Kilbourne (1989), that "the boys expect girls to be perfect

and beautiful. And skinny" (p.8). Alex felt pressure to be pretty, to have blonde hair and

blue eyes. She believed that "every boy thinks you have to have soft, sexy, luscious blue eyes." Alex, like the other girls, believed that team membership in the "cool" group, to which they all wanted to belong, was dependent upon being pretty and wearing the right clothing, as defined by the team in accordance with popular teen culture. Popular teen culture, in turn, is defined in part by the mass media. As Orbach (1978/1988) stated, girls have to consider what will be pleasing to others in their presentation of self.

Impression Management: Appearance

In attempting to manage the impression others gain of us, fashion is considered to be one of the most significant tools to identify status and establish identity (Brownmiller, 1984). As Lauer and Handel (1983) point out:

> Throughout the course of American history, books and articles have been written
>
> about the way in which clothes are an integral part of the message we convey
>
> about ourselves. If we do not dress fashionably, most writers have insisted, the
>
> negative impressions conveyed by our clothing will negate the positive
>
> impressions we strive to impart through our words and behaviour. If appropriate
>
> attire is necessary to foster good impressions, it follows that an individual might
>
> enhance his or her status through the tool of fashion (p.137).

The stories shared by the girls in this study mirrored this notion of the importance of clothing in impression management. They identified clothing as a significant factor in identifying status and acceptance in a group. Alex and Alicia both referred to situations where either they or their friends were rejected because of where they had purchased their

clothes. Not only do the clothes have to be fashionable in presentation, they also must be purchased from a store which specializes in fashions for females. Fashion trends are set in the media, and girls are expected to follow the trends with the same styles of clothing. The girls talked about the judging that occurs when someone doesn't have "cool" clothes. As Ayers (1994) noted, clothing can symbolize status within a group, or can be the source of rejection. Impression management is very important in the lives of young girls, as their stories all attested. One's clothing was frequently the measuring stick used to determine interactions.

Young girls worrying about their weight is a well documented phenomenon (Gilbert, 1998; Kilbourne, 1989; Poulton, 1996). Friedman (1997) found that girls want the body of Barbie, and find their own bodies unacceptable. Girls are seeking perfection based on physical appearance (Ayers, 1994).

Physical appearance was a concern expressed by all of the girls in this study. Four of them believed they were too fat or too heavy. Alex thought she was too skinny. All of them indicated that, given the opportunity, they would change their appearance, particularly their body size. In the drama of social interactions these girls felt they would be more popular and more content with themselves if they could change aspects of their physical appearance. At the ages of nine and ten they had already determined that impression management was important in their lives, and sought to do all they could to manage the impressions others gained of them.

Regions: Conformity and Conflict

A region is "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (Goffman, 1959, p.106). The performances enacted by the girls and me took place within an empty classroom. This was the front region. The girls worked hard to maintain the performance in the front region so that I, as the audience, would not see the back region, the areas of conflict and question. I was able to experience the back region of Alicia and Faye's performances though, because others gave them away.

While Faye put on a performance that seemed to convince her peers, I questioned her sincerity. Her mother, in her disclosure of Faye's behaviour at home, provided me with a backstage glimpse that told a different story. Faye's performances at home contradicted those she worked hard to perfect in our group sessions. She eventually took the step to pull back the curtain and share with her audience some of the sources of her conflict and confusion. At that time Faye told of being a fake, pretending she was happy and content, but all the while feeling pressured to conform to standards set by the media. She worked hard but never felt that she quite measured up. She was unhappy with her self perceptions, so she actively set out to take on the persona of a media celebrity. This backstage glimpse was short lived, as Faye quickly returned to her performance in future sessions, pretending as if we had never seen her backstage region.

Alicia's backstage persona was inadvertently presented by Alex in one of our individual sessions when she spoke of looking at magazines that belonged to Alicia. According to Alex, Alicia was one of the trend setters in their grade at school because she had direct access to teen magazines. Alex looked to Alicia to determine the latest trends

in fashion and presentation. Alicia, apparently conscious of my role as audience and wanting to conform to what she believed I was seeking from her, discretely avoided mentioning her supply of teen magazines. I suspect she wanted to impress me by sharing only ideas and comments that she thought I wanted to hear. Alicia presented as the most intellectual in the group, able to articulate her frustration with the influence wielded by the media, and was the most cautious about getting too personal about the contradictions in her own presentations.

Alicia is not alone in her conflict. "Our collective history of interacting with and being shaped by the mass media has engendered in many women a kind of cultural identity crisis" (Douglas, 1994/1995, p.8). The mass media encourages this dilemma between front region and back region performance. We conceal some aspects of ourselves, compartmentalizing them to the back region, and wear the masks validated by the mass media to carry out our front region performances.

As I reflect on my own journey of removing the masks that have been dictated by the media, I too face conflict because of my refusal to conform. I no longer don makeup and the latest fashions. I no longer purchase magazines that encourage women to be dissatisfied with themselves as they are. I work hard to resist messages in the media that suggest there is something wrong, something deficient within me that needs to be changed. When I look at the large scar down the center of my abdomen I refuse to see it as a cosmetic flaw, but as a testament of my strength in having survived cancer. I am learning to celebrate my curves and "round womanly parts." And why do I need to "wash that grey right out of my hair?"

We have learned to despise the curves, bulges, stretch marks, and wrinkles that
mean we've probably worked hard in and out of our homes, produced some
fabulous children, enjoyed a good meal or two, tossed back a few drinks, laughed,
cried, gotten sunburned more than once, endured countless indignities, and, in
general, led pretty full and varied lives (Douglas, 1994/1995, p.12).

How does the fact that I have dimples on my thighs effect who I am as a woman,
a partner, a friend, an educator? Why has this become so inordinately important in the
lives of females? If everyone who has experienced feelings of inferiority through media
messages stands together, voices strong and in unison, we can offer young girls
alternative interpretations. Unfortunately, girls interpret the messages they receive in the
media based not only on the messages themselves, but also on their observations that
most females in their world respond to the media in the same way. Girls watch their
mothers stand in front of the mirror, obsessed with a round tummy or flabby thighs. They
observe their female teachers standing all day in uncomfortable but fancy shoes. They
see women in their neighbourhood stand at the cash register, some purchasing the latest
issue of Vogue or Glamour, others looking at People magazine's best and worst dressed
celebrities.

Scene II - Future Performances

Implications for counselling

As counsellors working with children we must be cognizant of our own

perspectives and the messages we project. Young girls are bombarded with media messages that tell them they must conform to specific standards. The counselling environment could be one in which they can be presented with alternate ways of being in the world, a place where critical thinking is modelled. Girls need to see that they have value beyond how they look physically, that leadership and intelligence are more important than the often superficial messages put forth in the media.

Fostering self-acceptance, naming and challenging the forces that contribute to young girls' concerns about their bodies is an important step in the therapy process. Counsellors must name these social forces in order to support girls' movement away from a focus on the body.

Identifying with a group is an important part of youth culture. Counsellors working in schools can take advantage of peer groups to bring girls together and offer them a place to express themselves openly, and an opportunity to deconstruct media messages with peer support. Groups can provide girls with a sense of empowerment as they realize they are not alone in their conflicts. In these groups they can be guided and supported in dialogue about relationships between media values and their own values.

Organizing seminars on gender, " lookism," and media literacy to elementary students can also foster critical thinking and increase opportunities for girls to dialogue with both peers and adults.

Further research

This study has been a fascinating journey into the lives of five white middle-class

girls. I have read research that suggests that girls of African-Canadian descent do not interpret media messages in the same way, that they are not as strongly influenced by them. It would be interesting to hear the perspectives and observe the performances of a group of African-Canadian girls of the same age. Indeed, while the narratives shared by the five girls in this study have provided some valuable insights, generalizations should not be made from them to any other group of girls. I propose that if one were to dialogue with any other group of girls, be they from similar or different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, one would find both similarities and originalities in their stories.

A longitudinal study of this or a similar group of girls would be fascinating, following them through adolescence and into early adulthood to see how and if their scripts change as they grow and mature.

An observational study of young girls and their interactions with their female care-givers would be another worthy possibility for further research. It would be interesting to note the impact of the messages young girls receive from their care-givers and their relationship to those constructed by the mass media. Are their interactions with the media reinforced in their interactions with their female care-givers? What are the implications if their female care-givers present them with other ways of being?

One of the greatest challenges in completing this work was the initial interviews with the girls, when I met with them individually. The power differential presented as a significant barrier to connecting with the girls. It seemed that one of two things consistently occurred; either they wanted to give the "right" answers and were cautious in their responses, or they simply responded with single words. I would recommend that

anyone choosing to pursue a similar study consider having more time for the girls to

become comfortable and for rapport to become established in individual meetings, or to

work with the girls in a group format from the beginning.

Scene III - Personal Epilogue

It has been two years since my first thoughts about writing a thesis; two years and

a plethora of emotions. But throughout the entire process I have had in my mind a belief

that has guided me, a theory, a statement to which I have adhered, that the mass media are

one of the most powerful forces in the lives of young, preadolescent girls. While there is

very little literature which examines the ways in which preadolescent girls are influenced

by the mass media, the girls in this study offered testimonials which clearly indicate the

incredible power and influence wielded by media in manipulating young girls'

perceptions of themselves. I engaged in this study because I believed, and still do, that

we have a lot to learn about media's impact in the lives of preadolescent girls. Listening

to the stories of Alicia, Alex, Gwen, Alison, and Faye reinforced two significant factors

about the role of the mass media in the lives of young girls: 1) the influence is very

powerful for young girls, and 2) media messages are delivered much more powerfully

today than in the past.

A recent edition of Consumer Reports (September, 1998) indicated that not only

are marketers sending more powerful messages to young people about products for

children, they are also directing advertising of adult products like vehicles, vacations, and

telephone services directly to children, complete with arguments kids can make to influence their parents' buying. In this decade spending by children ages 4 to 12 has tripled (p. 46). Advertisers are relentless in their pursuit of expanding their market base, and young children are a current target.

The stories shared by the girls in this study mirror some of my own thoughts and experiences over the years. The feelings of inferiority because of physical size, not having the right clothing, and not being accepted by peers because of these things, are all experiences that I know well. Although 25 years have passed since I was the age of these girls, the issues remain essentially unchanged. The difference is the ever increasing power of the media in the lives of young girls.

The girls in this study are already losing that sense of freedom of youth at 9 and 10 years old. They have all begun travelling on that road of self-condemnation because they do not mirror what they see in the media. On the one hand I feel fearful, almost hopeless about the magnitude of the situation, where young girls are interpreting the messages that membership in a group is dependent on how they present themselves physically. Yet on the other hand I believe that if we, women in particular, work together to deconstruct these media myths and present a different interpretation to young girls, we can make a difference, create new perspectives. I do not believe girls will be able to reclaim the freedom they had before the media took hold of their authentic identities, just as I will probably not be able to reclaim mine, but the freedom that can be claimed is freedom of choice. Because of my level of awareness now I doubt that I will ever be able to "return" to the same freedom I had as a child. My decisions today are based on

conscious choices related to my interactions with myself and with my world. I have freedom of choice and the courage and strength to deal with the consequences of these choices. In that sense I have been able to reclaim my sense of freedom that the girls in this study did not seem to have. I am free to choose, and I am willing to accept the consequences of these choices.

I have come to believe that I have two important choices to make: I can either accept that the power of the media is insurmountable and therefore I do nothing, or I can refuse to remain silent, which is what I am opting to do. I am well aware that peers carry much more weight in changing young girls' beliefs and attitudes than I do as an adult, but I don't have to single-handedly be responsible for the emancipation of all girls from the influence of the media. I really just have to reach one girl who will agree to travel the path with me. Together we can create other perspectives and redefine the role of the media in those perspectives.
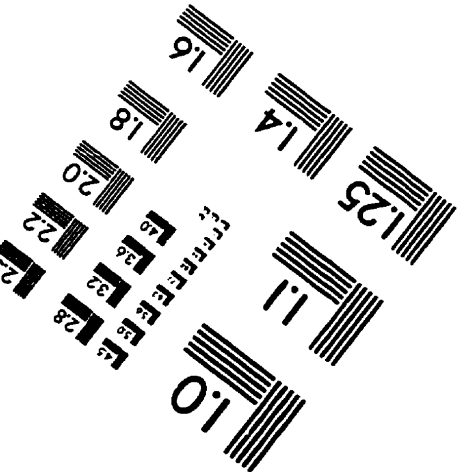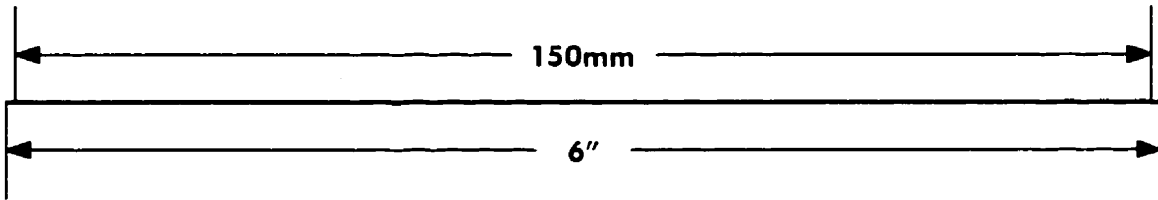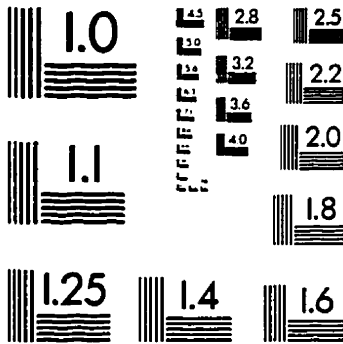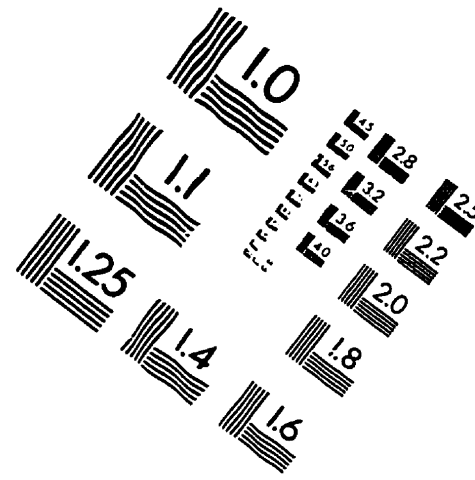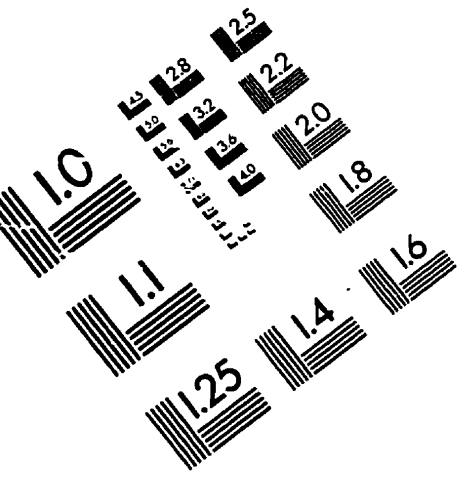
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IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

150mm

6"