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EVERY BODY HAS A DREAM: A SOCIAL INQUIRY INTO THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN THE PURSUIT OF PHYSICAL FITNESS AND CONCEPTIONS OF THE  
SELF

By

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores women's self-reported perceptions of identity vis-à-vis their experiences of embodiment within the context of engaging in various forms of body work. Accounts of the embodied self as stable and/or modifiable through the course of participation in body improvement regimens are examined against the claim made in postmodernist literature that the female body is 'the' site of construction and elaboration of identity, particularly through the altering of physical appearance. This social-theoretical assertion is explored by examining the motivations women voice for engaging in physical fitness regimens and the reported consequences of continued participation for female identity.

Owing to the interpretive, discursive character of this undertaking within two privately owned fitness centres, the research phase employed an initial three month participant observation period, followed by the formal data collection phase. Individual interviews of thirty-four women took place, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule; two separate focus group discussions were also conducted on the subject of women and the body, one in each research setting. Women who participated in this study varied by age, social class of origin (middle or working class), level of commitment to body work and

type(s) of activities preferred; they were virtually homogenous by ethnic background (Anglo-Celtic) and sexual orientation (heterosexual).

Findings show that while the social advantage of the well-managed female body as a form of cultural capital is acknowledged by all women, motivations for engaging in self-improvement through physical fitness regimens grant primacy to such things as the need to manage psychological stress, the desire to devote some private time to 'productive' self-care, and ultimately, the goal of achieving 'holistic' balance or integration among life elements through the pursuit of health/beauty/fitness. Individual accounts overwhelmingly reference a foundational quality to female corporeality, such that puberty, pregnancy, menopause, and the experiences of chronic disease and ageing are discerned as physical realities imposed-from-without, as limitations ordained by nature.

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Chapter IIntroduction

This dissertation addresses a series of related questions pertaining to the experience and meaning of female embodiment in contemporary North American culture. More specifically, it examines self-reported motivations for engaging in particular forms of body work<sup>1</sup>, as reported by a group of women, and considers, via these accounts, the implications of ongoing participation for the construction, reconstruction and elaboration of female identity.

The introductory chapter begins by linking the subject of this dissertation to work I have previously conducted at the Master of Arts level in the area of women and the body. The salience of the current project emerges from this connection, and from key conceptual features of contemporary sociological theory relevant to the study of female embodiment and identity in Western culture.

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<sup>1</sup>. The term body work more generally refers to efforts expended through fashion, cosmetics, diet, exercise, and so on, in an attempt to redefine or reshape the body and its appearance to more closely comply with beauty, health and fitness standards. Sometimes referred to as "technologies of femininity" (Cole, 1993:87) these are knowledges, practices, and strategies that manufacture and normalize the feminine body. The use of the term in this dissertation more narrowly pertains to the undertaking of exercise and fitness pursuits such as body building, aerobic fitness classes, cross training, and the like.

Having made explicit the connection between this thesis and the work which precedes it, and having briefly introduced relevant theory, the remainder of the chapter is devoted to describing the research sample and the two fitness facilities from which data for this research study were collected. Subsequent to discussing the social context within which this work was carried out and briefly describing the women who were interviewed for the research component of this undertaking, key findings are introduced so as to guide the reader through the chapters which follow.

## 1.2 The Arrival of the 'Body'

As a new area of study within the discipline of sociology, 'the body' has claimed a large portion of my academic interest since 1986, when I first read, with great interest, Bryan Turner's The Body and Society (1984). Two things were astonishing about Turner's book to me at that time, a neophyte student of sociology: first, it dealt with a subject matter that had been, to my knowledge, virtually ignored by sociology, and secondly, this amazingly insightful book on the subject of the body had been written by a man.

Turner argued in Body and Society that the human form is figuratively and literally shaped by every manner of social activity, and that societies which have enjoyed longevity are those that have successfully regulated the conformations and habits of the bodies that compose them. Turner's treatment

of corporeality outside of the macro-level perspectives of demography, political economy and war was novel, and bodies à la Turner were simultaneously seen as quintessential private possessions, and the most social of constructions. In his book, issues surrounding and informing bodies pointed to the very heart of public and private life.

Turner's book forged for me a vital link between what my mind was being trained to do through the discipline of sociology and what my female body apparently fated me to be socially. Equated with things bodily by virtue of being a member of the female sex, I could finally make sense of the experience of inhabiting such a defining feature of my existence through Turner's work, in intellectual and sociological terms.

It was noteworthy that this pivotal moment had been achieved through the writings of a British male sociologist, albeit a preeminent scholar like Turner. As a student of feminist sociology during the early 1980s I had come to grasp intellectually the on-the-ground consequences of the corresponding Cartesian dualisms of mind/body, man/woman. These powerfully defining social ascriptions in Western culture had left dire social-historical legacies that had been carefully chronicled and mercilessly critiqued by feminist scholars from across disciplines (Firestone, 1970; Greer, 1971; Reed, 1972). Within feminist sociology, for example, concerted efforts were being mobilized to critique existing social theory and to construct alternative models (O'Brien, 1981;



Smith, 1987).

On the subject of the day-to-day, lived, feminized body, however, this iconoclastic scholarship had remained oddly silent. It is not all that surprising that feminist sociology emerging from the Second Wave<sup>2</sup> of scholarship would not have wholeheartedly claimed 'the body' long before anyone else within the discipline, and we shall explore this subject in greater depth later. But partly from this perceived neglect in feminist sociology of something all women confront most directly, and partly from an increasing personal preoccupation with the so-called fitness craze that was sweeping North America, I began my graduate studies in the area of women and the body in 1991.

By this time a varied and sophisticated literature on the corporeality had gained momentum in Europe, and Bryan Turner had developed its sociology far beyond the set of suppositions laid out in The Body and Society. Second Wave feminist scholarship, previously neglectful of the body, even somatophobic, began to take on the complex issue of female complicity in the construction of femininity vis-à-vis the experiences of female embodiment. Writings in postmodernist theory and in the area known as sociobiology seized upon the body as well, and whether viewing it as an open-ended, discourse-dependent

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<sup>2</sup>. Second Wave feminism refers to contemporary feminism since the 1960s.

entity<sup>3</sup> or as one fixed by a genetic blueprint determined in early human history, the result was the same: the body had assumed a central place in social theorizing.

## 1.2 Aerobically Exercised Femininity

The bodily related research area I chose at the Master of Arts level was aerobic dance and step, a popular physical exercise regimen of the 1980s and 1990s especially for women. An analysis of the diet and exercise discourse which characterized this female realm was the primary focus of the study. For a period of six months I observed and participated in 'aerobics classes' and, employing semi-structured interviews, proceeded to collect women's accounts of their bodies while they were immersed in this form of body work. Fourteen interviews were conducted in total, all among women who were moderately to highly committed to aerobic dance as a form of physical conditioning.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. For the purpose of this submission, discourse includes all cultural representations that give rise to and reflect the tacit rules from which standards can be judged as true or false and from which models or classificatory systems can be organized. These tacit discursive rules also function to place and provide function and character to "knowers, authors, and audiences" of a discourse (Focault, 1980:101).

<sup>4</sup>. In this study, if a woman engaged in aerobics for the last two years and regularly attended at least three classes per week she was considered moderately committed (7). Among the highly committed group (5) women had engaged in aerobics longer (up to nine years continuously), they were frequently employed as part-time aerobics instructors and/or they not uncommonly chose to participate in classes scheduled back-to-back (often

I found this female dominated physical fitness regimen a compelling subject in that the discourse characterizing it simultaneously referenced mutually exclusive bodily ideals. Overwhelmingly it promoted the idea of 'health through fitness', implying that physical exercise was to be undertaken for its own sake, as an activity beneficial to physical and emotional health. At the same time, however, most of the women who were interviewed voiced very rigid and questionable<sup>5</sup> standards for female beauty under this rubric of health, promoting a mandatory physical ideal best described as the boyish, "hard body".

What was particularly intriguing was that this complex of contradictory elements located in and further evolving within this discourse was resonating with an increasing number of women of all ages during the early 1990s. The research project thus attempted to examine and explain women's complicity in and possible resistance to the boyish "hard body", and also to locate and assess the influence of wider cultural forces such as medicalization<sup>6</sup> in this

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attending classes seven days per week).

<sup>5</sup>. The pursuit of this small but muscular idealization is detrimental to the physical and emotional health of the majority of women. The hard body is unattainable by most women, and the over zealous pursuit of it has been directly implicated in the virtual epidemic of eating disorders observed among young women.

<sup>6</sup>. Medicalization is the process where by the biomedical domain expands or extends to areas of personal and social problems (Edgley & Brissett, 1990).

very popular physical fitness pursuit.

Subsequent findings suggested that by employing a discourse of diet and exercise emanating largely from the realm of "health as fitness" and only secondarily connecting it with female physical beauty, women could comfortably participate in this questionable project of femininity without seeming to fall prey to prescriptive or mandatory standards for female beauty. Further, women confirmed that notable feelings of self-empowerment promised in this discourse and achieved through techniques of body management were realized. They responded very positively to the increased physical strength and stamina gained from physical conditioning and the acknowledgement that these payoffs defied the physical fragility associated with traditional forms of femininity. Women viewed body work of this sort as symbolic of liberation.

While these positive, empowering elements in the discourse of fitness for women were compelling, the very same accounts offered by women strongly confirmed the normative discontent surrounding women's perceptions of their own bodies. Paradoxically, findings suggested that the 'healthier' women became, by virtue of improved physical conditioning achieved through prolonged commitment to this form of body work, the more scrutinizing and condemning of the aesthetic features of their bodies and the bodies of other women they became.

Analysis thus revealed the discursive mechanisms through which the

fitness movement successfully appeals to 'liberated' women by conflating beauty with health, while concurrently perpetuating narrowly defined and mandatory standards for the aesthetically pleasing female body. These observations were noteworthy and, to my knowledge, unique insights into the physical fitness realm of women who were highly committed to aerobic dance and step during the early 1990s.

The discourse of the female body which characterized this highly motivated subculture of women left some question, however, about how the experiences of women who drew more sporadically from fitness rhetoric could correspondingly be understood. As an exceptional, even elite group among practitioners of aerobics, the accounts of these women could be regarded as narratives from the overly converted, the lunatic fringe of the fitness world. I was left understandably curious about how the discourse of health/beauty might be differently internalized, altered, or even rejected by more peripheral players in the quest for fitness. Also, I wondered about the nature of the attraction women have to forms of physical exercise other than 'aerobics' and how these pursuits might be similarly or differently linked to the project of femininity.

On a more personal note, by the time I completed my M.A. work in 1992, not only was mainstream sociology taking more formal note of the "cult of the body" as an area of intellectual inquiry, but I was hard pressed to find

anyone among my fellow students or the university professoriate who wasn't doing something for their own body by way of a fitness regime. The body had arrived in every way and I began to consider the next direction my investigation of it would take.

### 1.3 Focus of this Dissertation

Since Turner's 1984 work, mainstream sociology has been quite taken with the body. While Synnott (1993) and Hall (1993) agree that sociology of the body was inaugurated with Turner's first book on the subject, since that time there has grown an enormous interest in corporeality within all academic circles. Within sociology it has even been suggested that the body should serve as an organizing principle for the entire discipline (Shilling 1993). Toward this end, Turner has gone on to coin the term "somatic society" to describe the ways in which the body in high modernity has become "the principal field of political and cultural activity" in the social system (1992a:12). For him, the history of the West is not to be seen so much as a transformation of culture under the impact of rationalization, but rather as the transformation of the human body via a collection of practices such as medicalization, secularization, and rationalization. These appear to be, he says, "the great forces which have operated on the body, or more accurately, on the body-in-the-everyday-world" (1992a:12,162).

This thesis considers a series of issues related to the experience and meaning of female embodiment within North American culture as we approach the twenty-first millennium. It locates and examines the contemporary female body within a very specialized locale in the "everyday-world", namely that of the fitness centre, that now ubiquitous feature of the North American physical-social landscape. This dissertation proceeds from previous work conducted at the M.A. level by exploring the project of femininity with a broader range of women, involved in a wider variety of fitness pursuits. It consequently complements previous work and goes further conceptually/theoretically by specifically exploring the alleged relation between female attraction to and ongoing participation in body work, and notions of the malleable, unstable self as conceptualized by many postmodern thinkers.

The connection between the self and the body as a central focus of this dissertation was originally provoked by the claim made in much current postmodernist literature that the contemporary female form is 'the' site of construction and elaboration of identity. Accomplished through and evidenced by the constant altering of physical appearance, the postmodernist claim is that identity is infinitely malleable through this physical route (Glassner, 1990; Lyon, 1994). This project examines this assertion by researching the motivations women offer for engaging in particular forms of body work, as well as the acknowledged implications of continued participation to self-perceived female

identity.

Central to this undertaking is consideration of the view that the human body in the high modern or postmodern era<sup>7</sup> becomes the last bastion of security for the individual within the social context of Western industrialized nations gone amok. Environmental degradation, economic uncertainty, the uprooting of large segments of the population in search of paid employment, serial monogamy, the ageing baby boomer population bulge, and so on, are described as giving rise to the increasing obsession with the body within these populations. Owing to the instability of virtually all other areas of social life, writers tell us that with the withering of high modernity, logically the body becomes emblematic of the core self. Most controversial is the claim that the self 'itself' takes on a highly malleable character via the body, such that identity becomes potentially multiple, an adaptation to the myriad of roles and demands placed upon the individual by a social context in constant flux.

These assertions of writers on postmodernity directly inform the focus of this dissertation. Investigating the likelihood that the rhetoric of selfhood

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<sup>7</sup>. The expansion of capitalism, multinationalism, and the related rapid forms of production and consumption marks an economic shift that has been referred to as late capitalism, high modernity, flexible accumulation, and post-Fordism. These shifts are alleged to intervene in the possibility of a unified, cohesive, and isolated economy, and resistance from marginalized positions is seen to further disrupt "the dominant modernist narrative of unity, universalism, and transcendence" (Birrell & Cole, 1994:vi). This combined intervention structures what is considered a postmodern condition characterized by notions of diversity, specificity, and the local.



attending postmodernist conceptualizations informs the motives and aspirations of women who engage in fitness pursuits is both thought-provoking and timely. Postmodern pronouncements, especially on the subject of the female form, have almost all remained at the level of the conceptual. While vociferously proclaiming the arrival of the 'postmodern body' (Glassner, 1990; Lyon, 1994) these highly descriptive accounts have fallen short of endorsement from systematic study.

Owing to the growing assertion in postmodernist literature that the body is fragmented and has many identities (Featherstone, 1991; Lupton, 1996), and that it is no longer secured or located in some fixed social space (Turner, 1992), the research which informs this dissertation explores the role of embodiment in the lives of actual women, and examines the ways in which it is referenced in regard to self-identity in the midst of the demands of everyday life. It elicits the body work history of each individual, seeks out the meanings attached to the physical indicators of femaleness through various life stages and events, and assesses the degree to which women speak of the body as emblematic of the self throughout these developmental periods.

It is readily acknowledged that current conceptualizations of the female form have been shaped, in no small way, by the fitness craze which has swept North America since the last decade. Guided in its conceptual/theoretical framework, especially by the work of Alter, (1993), Bordo (1989), Fisher and

Davis (1993), Davis (1995) and Glassner (1990), this dissertation also draws more generally from works in social theory and history, sociology of the body, of gender, the sociology of health and medicine, and the sociology of women and sport. Similar to the previous work I have undertaken in this area, this project purports to be feminist in character owing to its underlying commitment to understanding the mechanisms through which women participate in the discourse of femininity. It is also feminist in its explicit concern for the ultimate empowerment of women.

The research sample from which individual narratives were elicited comprises a group of women participating in various physical fitness pursuits within two different settings in Canada. The first locale from which women were recruited was a small town of approximately five thousand persons; the second was a moderately sized city of around one hundred fifteen thousand people. Semi-structured audio taped interviews were carried out to discern women's relationship with their bodies within a set of predetermined categories which emerged from a critical literature review. Following this, women were encouraged to speak on any additional topics they felt salient to the issue of women and the body.

Before engaging in the crucial debate concerning what a body actually is and how we are to proceed in our critical-analytical thinking about it, this dissertation begins by first exploring and making explicit its stand on the

possibility of human agency.<sup>8</sup> Owing to its feminist character, this undertaking is understandably motivated by a desire to empower women, especially in ways that might foster a meaningful resistance to prescriptive images surrounding the female body. The theoretical underpinnings of the structure versus agency argument in contemporary social theory consequently provides the necessary starting point from which to situate both this research undertaking and to begin to decipher the words of women.

#### 1.4 Conceptualizing Selfhood and Resistance

To begin, several concepts crucial to a more complete understanding of the apparent connection between female identity and bodily experience should be introduced. The debate between feminists and postmodernists has much to contribute to this discussion, particularly as it pertains to the possibility of human agency, the formulation of power, and, as an outcome of these analyses, the possibility of fostering resistance to the externally imposed norms comprising femininity.

Much of current feminist scholarship in this area converges with that of Michel Foucault, in identifying the body as a site of power, as the place of

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<sup>8</sup>. Human agency refers to the active power the subject possesses to produce effects in his/her own life. The contention that humans are subjects capable of agency suggests that they are not individuals constituted as mere effects of social structure, but rather are active, self-reflective players in their self-constitution (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1988:6).

domination through which docility is accomplished (Sawicki, 1991; Nicholson, 1990). Foucault locates the contemporary Western subject and our 'apparent' experiences of subjectivity within the dominant form of power characterizing Western societies - biopower. So labelled because of the "concrete and precise character of its knowledge of human bodies", it operates within the domain of biomedicine, (especially the psychoanalytic method of psychiatry), to create and make knowable, with the help of experts, an inner, deep and foundational self (Foucault, 1980). The assertion at play here is that discourse is the site of struggle for social power and also the place where the sense of the self is constructed in ways that are culturally specific and adaptive.

The preoccupation with health/fitness/beauty in North American society, as an expression of the self-construction process of which Foucault speaks, is described as a pan-value arising from the process of medicalization which took place in the 1960s and 1970s (Edgley & Brissett, 1990). This new individualizing health ethic contains the notion that each person is also responsible for the health achievements of others (p.259) and while its very cornerstone involves the Foucauldian notion of public surveillance and monitoring, its origin and growth is attributed to the conceptualization of an ideal or a single concept - the quest for the perfect body. Its promise is not just biological perfection, but also social and psychological salvation - better relationships, greater productivity at work and at play, less stress, and better

self-image.

This idea that work on the representational body (i.e. the body which is socially presented and historically specific) impacts on self-image and identity has been alluded to by many researchers/writers (Goffman, 1959; Synnott, 1988; Bordo, 1989). As a post-structuralist, Foucault's explicit position, however, is that human subjects are no more than the mere effects of prevailing social structure. The obvious consequence of the Foucauldian conceptualization of identity as fractured, plural and solely the product of discourse, is that it renders both a coherent theory and, more importantly, feminist politics for resistance through social action inconceivable.

This is not to say that Foucault sees the disavowal of human agency as foreclosing the possibility of resistance to totalizing discourse, however. For him, resistance spontaneously arises and operates in the same sphere as power, and, indeed, is not just a reaction to power but is a necessary condition for it: without resistance there could be no power, for there would be nothing for it to push against (Foucault, 1977). Fiske (1993) rightly sees Foucault's rendering of resistance as a bottom-up form of power of those low in the hierarchy. The force which Foucault calls "power", says Fiske, is top-down and serves a hierarchical social order which bestows to its higher social formations better access to its power. Foucault's "power" is both macro and micro in scale, its ambition is universalist and monopolist. Resistance, says Fiske, is

defensive and localist and no more extensive than which it deems necessary for a relatively secure, satisfying and pleasurable existence. It can take a huge variety of forms because of the diversity of physical, social and historical conditions to which it has to adapt in order to exercise.

For Fiske (1993) and Hall (1993), however, Foucault's account of resistance as simultaneously a precondition of and a product of power is not entirely satisfactory. Explaining behaviours as resistances produced by a power to which they are opposed denies the agency of those who resist. It denies that resistance can bring to the process anything not already produced by the power system and thus containable by it. While localizing power is never independent of imperializing power, says Fiske, it is never totally encompassed by it either. The agents who exert it bring to it something that is theirs, that is the product of 'their' histories and that is applied through 'their' social competencies (Fiske, 1993:64).

McNay (1992) also reflects on Foucault's tendency to understand subjects as "docile" bodies rather than as individuals or persons, and she says that what this cannot explain is how "women simply do not slip easily and passively into socially prescribed feminine roles" (p.135). Cole (1993) points out that the taming of female body has required much individual labour and is dependent on various industries (workout clubs, video programs, diet industry, active wear, science), but that the continual need for body work simultaneously

indicates the instability and duplicity of the feminine body, and, thus, the possibilities of intervening in dominant bodily codifications.

Jane Flax (1990) points out that resistance to totalizing discourse, a process Foucault himself acknowledges, requires or at least strongly suggests a 'deep' subjectivity. The suppressed, marginal or reverse discourses of which he speaks would most likely not persist under the "disciplinary and surveillance" aspects of power without the existence of some very solid form of the self (Flax, 1990:206). For Flax and others, it is premature to ignore our intuitions of an 'I', as a reflective self may not merely be just the effect of thinking or discourse but may also be the cause of these processes.

Recent feminist writing and Foucault's work more closely converge, although not without tension, in the acknowledgement that attention must be paid to local and intimate operations of power. As a corrective to Foucault's reformulation of power as inseparable from knowledge production, feminist efforts have reasserted the fact that power has long been masculinist and that its primary target has been the subjugation of women, most especially through their bodies (Coward, 1985; Currie & Raoul, 1991; Smith, 1990). For this reason, Grosz suggests that the body should not be seen as a blank, passive page, a neutral "medium" or signifier for the inscription of a text. She points out that the specific modes of materiality of the "page"/body must be taken into account because one and the same message, inscribed on a male or a

female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text (1994:156).

Foucault's explication of the relationship between power, knowledge and the body is generally felt to be his most notable contribution to contemporary social criticism. His formulation directly implicates the role of dualist categories which characterize Western thought in the construction of the docile body.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Alter (1993) and Bryan Turner (1982) point to the powerful quality of state domination and control revealed by Foucault's account of the docile body. Through it the state can operate unconsciously or covertly in areas, such as the body, that are seemingly insulated by virtue of their apparent insignificance. The state is able to control individual bodies with relative impunity, says Alter, because according to the Cartesian formula, the Western body, at least at one level, is thought of as a relatively inanimate and therefore politically benign object - it can be controlled and manipulated by virtue of its docility.

What is particularly noteworthy is that this docility does not preclude discourses of self-determination and predestination, because it operates on a

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault describes the docile body as the product of "a policy of coercions that acted upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body entered a machinery of power that explored it, broke it down and rearranged it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a "mechanics of power", was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practised bodies - 'docile' bodies." (Foucault 1979:138)



different plane. In fact, docility depends on these discourses as modes of rationalization, as potential escapes from what Weber called "the unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual" (Alter 1993:54). Therefore, the fictions of free will, salvation, and individual autonomy are maintained as independent of the body's docile utility and can even be actively employed, while domination is experienced in terms of a Cartesian logic that assigns primacy to the intellect.

Feminist scholarship again reformulates this account in its insistence that the role of various disciplines in producing a sort of embodiment peculiarly feminine is overlooked. Susan Bartky examines the disciplinary practices that produce a female body of a certain size and general conformation; those that "aim to bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements"; and those that are "directed toward the display of this body as an ornamental surface" (1988:64). She persuasively argues that these disciplinary practices are to be understood in light of the modernization of patriarchal domination, albeit a modernization that unfolds historically according to the general pattern Foucault described.

Common to feminist writers in this area (Banner, 1983; Coward, 1985; Smith, 1990) is the insistence that cultural representations of femininity not be treated as forcible impositions of false and limiting stereotypes. Coward sees representations as informing feminine positions, such that the content of a

position depends on the degree to which representations are sustained, endorsed or rejected. Feminine positions are consequently viewed as products of the responses to the pleasures offered, our subjectivity and identity formed vis-a-vis the definitions of desire which surround us. Dorothy Smith (1987) in her discussion of the "discourse of femininity", maintains women as active subjects and agents in the process. She refers to the "now massive productive apparatus of capital" which relies on and must be responsive to women's active participation to successfully produce the material dimensions of the social relations of femininity.

An adequate understanding of women's physicality, an aim of this current project, requires an appreciation of the extent to which not only women's lives but their very subjectivities are structured within a collection of systematic practices. Imposed discipline can provide the individual with a sense of authority as well as a secure sense of identity. The contradiction here involves the realization that on one level the imposition of bodily prescripts disempowers women, but that on another level, the development of bodily competence enhances a woman's sense of worth. Consequently, any political project that attempts to dismantle femininity may be held in dim view by women as something that threatens to deskill them, desexualize them and even destroy their identity.

The discourse of femininity shaping contemporary conceptualizations of

the female body emerges as a complex, paradoxical one, whereby women, as active participants, may engage in what they perceive of as an exercise in self-construction. Feminist reworkings of Foucault's formulation of power reveal that femininity is the product of disciplinary regimes which produce a version of the 'docile' body uniquely female. While cognizant of the self-constitutional function of the disciplinary project of femininity, this dissertation proceeds from the premise that resistance to physical and behavioural idealizations can be politically meaningful. It also rejects the postmodernist view that the 'self' is nothing more than the effect of social structure.

Regrettably, early feminist work in the area of the body formulates the research problem as one arising solely from the pervasive quality of female subordination, and how the gendered body serves to symbolize and perpetuate women's disempowerment. The active participation of women in their own bodily disempowerment is only touched on in all but the most recent feminist literature. This oversight is, in part, owing to the fact that female complicity in this process remains a politically sensitive subject in some feminist circles, as evidenced by its rather perfunctory treatment as merely an expression of false consciousness.

As a consequence, Foucault's postmodernist contributions in this area have to be acknowledged as significant in at least two respects. He provokes us to scrutinize more closely everyday practice, in local contexts vis-a-vis the

mechanics of power. Power itself he reconceptualizes as something much more than repressive, i.e. as not only carrying the connotation of "the force of a prohibition", so that we move away from a wholly negative, narrow conception of it (Foucault 1984:59). The fact that power is accepted because it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says 'no', that it can induce pleasure, form knowledge, produce discourse, and so on, contributes much to a theoretical-conceptual understanding of women's complicity in the construction of femininity.

Taken together, the literature outlined in this overview points to a series of questions and issues in need of systematic study: On the basis of what 'self' referenced values or motivational messages are women attracted or not attracted to competing physical archetypes associated with specific kinds of body work (e.g. the idealized aerobically exercised body type versus that associated with body building)? Bartky (1988), Smith (1989), Lorber & Martin (1998) note that women who body build are often received with suspicion and resentment for defying the physical fragility traditionally associated with femininity. Do participants understand their ongoing engagement in forms of body work as an elaboration on 'a core sense of self' or do they participate to reconstruct or recreate the 'self'?

Coward (1985), Smith (1990) and Davis (1995) consider the role of the beauty industry in luring or courting and supporting or maintaining women's

participation in the discourse of femininity. How do women understand this process? Do they acknowledge playing an 'active' role in it? If so, do they reference values associated with individualism (such as self expression) and/or social attributes such as class, race, age, geography, profession, marital status, and the like, in their accounts of resisting or acquiescing to the prescriptive images promoted by the beauty industry?

Emily Martin's (1987) much-cited work explores the different ways that women's reproductive processes are seen in American culture, such that metaphors of economy and alienation pervade some women's imaging of themselves and their bodies. Do these same metaphors apply to the discourse of health/beauty/fitness vis-a-vis notions of the self? How might metaphors of economy and alienation be distinguished from or linked to the biomedical metaphors revealed in the discourse of health/beauty/fitness revealed in my own previous work?

### 1.5 Setting and Sample

The participants in this study were selected from the female membership of two privately owned fitness facilities; one located in a town of approximately 5,000 persons, the other in a city with a population of about 115,000. Women engaged in various forms and levels of physical training were targeted for participation in this study. Exercise activities included bodybuilding, weight

training, aerobics, cross-training, jogging, swimming, cycling and the martial arts.

Sampling proceeded in a snowball fashion, drawing from morning, afternoon and evening participation as well as through opportunistic means.<sup>10</sup> As suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Kirby and McKenna (1989), interviewing ceased when "saturation" was achieved and no additional information was uncovered to further develop properties of emerging data categories. It was expected that a minimum of thirty interviews should be conducted to ensure a rich, thick qualitative data set. In the end, the total number of interviews completed was thirty-four. As contacts were made and interviews proceeded, attempts were made to obtain as broad a range of women as possible, especially by age and material circumstance. Following the individual interview phase, two group interviews (focus groups) were carried out, one in each research site, to clarify and expand on emerging data categories.

The fitness clubs chosen as research sites were selected on the basis of their sole function as specialized locations for the performance of body work and for their contrasting geographical locations and scales of operation. Both

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<sup>10</sup>. Of the thirty-four women who participated in this study, twenty-nine had active club memberships at the time of the interview, three had lapsed memberships and the remaining two women were performing body work activities in their own homes (they were referred by friends at the fitness facility).

are privately owned fitness facilities; Club Small is located on a quiet side street in a small town and Club Big is situated in a busy, central downtown location in a medium sized city.

### 1.6 Findings Foreshadowed

For the purpose of guiding the reader through the chapters to come, the following broad categories of findings will be introduced. First, as an almost exclusively heterosexual group of females who voluntarily self-improve through physical fitness, the women interviewed placed an enormous emphasis on individual choice-making capacities and on the need for self-expression in the exercise regimens they adopt. By and large they do not view body work as primarily about investment in their physical appearance but are aware that very real benefits accrue to women who closely comply with prevailing standards for female beauty.

From the body histories offered by women we see that the discourse primarily references a foundational basis to the human form, over which the wishes of the subject are perceived to have some limited sway. What is especially noteworthy is that the materialist quality of the body alluded to in the discourse of the female body owes to its 'sexed' nature; 'true' femaleness is thus seen by women as emerging out of the bodily changes associated with puberty. During adolescence the physical markers of sexual maturation (e.g.

menstruation, breast and hip development) are discerned as troubling expressions of bodily disorder, as instances of the body out-of-control. These events are initially experienced as negative, unwelcome physical sensations imposed on the subject by the wayward body. In the discourse of the pubescent female body 'nature' is perceived as the dominant player; it speaks through the body to bestow this foundational, quintessentially female character to embodied female identity.

While a small number of women report that they negotiate the negative social consequences of becoming foundationally female through unique and creative non-bodily means, impression management more often takes place through the adoption of strict body regimens. Virtually mandatory for middle class females, these regimens are designed to contain the contours of the sexually maturing female body. These strategies are seen as the most efficacious for managing one's social impression precisely because they target the body itself, the identified culprit in the sexual/social faux pas which unfolds during adolescence and early adulthood.

First menses in this process irrevocably marks the transition from childhood to 'true' femaleness as a kind of nature's rite of passage. Vis-a-vis the social world however, it is primarily the successful containment of secondary sexual characteristics in combination with the ability to maintain the secrecy surrounding menstruation that enables the subject to ultimately



internalize, accept, and confidently project the bodily designation of 'woman'.

Concepts surrounding the parameters of this essential female body in the discourse of femininity are shown to be guided both by vestiges of a nineteenth century understanding of what science tells us about mind-body relationships, and the seemingly contradictory concept of holism.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it is the essentialist and initially problematic material quality of female sexual maturation which ultimately grants the maturing subject a steadfast sense of the self through the body. This 'true' female body serves as the backdrop for the ever changeable and playful experiments associated with the project of femininity. The infinitely malleable and 'perfectible' plastic body alluded to by postmodern writers can thus be supported in its open-endedness by the irrevocable 'essential' female body ordained by nature. Consequently, schools of thought announcing the arrival of a malleable, fractured, and serial 'self' are found to be overstated against this modernist backdrop of bodily essentialism which women describe as informing embodied selfhood.

From the accounts women offer of their sense of self experienced through the body, we find ourselves poised on the edge of the coming millennium with our twentieth century science and technology subject to an extensive and emotionally charged scrutiny. A notable element of anti-scientific

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<sup>11</sup>. Holism refers to the philosophical theory that living nature consists of wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. This philosophy emphasizes the relationship between parts or elements and wholes (Birrell & Cole, 1994).

rhetoric characterizes the discourse of the body emanating from these women. Containing a strong but only partial rejection of the Enlightenment notion of technological progress as 'good', this rhetoric expresses a deep ambivalence toward technology. Industrial pollution, over-stressed immune systems and urban decay are seen as indictments of Western culture, and suspicion toward invasive medical technologies directed toward the body are symbolic of this disenchantment with the modernist project.

Simultaneously residing with this disavowal, however, is a strong faith in and psychological/emotional reliance on state-of-the-art technologies devoted to aiding and monitoring the quest for physical fitness. Whereas the pursuit of fitness is driven by a loosely articulated spiritual dream of achieving holistic unity, progress toward this end is measured in exact numerical increments - numbers of laps, miles, and repetitions as well as the read-outs on the computer screens of high-tech exercise equipment.

These foreshadowed findings point to the interplay between macro and micro level social forces operating within the complex realm of contemporary life. From the introduction to key theoretical approaches to female selfhood and agency contained in this chapter, macro and micro-level themes are explored in greater detail in Chapters II and III. Areas of questioning designed to elicit the subjective experience of female embodiment arose in large measure from the critical literature review contained in these two chapters, and subsequently

guided the individual interview process to yield a set of relatively fixed data categories. Chapters II and III thus function as a conceptual/theoretical prelude to the data chapters which follow.

The character and magnitude of macro and micro level social forces acting on the human form, and an appreciation of their dialectical relationship, becomes clearer with some input from the social history of the body as read through twentieth century analyses. Chapter II begins the task of grappling with a series of major societal-level processes which arguably inform the phenomenology of the lived, contemporary female body - repression, rationalization and medicalization. This chapter shows, for example, how the differential, systematic attention paid to 'problematic' female bodies by biomedical experts directly informed notions of biologically based sex difference, concepts that will be shown, in later data chapters, to linger only in a slightly altered form in women's accounts of their bodies.

Chapter III provides an overview of the theoretical approaches informing the analyses described in Chapter II, and proceeds to draw from the most useful to frame up the conceptual orientation of this thesis. While one aim of this chapter is to justify the body assuming centrality in current social theorizing, the foremost aim is to locate and make explicit the conceptual/theoretical tools most relevant to the subject under investigation.

Research techniques are presented in some detail in Chapter IV, including

issues surrounding the selection of methodology, the unfolding nature of the interview process, and practices employed in data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are also discussed in Chapter IV as are the limitations of the data that were gathered. Analysis of the data is presented by emergent theme in Chapters V through VIII of this dissertation. Unanticipated data categories are described there as well, interspersed with these predetermined areas. This approach allowed the chronological sequence within which tangential data categories emerged to be maintained, so that discursive links from one category to another are apparent.

Chapter V begins the presentation of data in the form of a description of the research sample according to a series of demographic dimensions (age, occupation, marital status, education, body work preference, and the like). The experience of participant observation is also presented in the form of selected field notes from which aspects of researcher reflexivity and the research setting are subsequently considered.

Chapter VI looks at the recalled impact of first menses and the development of secondary sexual characteristics on women's relationship to their bodies, and also considers the impact of social class and obesity during adolescence. The central theme surrounds how body work is related to or mediated by a struggle to maintain or reimpose order in their younger years. This theme is continued in Chapter VII, but is extended to women's motivations

as adult practitioners of body work. Chapter VII considers the physical archetypes to which women do/do not aspire, how heterosexual relations are referenced in the understanding of body work motivations, and the physiological and psychological benefits of the fitness activities themselves.

Chapter VIII addresses the consumption habits of the women interviewed, examines their views on ageing and sexuality, and looks at what they refer to as the "special" knowledge that attends being bodily female. The concept of holism as best describing women's vision of health is discussed here as well, as is the central role the female body assumes in this alternative philosophy. Finally, in Chapter IX, research findings are re-considered vis-a-vis the major theoretical works presented in the first two chapters of this dissertation to assess their contribution to knowledge about the female body in contemporary North America. The final chapter concludes with some discussion of the current status of sociology of the body and offers suggestions for further study.

Chapter IISocial History of the Body

This chapter highlights significant social historical developments which arguably have left indelible marks on the female body in Western culture and, from this discussion, lays the groundwork for a more systematic examination of theoretical approaches to the body which occurs in the next chapter. Not intended to be an exhaustive history of corporeality, this chapter takes on the following two tasks: to show that the female form has a discernible history that is directly relevant to the set of research questions posed by this dissertation, and, to set the stage for consideration of how best to conceptually/theoretically engage in this investigation.

The following account of the female body in Western culture underscores the centrality of industrial capitalism and the increasing authority of medical science in the concomitant emergence of powerfully defining gender categories premised on reproductive function. From this discussion we see the adaptive function of medically interpreted dimorphism to the requirements of early industrialism. The degree to which the attending construction of systematized medical knowledge supports and promotes this gendered view becomes apparent, as does the mechanism, in the form of Darwinian rhetoric, by which it authorizes its position.

This chapter begins by considering practices of bodily control and denial in human societies and selectively traces these behaviours through important periods in Western history. Judeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman philosophical traditions are briefly mentioned, as is the Renaissance period, in order to identify the historical moment at which the female form allegedly arose as the paradigm of physical beauty (Synnott, 1993). Special emphasis is subsequently placed on formalized health/beauty/fitness practices for women with the arrival of modern science and technology, as female gender construction through the body takes on more and more significance at this time.

The legacy of the Victorian period<sup>12</sup> to the Western experience of female embodiment is especially emphasized in this account as this previous era continues to hold the fascination of social historians (and readers) concerned with the topics of gender, bodily restraint, sexuality and sexual practice, and exercise and sport. Whether real or imagined, the Victorian Age is credited with leaving a lasting mark on the psyche of Western peoples.

### 2.1 The Repressed Body

While human bodies remain material, physical and biological entities they are taken up and transformed as a result of living in any society (Shilling

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<sup>12</sup>. Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire from 1837 to 1901; this period is customarily referred to as the Victorian Age.

1993:11). Notwithstanding its organic, tangible foundation, that the body would be an available site for behavioural manipulation is attested to by a wealth of anthropological evidence. Scarification and circumcision rituals associated with rites of passage, tattooing and body piercing for purposes of adornment, the severing of toes and fingers to mourn and pay homage to the deceased, all have a long history in traditional societies as practices which are symbolically shared and understood by the collective.

Shilling (1993) points out that common to all of these bodily practices which altered, inscribed and decorated the human form within traditional societies, is the fact that they were bound up with inherited, persisting models of socially acceptable bodies, forged through rituals in communal ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> The individual power derived from denying the body sustenance in the form of food has also been traced back to the world of so-called primitive peoples. Vlahos sees these earliest practices of bodily repression as the appeal for purity, the "starving of the body to feed the spirit" (1978:148). Humans, she says, are the only animals who will decline eating when hungry and can willingly forego all pleasures of the flesh for some higher purpose. Among the ethnographic evidence she cites to illustrate this point, is the example of the

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<sup>13</sup>. This is a salient observation because it points to an association between control of bodily appetites and self-improvement distinct from the liberal, project-of-one, individualist expression which writers such as Elias (1978) and Outram (1989) argue arrives with the modern nation state.



Yurok of Northern California. Slenderness was the mark of a wealthy man in this culture and the road to prosperity was thought to present itself to those who emulated the airs and manners of the privileged. Only those who exercised strict control over all appetites, especially dietary, could fit through the narrow sweat house exit, and thus be deemed worthy of the blessing of great wealth (p.164). Vlahos' work implies that while the body is virtually a universal vehicle for status attainment, which groups practise bodily repression (in the Yurok case only the higher status males), as well as the content of such idealized prescripts, varies from culture to culture.

More elaborate documentation exists for aristocratic Greek culture. Food intake was systematically regulated among elites to attain self-mastery and Christian practice long before the Middle Ages wholeheartedly embraced the habit of fasting (Bordo 1989:3). Outram (1989) and Synnott (1993) reinforce the idea that such attempts at moral purity through bodily restraint were the practices of the priestly and aristocratic classes. Synnott makes the important point that it may well have been that the attitudes and practices among the starving masses were precisely the opposite of what the ascetic, religious zealots practiced during these times. If given the opportunity to gorge, the otherwise chronically hungry masses, would, no doubt, succumb to feasting without much moral/ethical difficulty.

Synnott suggests that while the majority of people were probably not

inclined lead ascetic lives, historical documentation certainly over represents those who did. In his sociological discourse on physical beauty, he investigates both the Judeo-Christian and the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition which linked physical to divine beauty. Plato's ascetic attitude to beauty and the body, says Synnott, was more influenced by the Orphic doctrine of soma - sema; body -tomb. Dualistic thought not only polarized, but set up as inferior and superior, matter and soul, evil and good, ugly and beautiful. Spiritual and moral beauty, for Plato, ranked higher than physical beauty. But earthly beauty could be an impediment to realizing the heavenly sort, and thus was potentially a tomb or prison of the soul.

Synnott explains that while this moral-laden association between the physical and metaphysical received only limited support within the hedonist climate of Greece, Plato's philosophy exerted a tremendous influence on Christianity. Christ directly addressed the debate between the hedonists and ascetics on the body. Teaching that the body is important and good, Christ instructed his disciples to attend to both the physical and spiritual needs of others. This idea was later elaborated by Saint Augustine and Saint Paul. Nonetheless, the doctrine of depriving the body to enrich the spirit took precedence over indulging the flesh. The ascetic life of Christ, characterized by poverty, chastity and fasting, was adopted to the extreme by monastic movements from the eleventh to the thirteenth century and even well before

this period (1989:619). The restrained body under these conditions was one provided only with enough food to live and was regarded as a vehicle for transcendence in Christian thought. Synnott explains that while the threat of over-zealous practice of bodily repression to mortality knows a long history in Judeo-Christian culture, its origins are in the metaphysical aspirations of clerics rather than the earthly concerns of the masses.

It was only during the Renaissance, beginning in Italy in the fourteenth century, and in the early modern periods, that idealized notions of the body extended outside elite or priestly circles. Around and directly after this period, the body and physical beauty were becoming increasingly secularized. Though the dualism of physical and metaphysical was being "pried apart", the Renaissance period is described as one still mostly characterized by the belief that physical beauty is caused by spiritual beauty (Synnott 1989:623).

Physical beauty, according to this thinking, was not only related to goodness and God, but also to physical desire. This connection to sexuality coincides with the adoption of the female form as the new idealization of beauty, an image Synnott insists was not in evidence before the Renaissance period. Whereas the male form had been idealized with the physical/metaphysical duality intact, it was replaced by the female form with increasing secularization of the body and physical beauty.

Similarly, in the tracing of the civilizing process that took place in

Western culture, a connection is made between physical consciousness, individual identity and state formation (Elias 1978).<sup>14</sup> Elias' concept of "homo clausus" provides intimations of the development of the secularized body (Outram 1989). Elias presents transitions in physical behaviour among the emerging eighteenth century bourgeoisie as part of a more general repression of bodily urges and reactions which eventually was extended to all. Such restraint resulted in the "intimate self-consciousness of individuals" so that sharp boundaries between self and other emerged (Outram, 1989:230). For Outram, this marks the origin of a self-perceived sense of individuality within the nexus of the body, the psyche, and the larger historical development that was early industrial capitalism.

Susan Bordo (1989) examines this interrelationship further in her study of women and the body during the Victorian era. She claims that it was during this period in Western culture that, for the first time, systematic denial of food

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<sup>14</sup>. Among his ideas presented in The Civilizing Process, Elias examines the development of bodily self-restraint and control which occurred in Western Europe from the late Middle Ages by drawing evidence from sources including 'manner books', literature, paintings and drawings, and from historical documents depicting how people were said to have behaved. Referring to the people of the Middle Ages, who ate together in the customary way, taking meat from the same dish, wine from the same goblet and so forth, Elias argues that their relationship to each other differed markedly from that of modern people, and the difference involved not only their rational consciousness but the character and structure of their emotional life. These changes in people's psychology and social behaviour were enforced by the necessity of adapting to new forms of social life (Mennell, 1989).

was pursued in the quest for a purely secular aesthetic ideal. Evidently this practice was a middle-class, female preoccupation throughout the nineteenth century, and, as in the case of the French bourgeoisie described by Outram, this denial of food was an undertaking in service of the body rather than the soul (Bordo 1989:83).

In Bryan Turner's (1987) tracing of Victorian discourse on food, he points out that while appetite and sexuality were previously perceived as a threat to religious vocation, with the advance of capitalism, more general, rational control was exerted over the impulses of all.<sup>15</sup> The rise of capitalism, he says, not only required the separation of the worker from the means of production; to realize the capitalist discipline of labour, subordination of immediate instinctual gratification had to be exercised by all classes. Turner consequently looks at the disciplinary requirements of a capitalist civilization and considers whether they can be understood in terms of the ascetic practices on the body. The necessity to regulate labour that Turner points to provides a credible materialist and historical basis on which to examine the development of bodily disciplines in Western culture. Foucault (1980) also acknowledges that the advent of increasing and widespread bodily repression coincides with

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<sup>15</sup>. Turner argues that this was especially the case through the development and implementation of rationalized diet among institutionalized populations such as orphanages, military barracks, hospitals and so on. He views the dietary regime as a perfect way into the analysis because the term "regime" permits one to connect a medical life-plan with the larger notion of a government.

the development of capitalism.

Turner draws from Victorian discourse on food to illustrate how expression of appetite evolved into an indicator of moral character. Having a strong moral content, this discourse posited that excessive intake of food and drink would lead to disorders of digestion which, in turn, were believed to encumber the mind. Of major concern within this discourse was the idea that such a stupefied state would interfere with the performance of one's professional duties. Thus, obesity easily became viewed not just as a sign of physiological abnormality, but also as one of moral deviance (1987:268).

Susan Bordo's (1989a) analysis of this same development goes even further by clearly exposing an important and distinct gender difference in the emerging value placed on thinness during this era. She argues that the portly bourgeois gentleman was comparatively exempt from negative assessment compared with his female counterpart. Higher social status deriving from privileged participation in the marketplace meant that male corpulence could be viewed as a marker of success rather than an expression of sloth.

For females, however, with their idealized physical form firmly entrenched as the paradigm of beauty within an increasingly secular world-view and its connection to sexual attractiveness made explicit, the consequence of more generalized repression of the body had unique outcomes for women. For

example, in Descent of Man, Darwin talked about the adaptive functions of beauty and also the variation in the cultural definitions of physical attractiveness (Darwin 1981, Vol.2:353). His idea that physical markers would contribute to sexual selection was seized upon by Freud (1977:69n).

During this same period, Thorstein Veblen is credited with the first sociological theory of physical attractiveness. Veblen asserted that, in the course of social evolution, the first systematic form of exploitation and domination was the domination of women by men (Ashley & Orensten, 1998:429). In contrast to the biological view, Veblen's pronouncement on female physical beauty under industrial capitalism clearly implicates the content of the gender roles in the middle class perception of female attractiveness. His imagery eloquently expresses how these constructs functioned to sustain and promote gender inequality. Writing on idealized female beauty Veblen declares:

The ideal requires delicate and diminutive hands and feet and a slender waist. These features... go to show that the person so affected is incapable of useful effort and must therefore be supported in idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength (Veblen 1953:107).

According to Veblen, as social wealth increased over time, the men at the very highest level began using others - especially their wives and daughters - in order

to display vicarious conspicuous waste<sup>16</sup>. Over time, the practice of vicarious conspicuous waste was imitated by other men to enhance their status. Thus the removal of women from productive labour became a sign of male status throughout the society. Attached to the spread of this practice was a change in the ideal of feminine beauty. For status enhancement, males fostered a conception of womanly beauty that was characterized by a frail, pale appearance, symbolizing a person incapable of hard work. Idealized physical features and clothing styles demonstrated that they did not engage in labour. Of course, says Veblen, not all males were wealthy enough to support women who were completely removed from labour. Rather than remove women from all labour, males, when economically capable, endeavoured to remove women from all publicly visible labour (Veblen, 1979 [1899]).

Following Veblen, twentieth century social scientists were indirectly acknowledging the inherent value of physical attractiveness to women as a form of passive power.<sup>17</sup> In truth, females of the upper classes at this time

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<sup>16</sup>. Vicarious conspicuous waste is conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption done by one person that benefits the status of another. An extreme version of vicarious conspicuous waste was the binding of the feet of female members of the Chinese aristocracy. Veblen asserted that this practice was used originally to demonstrate that a male was of such high status that he could support a wife who was physically incapable of productive labour (Ashley & Orenstein, 429:1998).

<sup>17</sup>. Passive power in this instance is defined as that which is wielded through physical beauty; it is a sexually levered and sometimes consciously employed form of influence through physical attractiveness (Valverde, 1985).



had few alternatives but to present themselves in ways to enhance their marriageability. Secularization of the body and preoccupation with female beauty were both greatly accelerated by the Industrial Revolution, and further elaborated with the continued rise of science and technology. Synnott argues that beauty correspondingly became valued for what was felt to be its inherent physical and technical properties. Formerly a marker of male earthly transcendence, beauty idealized in the female form was associated with its capacity to achieve earthly, utilitarian ends. It became physical and female, no longer male and metaphysical; "it was art, not God" (Synnott 1989:67).

The pursuit of secularized, female beauty also involved, for the first time, the itemization or particularization of body parts. This scrutiny of individual body parts in the discourse of beauty coincided with the social construction of the body as a machine composed of various parts, a development arguably inspired in part by the increasing division of labour and the further development of Western science. Payer (1990) and Martin (1987) note that this mechanistic approach typifies medical research and the practice of biomedicine to this day. It is to this subject of the medicalized body that we now turn to provide a more detailed examination of the role of medical science in the social construction of the contemporary Western body as not only machine-like, but as irrevocably gendered.

## 2.2 The Analyzable Body

Current conceptualizations of Western bodies draw heavily on the discourse of science, and most particularly, from that of modern biomedicine. The latter's increasing authority to speak on the subject of the body can be traced to developments which took place during the last two hundred and fifty years. Michel Foucault, in his work The Birth of the Clinic, identifies the introduction of hospitals as a precondition for the development of pathological science (1975:110).

Whereas physical symptoms had previously assumed an independent, unsystematized existence, the emergence of a new "penetrating, medical gaze" was facilitated by, among other things, the availability of numerous corpses for dissection. This new way of seeing, describing, and constructing the body functioned to, in effect, subjugate it. The body thus rendered analyzable, passive and depersonalized, meant that medical science functioned as one powerful extension of the emerging "disciplining apparatus" of the state by the end of the eighteenth century (Outram 1989:45). The emergence of medical practice as a respectable profession served to further legitimate middle class male claims to authority, and, not coincidentally, the creation of "new medicine" served this end.

In contrast, premodern medicine had been practiced intuitively, such that internal sensation was discerned on the surface of the body using sight, sound

and palpation (Sontag 1989:38). Here the patient's experience of pain and personal history lent much to the diagnosis, an input soon largely brought to a halt with the introduction of the dispassionate and invasive medical gaze. The new medicine saw the body as a machine composed of various parts, quantifiable, passive, depersonalized and rigidly demarcated by the male/female divide premised on reproductive function.<sup>18</sup>

Thomas Laqueur (1987, 1990) has argued that, until the eighteenth century, the human body tended to be perceived as an ungendered, generic body. The male body was considered the norm, but the female body had all the parts of the male; they were simply arranged differently and in an inferior pattern. For hundreds of years it had been generally accepted that women had the same genitals as men, except theirs were inside the body and not outside it. The vagina was imagined to be an interior penis, the labia a foreskin, the uterus a scrotum, and the ovaries were seen as inferior testicles. It was also believed that women emitted sperm (Laqueur, 1990).

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<sup>18</sup>. Important work that has been done in body history exposes these taken-for-granted realities of medical science which linger to this day by contrasting them with very different forms of embodiment expressed by women from the early eighteenth century medical records (Duden 1991). Duden undertakes a critique of the modern body ("an archaeology of modern certainties") by using the experiences of women in the past to undermine the claim that modern science offers a universally valid form of knowledge. She locates traces of a body very different from the modern medicalized form, one in which pathways we would regard as anatomically impossible operate -a body dominated by humours and in which blood ebbs and flows, rather than circulates.

This 'one sex/one flesh' model dominated thinking about sexual differences from classical antiquity to the end of the seventeenth century. Women were considered to be inferior to men, but their inferiority was not reflected in any specific, permanent or stable way within their bodies. Bodies were important but, unlike their portrayal in later, naturalistic views, they were seen as receptors as much as generators of social meanings:

...the paradox of the one-sex model is that pairs of ordered contraries played off a single flesh in which they did not themselves inhere. Fatherhood/motherhood, male/female, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, honourable/dishonourable, legitimate/illegitimate, hot/cold, right/left, and many other pairs were read into a body that did not itself mark these distinctions clearly. Order and hierarchy were imposed upon it from the outside. The one-sex body, because it was concerned as illustrative rather than determinant, could therefore register and absorb any number of shifts in the axes and valuations of difference. Historically, differentiations of gender preceded differentiations of sex (Laqueur, 1990:60-1).

This quotation illustrates that the content and meaning of the culture/nature divide has not been historically constant, and that while gender divisions were perceived as natural before the eighteenth century, the content of the boundaries of these divisions was not wholly stable and did not correspond to simple biological correlates. Laqueur points to a revolutionary shift that took place some time during the eighteenth century which substituted 'an anatomy and physiology of incommensurability' for the existing model of social

difference based on homologies between male and female reproductive systems (Currie & Raoul, 1991).

During the eighteenth century, science began to flesh out the categories of male and female and to base them on biological differences. This was accompanied by the development in the late eighteenth century of the notion of 'sexuality', a singular and significant human attribute which gave one a self-identity which was firmly contrasted with the opposite sex (Laqueur, 1990:13).

The growing prestige and authority of the medical establishment during the next century made this assemblage a key player in the development of a more rigid demarcation of the male/female divide premised on biological differences, particularly with respect to differential reproductive function. As childbearers, females were deemed naturally inclined toward domesticity and ill-suited to participation in the public realm. Female exclusion from the marketplace characterized the emerging middle class that arose from the concomitant social division of labour within industrial England (Shuttleworth, 1989; O'Neill, 1987). The aim of the campaign of the medical establishment at this time was to further establish its professional territory, and this metamorphosis in the gender division of labour provided it with the rationale to do so (Ehrenreich and English, 1979; Shorter, 1989).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>. Writers on this topic generally agree that elaborations on the male/female divide are articulated through sets of similarly interrelated opposites, such as mind/body and culture/nature. Some posit that there is, however, an instability

Shuttleworth (1990:49) describes the inventory of physical symptoms which functioned as a "prescriptive list for femininity" during the Victorian era and tracks the intersection of roles between medical discourse and popular advertising in promoting this definition. This implicit gender distinction in medical discourse resulted in the "ideological erasure of female agency", she says, such that activities of bodily control and regulation for women increasingly involved the application of external medications, managed by professional supervision. In contrast, those for men emphasized self direction in the cultivation of internal resources, the aim of which was to produce, in individual men, those qualities requisite for climbing the social ladder (1990:53).

The ideological defense at the time, and one that is in hindsight blatantly paternalistic, was that this sheltered female gender role expressed the value attached to women. Shuttleworth responds that what was really valued was the passive reproductive body, a body that had to be saved from the labour market through exclusion from it. Conveniently, this reasoning also provided the excuse to rid the territory of midwives, a development which was a further boon to male-only medical practice (Ehrenreich and English, 1979; Shorter,

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in these formulations; depending on the historical and cultural context, 'woman' emerges on either side of these divisions, though 'woman' is rarely identified with mind. The nuances of these context dependent formulations within the construction of knowledge will be discussed in Chapter 3.

1989). Women were viewed as lacking the intellectual resources to understand and regulate their own chaotic and pathological biology, so they could hardly be deemed capable of practicing medicine on each other.

The rigid and unequal gender demarcations which were premised on reproductive function and led to the relegation of women to the private sphere greatly benefitted industrial capitalism (Szekely, 1989; Haug 1987). Women's relation to the labour market was influenced by the intersection of race, class and gender. Middle class white women, relegated to domesticity, became a leisured class of consumers. Meanwhile, their materially disadvantaged working class counterparts willingly functioned as reserve pools of labour because they too were fundamentally rendered docile by the dictum that they were defined by their reproductive function (Shuttleworth 1989:92).<sup>20</sup>

Writers in this area have exerted considerable effort to make explicit the mechanisms by which medical science acts through the body to both increase institutional authority and promote the interests of the state under industrial capitalism. Gendered bodies conceptualized within this male dominated

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<sup>20</sup>. Shuttleworth suggests that such ideologies of womanhood originated not primarily with the need to control women, but rather from the requirement that men be assimilated to the developing economic system. Men's favoured position in the labour market coupled with a gender identity emphasizing autonomy and control, minimized feelings of "subordination of man to machine" (1990:94). Her insight is novel in that it offers an explanation for the relegation of women to the private sphere which does not rest solely on male expression of misogyny.

framework foster professional authority by providing pathological female bodies on which to base medical practice, whilst autonomous male bodies are constructed to labour in the public sphere. Images of gendered bodies are thus adapted to a mode of production which requires both efficient producers and insatiable consumers.

As to the extent to which physicians had access to still-living bodies, records show that for some time biomedical interventions must have been met with some scepticism. Even during the Victorian era most people relied on home remedies (hot baths, herbal teas, and potions) for minor ailments, as well as patent medicines and related products (Leavitt 1984). For more serious problems, only those with financial means could consult doctors and convalesce at health spas, private hospitals and sanitoriums; the poor had to rely on charitable institutions. On the whole, however, due to the monthly cycle, childbirth, menopause, and limited knowledge about the female body, women were seen as more likely than men to suffer from "the ills and discomforts of the flesh and blood" (Anderson 1995:114).

The idea of menstruation as a disease or as "the eternal wound" (Vertinsky, 1994:21) was part of a larger medical tendency to equate femininity and pathology. Though physicians did not understand the exact relationship between the onset of menarche and a critical level of body fat, they did worry about anorexia scolastica, a debilitating thinness and weakness that



they believed to result from too much mental stimulus, especially during menstruation. They were also acutely aware of the linkage between the body changes of puberty and chlorosis, a common form of anaemia named for the greenish tinge that often marked the skin of young women (Brumberg 1984:188).

The ovaries and uterus were seen as culprits in many forms of female ill health: headaches, sore throats, indigestion, disorders of the kidneys, liver or heart, even tuberculosis (Leavitt, 1984). All these and more they diagnosed as symptoms of a primary "disease of the womb". Later in the century, doctors would add surgery to their gynaecological repertoire of uterine injections of silver nitrate, application of leeches to the vulva or cervix, and cautery. Removal of the ovaries was the most common surgical procedure and, in rare cases, the clitoris was excised.<sup>21</sup>

Wisely, the majority of women apparently paid little attention to the medical characterization of femininity as illness; they avoided the worst "cures", and continued to go about their business (Vertinsky, 1994). Some, however, accepted the role of invalid, and even used it to escape the burden of constant reproduction and the monotony of domestic responsibilities. Others, almost exclusively women of material means, found a more demonstrative way

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<sup>21</sup>. The clitoris was excised in those cases where a woman's symptoms included nymphomania or "incorrigible masturbation" (Anderson 1995:117).

to protest both the limitations of their lives and medicine's effort to enervate femininity. This was hysteria, a syndrome that became widespread in England, the United States, and throughout Europe.<sup>22</sup>

Physicians treated cases of hysteria inconsistently, says Anderson (1995). In keeping with the new medicine, most insisted that hysteria had a discernible physical cause - the diseased womb. In fact, the word "hysteria" comes from the Greek expression for uterus. Notwithstanding its supposed causation, Anderson insists that the profession must have also regarded it as a behavioural disorder, for treatment was not so much medical as punitive. Among the measures doctors advocated and received payment for were stern lectures, suffocation until the fits stopped, beating the patient across the face and body with wet towels, embarrassing her in front of family and friends, and threatening to give her cold showers or shave her head. Anderson makes the important point that while doctors strongly maintained the dogma of the defective womb, the nature of these 'treatments' suggests that they must have had an idea of the true nature of hysteria. Not a disease, and social rather than physical in origin, it was women's rebellion against the limitations of their lives and the medicalization of their bodies (Anderson, 1995:82).

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<sup>22</sup>. Hysteria showed itself within a variety of symptoms: fainting spells, thrashing limbs, inability to speak, loss of appetite, fits of coughing or sneezing, and hysterical screaming, laughing or crying (Anderson 1995:117).

### 2.3 The Self-Monitoring Body

The preceding discussion exposes some of the major social-historical forces which inform human embodiment under early industrial capitalism and considers how these institutionalized forces derive and perpetuate power from this undertaking. Social historians have shown how the new, powerful middle class, having deposed the aristocracy, assumes the responsibility of redefining the body and in consequence, further establishes its authority.

Two interrelated features of this development stand out as noteworthy, in that they exercise a carry over effect to contemporary Western culture. Monopolizing the construction of all bodies, middle class authority adopts a somewhat altered form of courtly behaviour. This involves repression of urges and appetites, an elaboration of the conduct which had initially ingratiated them with the aristocracy. As described by Foucault (1975), new hospital medicine is also developed and comes to function as a mechanism of power through the regulation of human bodies. By the eighteenth century, we see the emergence of a new, powerful political class, one establishing a new knowledge based on rationality and, consequently, a new conception of the body.

The body becomes viewed as a problem in self management, a view Outram (1989) describes as retained to this day. Medical science was becoming aware of what were as yet unfathomable, complex interrelations of functions within the body. "Homo clausus" appears, and functions to maintain

some semblance of physical integrity in what is perceived as an otherwise internally conflict-ridden body. Notions of the body emerge which regard it as an "economy" of physiological systems, fuelled by an "inner dynamic" rather than by externally located forces (Martin, 1987:32).<sup>23</sup> The institutionalized forces that come to bear down upon the body through increasing rationalization, secularization and medicalization are shown to have unique consequences to the female gendered body. Pathologized and rendered passive, the female body of the middle classes adopts an anxious self scrutiny monitored by medical experts.

#### 2.4 Moral Goodness and Sexual Allure

Sociologists and social psychologists continue to emphasize the significance of physical beauty as a status symbol, as increasing self-esteem through the looking glass effect, as eliciting more helping behaviour from others, and other such socially useful advantages (Synnott 1993). Upwardly aspiring females as far back as the eighteenth century were guided by a number of 'conduct books', often penned by female writers of the day, in which the feminine ideal was promoted through styles of dress and demeanour written in

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<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, eighteenth century medical practice increasingly develops disciplines and institutions aimed to secure a hold over the peasant body perceived as "profoundly other - because profoundly irrational" (Outram 1989:67).

a highly instructive style. During the Victorian era, beauty was explicitly seen as a duty for women and as an expression of their wholesome development. As one writer of the period notes: "love of self, as reflected in the care of your person and the enhancement of your looks, is an expression of a healthy personality" (Hauser 1961:8).

In her work on the Victorians and their attitudes toward sex, historian Patricia Anderson describes the ideal Victorian woman as a "paragon of passive virtue. She was loving and nurturing, patient and agreeable, gentle and cheerful, obedient and dutiful" (1995:31). She was innocent of mind and pure of body, and she had two sides: on the one hand, the truly womanly woman was sexually virtuous - on the other, she was sexually attractive. Toward the "scientific" construction of this end Anderson chronicles the 1890s, which saw the rise of sexology - the professional study of sex - and all the publications, papers, lectures, and discussion that it encompassed.

This marked the transformation of sex into talk within scientific and medical circles. The use of evolutionary theory as a "scientific" rationale for maintaining the status quo of sexual inequality was well received and new editions of Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson's biological study, The Evolution of Sex, appeared in 1890, 1895, 1897, and 1899. More importantly, the sex research that would leave the most lasting legacy became part of the English-speaking world in the 1890s; it was during this year that the

society for Psychical Research and other British learned groups first discussed the ideas of Sigmund Freud, a man whose name would become a household word in the next century (Foucault 1980; Anderson 1995). Freud's theory of psychosexual development, which claimed to explain the passive heterosexuality of well-adjusted women, was perceived as a normative prescription for patriarchal relations in European cultures (Raoul, 1992).

Throughout the Victorian period female sexuality was a potent force, and the desirable woman's standard for expressing it "was as high as her imposing bosom and stylish bustle" (Anderson 195:23). Victorian men and women alike associated beauty, femininity, and sexuality with a rounded figure and well-developed bosom. Romantic fiction of the time contributed to its female readers' sense of their sexual potential, and it did so by constantly referencing in its content the standard of full-breasted, curvaceous beauty. This popular image was also promoted by fashion and beauty experts, advertisers, and glamorous figures such as actresses. Anderson (1995) and Banner (1983) insist that there was no concerted effort to impose this image, nor would women at the time have suspected a conspiratorial campaign if there had been one. For mass entertainment was new, and the Western world had yet to remotely suspect its capacities and consequences.

One way or another, there was considerable pressure on women to conform to the ideal of curvaceous beauty. They responded most noticeably

through the virtually universal use of the corset. By 1868 Britain was annually producing three million of these popular undergarments and importing an additional two million from France and Germany (Anderson 1995:29).<sup>24</sup> So central was the corset to popular consciousness - male as well as female - that it was the focus of an ongoing and sometimes heated controversy during the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>25</sup>

The corset represented the contradictory demands placed on the Victorian female. It fulfilled a dual purpose: it lifted and emphasized the breasts while confining and restraining the waist. In this way it served both the imperative of feminine attractiveness and the virtue of self discipline. In short, to achieve what the world defined as her highest and most appropriate role in life, a woman had to be good **and** good-looking.

In responding to this dictum, Victorian women not only improved their

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<sup>24</sup>. In addition to standard designs that simply enhanced the curves, there were more specialized versions of the corset: the Self-Regulating Gestation Corset, for ladies in a delicate condition; the Juvenile Elastic Corset, for girls growing too rapidly, presumably due to puberty; the Invisible Scapula Contractor Corset, to develop the chest; and various models, sturdily boned or belted, to reshape bulky torsos (Anderson 1995:30).

<sup>25</sup>. The corset itself was for the most part uncontroversial; the issue was whether or not it ought to be tightly laced up. Some people objected to tight lacing on health grounds, arguing that it caused everything from breathing difficulties and constricted internal organs to bad complexions. Others, often men with waist and breast fetishes, passionately endorsed tight lacing. Meanwhile, the vast majority of men and women simply accepted a moderately laced corset as an indispensable enhancement to feminine beauty (Anderson 1995:31).

marriageability but at the same time maintained the contemporary standard of well managed sexuality. As a conventional fashion, the corset was a sign of moral uprightness and no respectable woman of means was likely to appear uncorseted in public. Decency of dress signalled decency of behaviour to middle class Victorians. For the Victorians, feminine propriety and female sexual attractiveness existed in constant tension. Anderson sees no more visible and compelling symbol for this than the female breast and its popular imagery during the Victorian era in the form of the "chaste bosom", "virgin breast", "lily-white orb" (p.34).

. By the end of the twentieth century, however, as Synnott (1989, 1990) notes, beauty is entirely redefined from the effect of attitudes, beliefs and philosophy to a purely physical phenomenon of "bones and muscle, diet and make-up". Rather than emanating even partly from what is housed within, by the end of the twentieth century it is the consummate expression and outcome of what is imposed from without. Histories of women's bodies into the late modern period (Banner 1983; Bolin 1992) chronicle the quest for a beauty of the increasingly technical, secular sort. For example, in her charting of the American history of beauty between 1800 and 1921, Lois Banner notes that even though a dominant standard probably existed in every age, by the 1900s, it was challenged by several competing models or looks, and a fashion



conscious woman might incorporate elements of each into her personal style.<sup>26</sup>

As physical attractiveness became more technical and complex, female flesh was subject to an even greater scrutiny under the rubric of health/beauty. Eva Szekely delivers a scathing critique of contemporary Western medicine in this respect, which is easily linked to analyses of Victorian accounts. Labelling the approach of biomedicine as ahistorical and decontextualizing, phenomena are stripped of the social situations in which they are embedded, she says, and explanation is reduced to psychopathology of the individual (1989:173). Specifically discussing the sociological analysis of eating disorders, Szekely charges the medical perspective with concealing the causes and development of "the relentless pursuit of thinness"(p.175). Once any such phenomenon is viewed as a disease, sociocultural factors are only reconsidered as elements undermining the individual's personality defect or arrested development. The

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<sup>26</sup>. Banner (1983) documents changes in fashion and standards of personal beauty by consulting novels, fashion magazines, diaries and autobiographies, beauty and etiquette manuals, travellers' accounts, periodicals and advertisements. She challenges Thorstein Veblen's argument (The Theory of the Leisure Class, 1899) which located the origins of fashion changes among social elites, implying a percolation downward through the class structure. Banner argues that fashions evolved and spread through an interaction of classes, including workers and the middle classes as well as the very wealthy, and through the important influence of a "subculture of sensuality" - members of the sporting set, the theatrical world, and the frequenters of saloons and gaming parlours. Anderson (1995) notes that actresses, dancers, and other female entertainers were among the most highly sexualized beings of their day.

'patient' is seen as an isolated case, one manifesting pathology because of psychological and/or genetic predisposition.

Reminiscent of Elias' notion of homo clausus, Szekely maintains that the approach of modern medicine reflects the dominant ideology of our society - that of possessive individualism. According to Outram, the rise of institutions and disciplines during the French Revolution aided control of the masses. In much the same way, the biomedical establishment perpetuates the pursuit of thinness by women, not just by viewing extreme expressions as individual pathology, but by sanctioning and participating in the obsessive character of body work for other women. Techniques to surgically alter the body, to insert implantations of various sorts, to remove fat through the liposuction, are but a few services offered by modern medicine to these women. The involvement of medicine in this massive body project and its role in obscuring the larger picture, means that the enormous energies invested in, and insecurities surrounding, body weight, physical presentation, level of fitness, and the like, appear simply as normative. Preoccupied with culturally imposed standards for femininity which are virtually unattainable owing to genetic inheritance and lifestyle demands, even those women who abandon the project feel inadequate because they have failed to measure up.

Looking at the role of the macro-body of consumer culture which also contributes to the production of the social personality type prone to aberrant

dietary practices, Poovey (1985) also undertakes a sociological account of eating disorders. They symbolize to her the contradictions of the social body which makes self-regulation compulsory, but virtually impossible to accomplish in a consumer culture. The role of disciplined worker and unrestrained consumer are not compatible, she says. But consumer needs, as O'Neill points out, originate in the productive sector, rather than in the consumer's body (1985:95). Outlining the "work of consumption", he describes the consumer as the product of "anxiety-inducing processes" , not as a hedonist luxuriating in the sensuous appreciation of rewards for a job well done. Insatiably driven to acquire still more of what is commercially invented, the consumer tries to reclaim a psychological deprivation that class structure has created in his/her life. O'Neill would not consequently view the roles of producer/consumer as incompatible or contradictory, since the objective in producing is not consumption in the sense of indulging, so much as aspiring to more.

Nuances of interpretation aside, writers on the subject of the body essentially agree with the insight attributed to Mary Douglas, that images of the physical body symbolically reproduce the vulnerabilities and anxieties of the social body (1973:65). The content of standards for female beauty scrutinized by the feminist scholars previously outlined underscores this connection between the physical body and the body social. The current "hard body" ideal for women symbolizes society's psychic anxieties and moral valuations

concerning control of impulse and desire (Bordo 1989); it is a physical archetype that can work hard and play hard within socially prescribed parameters. With the recent increased participation of women in the paid labour force, this idealized female body symbolizes the capacity to labour in non traditional jobs, as evidenced by its boyish, but muscular appearance. Its tenuously erotic quality is also apparent in its duty to increasingly consume prescriptive commodities.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.5 Techniques of the Body

Women's bodies, through time, have also been subject to explicit fitness programmes which reflect the prevailing ideology of the day. Secularization of beauty in the female form and the entrenchment of medical beliefs and values over the past two hundred and fifty years have understandably influenced the perceived benefits of purposive exercise for women across their life span. Ideological assumptions about the nature of women, and the assumed authority of biomedicine to manage the female body means that scientific knowledge, medical practice, and social perceptions surrounding female corporeality interact

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<sup>27</sup>. The female form as exemplified by the aerobically fit ideal, while boyish in appearance, manages to stop short of threatening the dimorphic quality of the male/female divide. Dimorphism is maintained through the accentuation of secondary sexual characteristics such as breasts and buttocks, acquired through surgical means if need be. Further, attention paid to make-up, hair, and attending accessories, underscores the body's femaleness in the face of an increased muscle to fat ratio.

to promote views concerning what kinds and amounts of physical activity, including sport and healthful exercise, might be most appropriate for girls and women at different points in their lives.

Not uncommonly, medically defined notions of optimal female health and individual and social well-being have justified the practice of viewing female physiological functions as requiring prescribed and/or delimited levels of physical activity and restricted sporting opportunities (Well, 1985; Vertinsky, 1994).<sup>28</sup> According to writers of the history of women in sport, what physicians had to say about women, health and physical activity had an important impact upon the lives and outlook of middle class women<sup>29</sup>, and

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<sup>28</sup>. Many historians have mistakenly concluded that the processes of industrialization eased the burden of women's work in the home, and that the assistance of servants necessarily did the same thing. Although developing industrialization served to eliminate those types of work once assigned to men and children, in almost every aspect of household work the toil of women was left either untouched or even augmented. It was a glaring example of women's very separate sphere, for even though middle class women were constantly advised to rest by popular medical literature, they were also expected to put in a long hard day managing both house and family activities (Cowan, 1983:64).

<sup>29</sup>. It was the middle class mind that reflected on the meaning of exercise for female health during the Victorian era and it was the woman of the 'better' classes with whom the establishment doctor was largely concerned. Literature giving these women guidance about their health and exercise behaviour was more profuse and inflexible than for working class women, although advice for the working class increased substantially in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Society doctors viewed affluent women as being in special need of protection because of their delicate nature and refined life-style, and saw working women as naturally robust and less susceptible to difficulties brought on by bodily exertion. Lower class women were believed by establishment doctors to be physically stronger and to feel little pain in

provided a legacy which has had a lasting effect throughout the twentieth century (Verbrugge, 1976; Smith-Rosenbury, 1985). For example, in a summary of the scientific literature related to exercise and menstruation, Wells (1985) concludes that misinformation and traditional views concerning the menstrual function are still major blocks to the active participation of girls and women in competitive sports.

This is not to suggest that some nineteenth century women did not pick up heavy dumbbells, take very long walks, or join together in strenuous calisthenics and gymnastics classes. Works by Todd (1998) and Verbrugge (1988) argue that purposive exercise in the lives of nineteenth century American women was anything but "light". Their examinations point to several systems which actually required high levels of strength and endurance. Devotees of these strenuous systems were ideological heirs of Mary Woolstonecraft, who had argued that women had as much right to physical strength, muscularity, and robust health as men did. Therefore, a more robust ideal of femininity was circulated, says Todd (1998:6), which took the form of *Majestic Womanhood*, a new physical model for American womanhood - a model based on size, strength, and substance. Roberta Park (1978:5) has speculated that the feelings of empowerment enjoyed by the women who

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comparison to middle class women (Stanley, 1984; Lewin & Olesen, 1985; Vertinsky, 1994).

participated in these early exercise programmes may even have served as a catalyst of the women's rights campaign of the mid-nineteenth century.

While by 1900 the idea of female invalidism was being steadily challenged by feminists promoting the beneficial effects of exercise and sport, conservative male and female doctors continued to warn an increasingly nervous public that the physical activities of the 'new woman' were going too far and that women were irresponsibly using up the bodily energy that was required for healthy maternity and efficient housekeeping (Vertinsky, 1994:21). Menstruation was still generally looked upon as an eternal wound, an illness and as a shortcoming, it came to be seen by some practitioners as a process requiring certain kinds of moderate physical activity, suitable open air exercises and sports appropriate for physical renewal. Still perceived as a pathological condition, though, it provided cause for exclusion of women from vigorous and competitive sports, and from any physical exertion which medical experts considered overtaxing (Smith-Rosenbury, 1985).

Teachers in the mid-nineteenth century were encouraged to protect adolescent girls from mental fatigue and violent physical activities such as long walks, riding, dancing, or lifting heavy weights. Instead, they were to advocate gymnastics, active games, daily baths and other hygienic practices for female students so that their physical condition might be improved (Verbrugge, 1988; Vertinsky, 1994). On the one hand, definitions of femininity and menstrual

disability theory implied a lack of physical vigour and robustness, and a recurring energy drain which prevented participation in education and hard labour. On the other hand, the development of physical strength and health was a necessary attribute of a robust, productive mother. There was a difficulty, then, says Smith-Rosenburg (1985), of providing the appropriate regimen to smooth the path taken by the dependent, fragile girl en route to the demanding responsibilities of motherhood.

Some experts advocated an active childhood, including outdoor play and exercise for young prepubertal girls. According to this thinking, childhood was regarded as the time to rear little girls with a view to storing up enough vital energy for perfect physical development, but at the first sign of menarche the carefree romping and vigorous activity had to cease. According to Vertinsky (1994), the bodily changes associated with menarche also dictated an alteration in exercise prescription.

The general attitude of the established medical profession toward physical education for adolescent girls was that it should harden muscles, add to fat, soften skin, enrich the blood, and promote, but not over stimulate the bodily functions. Excessive muscularity was felt to be unfavourable to maternity since it increased the difficulties of giving birth. Most suitable, then, were calisthenics or other movements with light elastic apparatus, which promoted grace and symmetry (Verbrugge, 1988).



Since childbearing and childrearing consumed most of a married woman's adult life, there was little time available for exercise during these years. At the same time, married women were frequently warned not to neglect healthful exercise needed to maintain their vitality. Endurance exercises and those designed to assist the respiratory system were considered to be the most suitable for burning excessive fat and improving health. Walking in the open air was consistently promoted, and was considered the most suitable physical exercise for pregnant women, although it was never to be taken to extremes.

Although the adoption of the bicycle<sup>30</sup> did more than any other activity to form new conceptions of what was possible for females to do and be, by the late nineteenth century other sports too were increasingly accepted by establishment physicians as a means of using carefully managed activity to strengthen women. Riding, hunting, tennis, rowing and golf were considered medically acceptable if moderate and non-competitive. Although few women could actually swim, swimming came to be promoted as an excellent sport, always provided that the exercise was not too violent and the bathing costume was modest (Vertinsky 1998:82).

In the late nineteenth century only about 15 per cent of women lived

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<sup>30</sup>. Feminists and physicians alike argued over the bicycle's potential for improving the physique and health of middle class women when it first arrived in France and as it was quickly adopted in America and England (Vertinsky, 1994:76).

beyond their fertile years.<sup>31</sup> Since menopause marked the end of fertility, attitudes towards it reflected the inferior social status of women, and the value attached to their reproductive capacity. Ideas about older women being either childish or masculine underscored late nineteenth century notions of the centrality of female reproductive capability. American and English physicians generally agreed with the French experts that menopause and ageing required considerable medical attention, but they simultaneously retained a strong belief in old age as a depletion of vital energy about which very little could be done.<sup>32</sup> Advice about physical exercise for older women thus emphasized caution and advised against overtaxing their strength by continuous exertion. Rest was essential, with some hours of each day to be spent lying down, and gentle exercise in the form of walks in the cool of the day was recommended

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<sup>31</sup>. Shorter (1982) explains that despite a slight female advantage in life expectancy, during the nineteenth century girls between five and twenty had a significantly higher mortality rate than boys (often due to tuberculosis) and married women in their thirties stood perhaps a twenty-five per cent greater risk of dying than their husbands as a result of childbirth-related difficulties such as puerperal fever. The general morbidity/mortality patterns therefore illustrate higher mortality rates for women at younger ages, though female survivors have a slightly longer life-span than men.

<sup>32</sup>. Referred to as vital energy theory, this was the notion that by leading a temperate life, the supply of life force could last for more than the time allotted by God (3 score and ten) to that allowed by Nature. According to this theory weakness in old age resulted from the life energy having already been spent. Thus the more wisely people spent their final portion of energy, the more likely they were to maintain a healthy balance between their body and the environment (Vertinsky, 1994:97).

to relieve congestion of the internal organs and reduce nervousness and temper.

For nineteenth century females, physical activities as well as intellectual pursuits had to be compatible with age-related female physiology and was to be focused upon health and balance rather than on competition. The vociferous demands of the 'new woman' at the end of the century, however, suggested that, in athletics as well as in other endeavours of the male sphere, women were not unanimously committed to the notion that they were eternally wounded (Smith-Rosenburg, 1985).

From the 1890s to the 1920s an active and visible feminist movement focused itself on the achievement of female suffrage. These feminists challenged entrenched Victorian assumptions and prescriptions concerning femininity, and according to Messner, this was reflected in a minor first wave of athletic feminism in the 1920s, mostly located in women's colleges. Female athleticism was predictably viewed as conflicting with the conventional ethos of femininity, and led to a violent opposition. Those involved in women's athletics responded defensively with the establishment of an anticompetitive "feminine philosophy of sport" (Beck, 1980), thus ensuring the survival of women's athletics albeit in a marginalized and ghettoized form (Messner, 1994).

As the twentieth century progressed, prevailing standards for feminine

beauty shifted in rapid succession. In the U.S., for example, the statuesque Gibson girl with her hourglass shape made way for the perky, flat-chested flapper of the twenties. The businesslike, assertive beauties of the forties as represented by Hollywood stars such as Joan Crawford, Katherine Hepburn, and Bette Davis were replaced by the fleshy sex symbols and Playboy bunnies of the fifties. Thin was in with Twiggy in the sixties and muscles and the healthy look were added in the late seventies as the fitness craze emerged and Jane Fonda became the symbol of feminine beauty/health/fitness. (Banner, 1983; Lakoff and Scherr, 1984; Marwick, 1988).

What had been an ignorable undercurrent of female athleticism from the 1930s through the 1960s was suddenly subject to a second wave of athletic feminism by the 1970s. Notwithstanding the ensuing "torrent" of female sports participation, the modern female athlete placed herself "on the cutting edge of some of the most perplexing problems of gender-related biology and the feminine ideal" (Brownmiller, 1984:195). A mid nineteen eighties survey of 1,682 American female athletes showed that 57% agreed that society still forces a choice between being an athlete and being feminine, suggesting that there is still a dynamic tension between traditional prescriptions for femininity and the image presented by active, strong, even muscular women (Messner, 1994).

With the arrival of aerobics as a popular form of physical conditioning for

many women, it was the value attached to female beauty which initially occupied a central space in the fitness discourse surrounding aerobic exercise. Markula (1995) points to the fact that in the 1960s the father of the aerobics running programme, Kenneth Cooper, felt that women's exercise should primarily improve bodily appearance: "The way it works out, women earn a double payoff from aerobics; they go to the program to improve their looks and they get fitness and health as fringe benefits" (Cooper, 1970:134).

In the 1970s and early 1980s women were increasingly urged to exercise to take care of their bodies. In addition to light aerobic activities such as jogging, swimming or tennis, calisthenics, light strengthening exercises, and stretching were often recommended. The ideal feminine body was described as shapely, slender, and softly curvy (Fairclough, 1980; Lenskyj, 1986). Magazines assured their readers that female hormones prevented any extensive muscle development despite engagement in physical activity. It was, therefore, promoted as a physiological fact that women had soft, small muscles and curvy bodies.

Markula (1995) describes how the whole concept of a muscular woman was redefined when Jane Fonda published Jane Fonda's Workout Book in 1981. Fonda promoted and exemplified the fit, trim, and muscular body, and a new ideal stepped into the aerobics movement. Magazines, Markula shows, deepened the fragmented image of the body when they assigned special parts

as problem spots. Problem areas - abdomen, thighs, underarms, and the "butt" were thought to be particularly resistant to manipulative toning, albeit the areas of the female body that needed it the most. Already in 1980, one article pointed out that "the main areas of concern for most women are the upper arms (batwings), abdomen (stretch marks and flab) and outer thighs (saddlebags)" (Stallings, 1980:49).

Markula (1994), among others, contends that these spots are the very parts of our bodies that identify us as female: the rounded bellies, the larger hips, the thighs, the soft underarms. These "female parts" are also the ones we hate the most and fight the hardest to diminish. Bordo (1990) argues that women grow up despising their feminine form, because the contemporary ideal feminine shape resembles that of a young boy: wide shoulders, tight muscles, narrow hips.

The most explicit connection between women's exercise and slimness dates back to the advent of aerobics, says Markula, and even now, weight loss is always listed as an advantage of a regular exercise programme. Sometimes, strength training is also sold by linking it to weight loss because increased muscle mass burns calories even at rest. This logic implies that women should build muscle to assist weight loss, not to increase strength (Markula, 1995:439).

Markula points out that even female bodybuilders need to be unnaturally

thin to show off their muscle development. Although challenging femininity through developing big muscles, women bodybuilders do not overcome the requirement of feminine thinness. Being fat is still probably the furthest from the ideal feminine body of the 90s. A strong, overweight woman, theoretically, would offer the most direct resistance to the patriarchal notions of femininity in this society, as her body would directly oppose the toned and thin ideal (Markula, 1995:442).

Carole Spitzack (1990) shows how women's present beauty standard is defined through health: the "healthy look" and "natural beauty" are now the fashionable descriptions of a good-looking woman. She points out that a beautiful body in this society is a healthy body, not only a slender body as 10 years ago. This shift away from thinness should provide more diverse models for women, but most descriptions of the healthy look still centre on the requirements of physical attractiveness. In reality, the healthy body "mandates even greater restrictions on female bodies" (Spitzack, 1990:37).

For Markula (1995), Bradley Block's (1988) article in Health magazine serves as a case in point. He proclaims that the great body today is a healthy body and that, therefore, there is no single great body "look". The article introduces six women who demonstrate the alleged diversity. However, when we take a closer look at these women, we find that they are all thin, young and toned. The only variable is their height. Therefore, for Spitzack and Markula,

the healthy body is only a new, fashionable, euphemism for the physically attractive body.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has selectively chronicled the malleability of the human form to prevailing ideology, and has suggested that key occurrences in Western social history have had a lasting impact on conceptions surrounding the contemporary female body. The rise of medical science and secularization of the body brought about rigid gender categories, which translated for Victorian middle class women into the quest for an increasingly commodified, technical sort of physical beauty in the face of "naturally" pathologized bodies.

We see that by the early twentieth century women moved away from the compulsory corset and bustle which augmented but confined a tamed sexual allure, and began to tackle the flesh itself to fashion a physical form that simultaneously exemplifies the consummate consumer and able producer. Having increasingly entered the public realm in large numbers to engage in paid labour, women's bodies have maintained their perennial association with the sexual and reproductive realm, but are now styled into a conformation more palatable to male dominated space because lacking in extraneous flesh.

This reading of the female gendered body provides intimations of how the female physique as a potential form of intimate and proximate cultural



capital can become increasingly emblematic of identity, and of how this process is inextricably linked to and exacerbated by the strongly individualized ethic of contemporary North American society. The physical archetypes of health/beauty/fitness from which women may arguably 'individualize' in the late twentieth century reflect a dynamic tension between athleticism and femininity. Vestiges of invalidism from the Victorian era apparently still reside in conceptions of female physicality and psychology, in that open-ended physical strength, largeness and competitive spirit are still seen as antithetical to femininity.

Before examining these possibilities more closely vis-a-vis the self-reported, lived experiences of the women interviewed by this research study, the next chapter will present some major theoretical perspectives on the body. This will begin with an examination of the 'absent presence' of the body in early sociological thinking. Chapter III will account for the rise of embodiment in contemporary social theorizing and, more importantly, present the conceptual/theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Chapter IIIThe Body in Social Theory

This chapter begins by selectively reviewing some insights offered by critical perspectives on the interaction between notions of the body, gender, and identity vis-a-vis the concept of human agency, and how Cartesian thinking is implicated in the reappraisal of the body within the discipline of sociology. Toward its end this chapter will make explicit the theoretical orientation of this dissertation, and underscore why and how this undertaking attempts, from its onset, to be guided by women's accounts of their bodies as reflecting knowledgeable, self-directed participation in body work.

As was illustrated through analyses presented in the previous chapter, much recent work exploring the history and cultural meaning of the body in the West has drawn productively on classical works from sociology and anthropology. The body, past and present, is read with the guidance of earlier thinkers, either as pioneers upon whose ideas further thinking has developed, or as foils for more iconoclastic works.

### 3.1 The Body in Classical Sociology

It is generally agreed among those who have had the interest to pose the question that the virtual absence of specific sociological analyses of the body prior to the recent past owes, in large measure, to the Cartesian legacy in Western thinking which attributes primacy to the mind (Currie & Raoul, 1991; Shilling, 1993). Also based on the assumption that there exists a sharp division between body and mind, Cartesian thinking acts from the premise that there is no significant interaction between these two realms. Each realm was consequently seen as only rightfully addressed by separate and distinct disciplines of study.

In sociology, notions of the social actor and social action have been primarily developed within this dualistic Cartesian framework and consequently the body has been treated as a part of only the environment of action. The mind has been identified, according to this thinking, as the location for that which defines humans as social beings.

Having said this, to claim that classical sociology adopted an entirely disembodied approach towards its subject matter would be far from the truth. While classical sociology has rarely paid specific attention to the body, its concern with the structure and functioning of societies and the nature of human action understandably led to some speculation concerning qualities of human embodiment. Anthony Synnott (1993) makes the point that theorists

of this period<sup>33</sup> paid more attention to embodiment than perhaps most people are aware of, and certainly more than many contemporary sociologists. As an implicit rather than explicit feature of early sociological theorizing, the body occupies an "absent presence" in these classical works (Shilling, 1993:9).

According to Shilling (1993) the social and epistemological foundation of sociology as an emerging discipline had very detrimental implications for the body as subject matter. The mind/body relationship itself had been left for philosophy, and the body, conceptualized as a 'natural', pre-social phenomenon, was claimed by biology, and therefore not seen as seriously warranting sociological analysis. Bryan Turner (1991) has written on the specific reasons for the failure of classical sociology to generate an overt sociology of the body, and these can all be related to the character of the disciplinary project that was undertaken by the 'founding fathers'.

Despite the epistemological and ontological foundations of classical social theorizing which precluded specific analyses of the body, its presence can be detected there. As Turner (1991) expresses it, there has been a marginalized, almost 'secret' history of the body which has included the work of Marx, Engels and Weber, that was more fully developed later through the writings of

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<sup>33</sup>. The theoretical statements written during the classical period in sociology were produced between the time of the French Revolution of 1789-1799 and World War 1, which officially ended in 1919 (Ashley & Orenstein, 1998:1).

Nietzsche, Elias, Marcuse and Foucault. Veblen's insightful pronouncement on beauty as a status symbol has been mentioned earlier. The more substantive earlier works of Marx and Engels are briefly outlined here to acknowledge what they had to say about the working, exploited body. According to Synnott (1993), these observations clearly represent pioneer contributions to the study of the body within the area of medical sociology.

### 3.2 Marx and Engels: Marked Bodies

The corporeal conditions surrounding the English working class and the abysmal consequences of the division of labour under capitalism were described by Marx and Engels as deforming the bodies of workers, making them fit only for limited and repetitive tasks in the workplace. Synnott (1993) writes that even before meeting Karl Marx, when Friedrich Engels published The Condition of the Working Class in England (1843) he outlined in great detail the degree to which capitalism cripples and kills the bodies of workers. Using medical reports to various government commissions of inquiry, Engels categorizes body after body by occupation and industry: mill hands in Yorkshire and Lancashire, metal and steel workers in Sheffield, pottery workers in Staffordshire, miners of coal, lead, copper, zinc and tin, in Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, the North and West, and so on. These accounts, extracted by Synnott, spare no detail as to the fate of the body as an instrument of production and repression. In one

such entry Engels describes the dress makers of London:

Enervation, exhaustion, debility, loss of appetite, pains in the shoulders, back and hips, but especially headache, begin very soon; then follow curvatures of the spine, high, deformed shoulders, leanness, swelled, weeping, and smarting eyes, which soon become short-sighted; coughs, narrow chests, and shortness of breath, and all manner of disorders in the development of the female organism.

(1969:180-238)

Synnott (1993) uses these detailed descriptions of the body to illustrate how, as an instrument of production, the body literally bears the marks of the production process. He points out that Engel's well documented evidence of the body as an instrument of repression would later be further developed by Foucault in Discipline and Punish (1979). Taken together, Marx and Engels' corpus of work contributes much to the area of occupational diseases and mortality, and also knowledge about the health-gap between rich and poor. These matters are still of concern, and as underscored by Synnott: "profits, capitalist or socialist, Bhopal or Chernobyl, tobacco or armaments, are still built on blood" (1993:255).

Specific contributions to the theory of the body include the contents of The German Ideology (1979 [1846]). This work of Marx and Engels concerned the relationship between the material existence of humans, labour and the development of consciousness. Shilling (1993) discusses the concept of the

body in this work, pointing out how it was treated simultaneously as a social and biological entity which was in a constant state of becoming. By examining how Marx and Engels saw human development as occurring out of a dialectical relation between nature as determined by the conditions of human life, and the practical transformation of these conditions, Shilling brings forth a Marxist version of the body from this theoretical work, one which contains no a priori, pre-social qualities. It is this concept of embodiment as open-ended and shaped by human action accessing and transforming the material foundation of nature that would form the basis for the socialist feminist position on the gendered body.

### 3.3 Max Weber: Post-Reformation Asceticism

Turner (1992) has argued that implicit in the work of Weber is a concern with the relationship between modernity and the body. Synnott (1993), too, suggests that Weber was not directly interested in the body at all, but points out that his writings on the protestant work ethic, rationalization, the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy, charisma and eroticism, allude to the (in)voluntary subjugation of the body to strict routine.

For example, Shilling (1993) productively draws from the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1985 [1904-5]) which examines the Calvinist idea of the 'calling' as paving the way for the psychological conditions which

accompanied the emergence of modern capitalism. According to Weber, the Calvinist view of predestination produced a deep insecurity which manifested itself in a high motivation to lead disciplined and dedicated lives on earth. Essential to the 'spirit of modern economic life' was the voluntary subjugation of the body to strict routine, such that hard work and effort in the sphere of production was accompanied by frugality and denial of the sensuous in the sphere of consumption. Synnott (1993) points out that a tension exists, between rationalization of religion and industrialization on the one hand, and the body, particularly sex, on the other. This polarity between reason and passion mirrors the duality of society and self, culture and nature, which reflects the dualism of human nature: mind and body.

Citing Weber's The Sociology of Religion, Synnott goes on to examine how the passions of the body, particularly sexuality, were seen as impediments to salvation in some mystical and ascetic faiths because, according to Weber, "[r]ational ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization" (1964:236-8). Judeo-Christian hostility toward sexuality, Synnott says, thus became entrenched through the high regard for chastity, the widespread misogyny, the condemnation of birth control and condemnations of adultery and prostitution.

Capitalism for Weber, was the economic expression of Calvinist



theology, a form of post-Reformation asceticism. Whereas Marx had seen capitalism as founded on violence, Weber saw it consisting not of the intentional infliction of physical or emotional pain, but in working the body hard for earthly gain, in the hope that it would result in heavenly salvation.<sup>34</sup> Synnott points out that while Christ had blessed the poor and eulogized poverty, the new Reformation asceticism did not.

### 3.4 The Feminist Body

Feminist theory, until recently, has been accused of being remiss in addressing the female body, with charges of being neglectful, and even somatophobic (Poovey 1989: Spelman 1984). In her analysis of somatophobia in first wave feminist work, Elizabeth Spelman claims that it can be seen as an expression of an eagerness to end the stereotypical association of woman and body and its attending connection with the derogation of women on the basis of sexual identity. Early feminist theories wanted to reject the kinds of descriptions of woman's nature which date back as far as Plato and other philosophers, in which women's lives are quintessentially bodily-directed.

Spelman (1984) feels that various versions of feminism have rested on the same Western assumption of dualism, that we must distinguish between

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<sup>34</sup>. This sentiment was clearly expressed somewhat later within the social movement known as "Muscular Christianity" which originated in Victorian Britain in the 1850s. As an ideal of manliness constructed around the notion personal salvation, it linked moral development to the healthy body (Horton, 1996).

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She summarily dismisses the ancient opinion that woman was created for men as a 'poetical story' (Wollstonecraft 1985:109), and proceeds to apply the doctrine of inalienable human rights developed by Rousseau and Paine to women. She says of beauty: "Taught from their infancy that beauty is women's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison" (1985:131). Although rejecting patriarchal prescriptions of femininity, the liberal feminist platform emphasized women's potential to realize the male standard, one which granted primacy to the intellect.

Later, nineteenth century feminists, while opposed to the theory of female invalidism, focused almost solely on the interplay between fashion and women's roles, promoting the definition of beauty as a spiritual quality emanating from within. While this implied that every woman could be beautiful, it was a belief that was increasingly and successfully co-opted by the commercial beauty industry. Taken together, nineteenth century feminist contributions to female embodiment are seen by some as limited in that they underestimated the power of the industry and the extent to which fashion itself "underlay the entire constellation of discriminations against women" (Banner 1983:47).

'Second Wave' feminist scholarship, beginning in the 1960s, finally placed female bodily related issues such as the control of fertility and abortion

rights firmly on the political agenda. This created a context for a more general project among women to reclaim their bodies from male control and abuse. Self-help groups were important parts of the women's movement in this respect, and they incorporated attempts to further women's knowledge and control over their own bodies. As well as using the body as a vehicle for political action and protest, feminist analyses of women's oppression brought the body into academic conceptualizations of patriarchy (Shilling, 1993).

In contrast to those theories which identify the family as the basis of women's position in society, a number of feminists gave primacy to the biological body as the source of patriarchy. The best known example of this is Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex (1971). Firestone's book has been much criticized for containing an analysis based upon biological reductionism: its central thesis being that an unequal sex class system emerged directly from the different reproductive functions of female and male bodies. However, one of the great merits of this early feminist text was that it addressed directly the body's implication in systems of domination and subordination. Radical feminists have also placed a great deal of importance on the body as the basis of female oppression through, for example, its location as a site for the construction of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Shilling, 1993).

As Shilling and others see it, feminist work highlighted the fact that women frequently have to learn to live with what can be termed 'overburdened

bodies'. Women who are wives, mothers and paid employees 'often experience intense emotional and physical stress: there are simply too many conflicting demands, too many things to do, too little time to do them' (Currie & Raoul, 17:1991). Building on such insights, feminist theory has also highlighted the general importance of the body in legal and gender systems of oppression, examining what it is about the embodied existence of people that has maintained men's domination over women (Eisenstein, 1988; Griffin, 1978; Heritier-Auge, 1989).

This feminist focus on the embodied existence of women did more than simply highlight the multiple ways in which bodies were implicated in the social relations of inequality and oppression. Analysis of the sex/gender, nature/culture and biology/society divisions began to break down, or at least reduce the strength of some of the corporeal boundaries which popular and academic thought had posited between 'women' and 'men' (Oakley, 1979:172). Indeed, feminist scholarship has helped to problematize the very nature of the terms 'woman' and 'man', 'female' and 'male', and 'femininity' and 'masculinity', by questioning the ontological bases of sexual difference.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>. Feminist thought did not concentrate on women's bodies to the exclusion of men's bodies. These subjects were seen as inextricably linked, as it was the power and force exercised by male bodies which was instrumental in controlling the bodies of women. Furthermore, the development of men's studies in North America and the UK gave an added impetus to the study of the embodiment of masculinity (Currie & Raoul, 1991).

### 3.5 The Postmodern Body

Having introduced the major modernist perspectives on the body, the following discussion highlights pertinent literature from the postmodernist school and from its detractors on the subject of the 'postmodern body'. Particularly salient to the topic of this dissertation is the malleable quality of the human form and its alleged conflation with the self in postmodern renderings.<sup>37</sup> Subsequent to this discussion, contemporary feminist reworkings of postmodern ideas will be presented as a necessary preamble to the presentation of the conceptual/theoretical approach adopted by this dissertation.

According to Lyon (1994), under conditions of postmodernity the locus of control at the level of formal and popular social theorizing has shifted from society to the individual. The ensuing emphasis on life style change holds individuals responsible for their own fate. They expect to be happy, to achieve a glamorous life style, and to cultivate an attractive body through discipline and denial (Davis 1993). Controlling appearance through the daily regime of body maintenance (jogging, diets, keeping fit) is a primary means for the individual

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<sup>37</sup>. Literature on the subject of the postmodern body has proliferated across academic disciplines and is diffuse also in writing style and approach. For the purpose of this submission, sources are taken mostly from the discipline of sociology, and are limited to discussion of the female body vis-a-vis postmodern renderings of selfhood and its connection to contemporary consumer capitalism.

to eke out his or her identity under the conditions of high or post modernity (Giddens 1991). Through the cultivation of the body, individuals enact and display their desire for control.

In the analysis of body maintenance and improvement as a general phenomenon in Western consumer culture and as something directly affecting the contemporary concept of the 'self', postmodern social scientists willingly concede that women are the primary targets and are "most clearly trapped in the narcissistic, self-surveillance world of things" (Featherstone 1991:179). Featherstone's explanation for the feminine susceptibility to the promises of happiness through body improvement is looked for in the sexualization of the female body by the media in order to sell products. He tells us, however, lest we become too alarmed, that cosmetic and fashion industries are currently directing their efforts at a male market (p.179). It is presumably only a matter of time, he says, before men and women enjoy "dubious equality" in the area of body cultivation.

Taking this argument a step further, some have suggested that in postmodern society women are not merely the primary objects of consumer culture but that culture itself is in the throes of "feminization" (Featherstone 1992; Lyon 1994). The masculine or "heroic" values of action have been replaced by the "idols of consumption". The world of Hollywood celebrities, soap opera stars, and royalty - the cultural favourites of the female consumer -

are the new cultural symbols - admirable for who they are rather than what they can do. They are ideally suited to promoting the glamorous life, replete with fancy hair styles and makeup, electrolysis, teeth capping and cosmetic surgery. In the feminization of culture, women are the victims and the perpetrators, all in one.

Other analyses place women's concern with appearance in the context of their emancipation (Turner 1984; Giddens 1991; 1992). Having broken free of the constraints of domesticity and entered the public sphere of waged labour, women have for the first time the material means to enjoy themselves. The sexual revolution and feminism provide the finishing touches to this new sense of what is possible, by encouraging them to make the most of themselves and to take their own needs seriously. Women continue to be excluded from full participation in the public realm, however, and the cultivation of the body becomes one of the only ways they can achieve the exciting life that they had come to expect was within their grasp. The prevalence of eating disorders attests to the fact that controlling the body can become a dangerous and destructive way to master an insecure environment. In a world of many promises and few real options, freedom under these conditions is, at best, a "risky business" (Giddens 1991:107-108) and, at worse, only a "pseudoliberation". The old chains of patriarchal authority are replaced by the new ones of consumer culture and neuroticism (Turner 1984:203).



Unlike social psychological or psychoanalytic approaches, these sociological perspectives on beauty do not individualize women's concern with appearance as a personal lack of self-esteem or as a woman's psycho-sexual predisposition toward narcissism. To their credit, they bring attention to the cultivation of appearance as an embellished artefact of consumer capitalism, which, in principle, affects us all. The specific relationship of women to their bodies in these approaches, however, tends to be ignored or overemphasized as indicative of the feminization of culture in general (Davis 1995). In these analyses women are collectively treated as the brain-washed victims of media hype or of their own misguided search for emancipation.

Although some concession may be given to the "greater premium" placed on physical attractiveness as a form of cultural capital for women as opposed to men (Giddens 1991:106), the significance of gender for different beauty norms (or the norms for sexual difference) is left unexplored. Thus, while sociological approaches provide insights into the social and cultural context in which body improvement is situated, their explanations fail to account for women's specific relationship to their bodies and for their involvement with the practices of body improvement. To do so would require a perspective which links a sociological analysis of the contradictions of contemporary social life and consumerism to an analysis of the social construction of femininity, the control of women through their bodies, identity

politics, and the politics of beauty.

There is no question that attempts to (re)construct the self within the discourse of femininity must be read vis-a-vis the wider social context, itself characterized by recent and fundamental changes in the self-body relationship. The immense popularity of fitness activities in recent years which attests to a general commodification of society and the bodies within it deserves closer scrutiny. Glassner's symbolic interactionist perspective specifically looks at the attractiveness of the 'fitness package' to participants in an effort to account for its timely symbolic importance. He describes the infinite number of images of idealized bodies North Americans see every day in television, magazines, and billboard advertising as common pivotal resources for judging the adequacy of self and others (1990:215). Postmodernity is seen by Glassner as an age in which bodies don't produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sports cars, bodies for fashion, and so on.

Postmodern images of the body are described by Glassner as packages which take the form of a pastiche - a borrowing from diverse imagery, styles and traditions, including both 'high' and 'low', mundane and special, and past, present and future, and applied wherever these images seem useable. Modelled after these images, the fit body is consequently a postmodern object par excellence - its idealization is perpetually reconstructed of pieces and

colorations added on and then discarded: small waists and breasts for women in the late 70s and early 80s; more robust proportions recently; a non-warrior look for men throughout much of the 70s, the return of muscles in the eighties, and so on. In much the same way, preferred types and amounts of exercise vary from season to season. Glassner asserts that this is not merely a fashion issue, but an aspiration to a special sort of 'after-image', what literary critics have termed simulacra: images for which there are no originals because they are made by combining features from other images.

Idealizations of the fit body to which the viewer is subjected and possibly aspires to consequently correspond to simulacra (special effects), not actual people. Ann Bolin (1992) describes, in a similar way, how she sees the postmodern shape of women as including a whole range of types and combinations of types. Unlike the position taken by Bordo (1993) and Markula (1994) outlined in the last chapter, Bolin sees the postmodern female body as occurring across a continuum. These forms, she says, range from that of the "denied and restrained female, similar to the virtually unattainable image of an adolescent boy super-scripted with large breasts, to the competitive female bodybuilder with hypertrophied muscles, strength and power" (p.81).

The ideological content of contemporary fitness discourse is discerned as also deviating from that of earlier modernist health movements in that fitness activists promote the idea of an "ostentatious self-confidence" that

there can be "a realm of purity" for the body outside of the extensive degradations it has been forced to face in technological society (Glassner 1990:210). From the point of view of the middle class of the 1960s and 1970s, the activities of modernity resulted in a loss of control over nature, as evidenced by the increase in heart disease and cancer, the emergence of AIDS, leaking power plants, and so on. Unlike earlier generations of exercisers and healthy eaters who evoked the notion of a citizenry that had recently been strong and virtuous but was becoming fat and sedentary from too much affluence, the contemporary fitness enthusiast disengages the body from the service of the nation. It is now for the salvation of the self, not society, that fitness activities are performed (Edgely and Brissett 1990; Glassner 1990).

Turner (1992) extends this disenchantment with the modernist project to the populations of Northern Europe, especially Germany and Finland. He claims that anxieties about the so-called "burden of dependency", ageing, retirement, the social consequences of Alzheimer's disease, failure of population replacement, and so on, have resulted in a form of hyper-Malthusianism. Coupled with anxieties fuelled by HIV and AIDS in the heterosexual population, especially in the ethnically diverse, underprivileged, intercity areas of North America, there has emerged a new way of viewing the body in the West - as enormously vulnerable, no longer efficient and effective. Turner therefore predicts that regulation of bodies will continue to be a

fundamental activity of political and social life. He sees these concerns as suggestive of a new concept for the bio-politics of the 21st century, what he labels the development of the "somatic society" (1992:12).<sup>38</sup>

Glassner and Turner consequently see fitness ideology as offering a much sought after, direct and remedial control over nature through the body, the achievement of a kind of personal morality with effects one can "feel". The body, now engaged in activities frequently performed in the presence of others in public programs, becomes the focus of social interaction such that it constitutes more than ever what is 'me', the cardinal sign of the self. By looking good in public, the fit body can attract favourable attention from significant others in the course of making an overwhelming statement about who you are (1992:218).

While fitness can be viewed in this postmodernist light, writers on the subject also refer to the residual features of modernism which still pervade the movement. Glassner counts among them the linearity of the pursuit, the gradual increase in the number of miles run or pounds lifted, the movement toward a "more perfect body, and the traditional values of strength, beauty, rational self-control associated with it" (1990:231). He claims that the old dualisms of modernity still apply as well - one is either "in shape" or "out of

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<sup>38</sup> Turner describes the somatic society as a social system in which the body, as simultaneously symbolizing constraint and resistance, is the principle field of political and cultural activity (1992:12).

shape", fat or thin. This is not to suggest that the overall goal of this pursuit is singular or rational, he says, but rather a "mosaic of the physical, emotional, economic, and aesthetic - a pastiche of ends and means".

These writers on the subject of the postmodern body describe a social context expressive of a widespread disenchantment with the modernist project and a projection of these anxieties, an acting out of them, unto the self/body relationship. The postmodern analysis complements the preceding account of how Western embodiment since the Enlightenment was modified vis-a-vis other social/historical forces, and together, they confirm the insight credited to Mary Douglas (1973) that anxieties and preoccupations of the social body are mirrored in the physical body. Any investigation of the uniquely female expression of embodiment characterizing an epoch consequently draws from this set of influences operating at the macro level, in dynamic relationship with the prevailing gender categories which attend them.

Glassner (1990:232) sees the quest for the fit body as fuelled by the promise of "mastery", the guarantee that one will gain not only control over one's appearance and health, but of one's position in the labour and mate markets - "you'll feel alive, in charge, and a full participant in life." The fit body is one "both economical and globally favourable to the self", in a manner upon which Goffman (1963:35) remarked in a different context:

Although an individual can stop talking, he (sic) cannot stop

communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing. Paradoxically, the way in which he can give the least amount of information about himself - although this is still appreciable - is to fit in and act as persons of his kind are expected to act.

The idea that work on the representational body brings about change to self-image, identity, and potentialities for impression management, complements the work of Anthony Synnott and Susan Bordo previously mentioned, and to some extent that of Michel Foucault. Bartky and others (Coward, 1985; Smith, 1990) write that while the size and style of the female figure varies over time and across cultures in ways that may reflect cultural preoccupations, these relationships are still poorly understood.

In her study of competitive female bodybuilders, for example, Ann Bolin (1992) writes that throughout the history of the West at no time has the brawny, muscled physique been regarded as the paragon of beauty for women. And, as was outlined in the last chapter, the history of exercise and sport shows that while an athletic image in the form of the "unconstricted and linear" made an appearance during the 1920s, even to the point of displacing the hour glass figure, athleticism and femininity had been considered exclusive categories (p.87).

While athletic female bodies have become increasingly popular as of late, Bolin maintains that this new found muscularity lies securely within the

confines of the "toned" form (similar to Bordo's "hard body") as opposed to the "brawny" physique. Bolin concludes that competitive female bodybuilders who have achieved a degree of muscle size indicative of underlying strength embody status strain or incongruity, and are consequently threatening to a femininity conceived of in terms of frailty. Bolin and Markula (1995) observe that while female bodybuilding can be regarded as women's most nontraditional sport and one which symbolizes acquired strengths in a variety of domains, these gains are nonetheless mediated by the culture of beauty and femininity. Beauty therefore continues to inscribe concepts of femininity even in the case of the contemporary woman bodybuilder, but, as Bolin points out, "while the beast in women's bodybuilding is ultimately tamed by the beauty, its disruptive whispering demands attention" (p.95).

Other work in this area focuses specifically on the evolution of fashion and beauty standards within North American culture, and considers, among other things, the role of the commercial beauty industry in courting and co-opting female pleasure and desire (Banner, 1983; Coward, 1985; Perutz, 1970). An overwhelming strength of Banner's (1983) work is its detailed documentation of American standards of beauty and fashion between eighteen hundred and nineteen twenty-one (1800-1921), the outcome of impressive content analyses of novels, fashion magazines, diaries and autobiographies, beauty and etiquette manuals, travellers' accounts, periodicals and



advertisements. In her suggestion that fashions and standards of beauty evolved and spread through an interaction of social classes, including workers and the middle classes as well as the very wealthy, she challenges the prevailing notion that percolation occurred downward through the social structure from social elites. In this analysis, she identifies the important role of the "subculture of sensuality" comprised of members of the sporting set, the theatrical world and the frequenters of saloons and gaming parlours in shaping both fashion and beauty standards.

### 3.6 Femininity and the Politics of Beauty:

In recent years, feminist scholarship on beauty-as-oppression has begun to make way for a more postmodern approach which deals with beauty in terms of cultural discourses (Haug et al., 1987; Diamond and Quinby 1988; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Jacobus et al., 1990; Spitzack 1991; Bordo 1993). In this framework, routine beauty practices belong to the disciplinary and normalizing regime of body improvement and transformation, part and parcel of the production of "docile bodies" (Foucault 1980). The focus is on the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the female body as well as the insidious workings of power in and through cultural discourses on beauty and femininity. The female body remains a central concern, this time, however, as a unique text upon which culture writes its meanings. Following Foucault's idea of

discourse production, the female body is portrayed as an imaginary site, always available to be inscribed. It is here that femininity in all her diversity can be constructed - through scientific discourses, medical technologies, the popular media, and everyday common sense.

Physical health/fitness/beauty cannot be understood without taking gender and power into account. Bordo (1993) focuses on images of the female body as a site for exploring how gender/power relations are constituted in Western culture. Drawing upon Foucauldian notions of power, Bordo treats the female body as a kind of text which can be "read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (Bordo 1989:16). In order to understand why women are preoccupied with their appearance, she describes several intersecting cultural discourses, showing how they converge in contemporary bodily phenomena associated with femininity -hysteria, eating disorders, agoraphobia, and more routine beauty practices like dieting and body building (Bordo 1988; 1989a; 1989b; 1990).

The conceptual/theoretical framework adapted for this dissertation is a hybrid, drawing from two of the four models provided by Bordo and adapting a third model to account for counter-hegemonic discourse. The first model for discourse it adopts from Bordo centres around the mind-body dualism which is said to permeate Western thought, dividing human experience into a bodily and a spiritual realm. As the literature outlined in this chapter and the one that

precedes it points out, the female body becomes a metaphor for the corporeal pole of this dualism. Images of the dangerous, appetitive female body, ruled precariously by its emotions, stands in contrast to the masterful, masculine will, the locus of social power, rationality, and self-control. The female body is always the "other": mysterious, inferior, threatening to erupt at any moment and challenge the patriarchal order (Bordo 1990:103).

The second model for discourse adopted from Bordo focusses on the preoccupation with control and mastery in highly industrialized Western societies. Like the sociological analyses mentioned earlier, Bordo also situates the explosion of techniques for body maintenance and improvement in the "collective cultural fantasy" that death and decay can be defeated and an increasingly unmanageable culture brought under control (Bordo 1988:100). The notion that the body can be controlled through a little will power ("mind over matter") sustains power relations between the sexes. Davis (1995) describes how this manifests itself in the belief that by controlling or containing their bodies and their appetites, women can "escape the pernicious cycle of insufficiency, of never being good enough". Moreover, by controlling their bodies they can take on "male" power - power-as-self-mastery (Bordo 1989a). Thus, women paradoxically feel empowered or liberated by the very beauty norms and practices which constrain and enslave them.

Bordo is pessimistic about women being able to overthrow the beauty

system. Their preoccupation with appearance, she says, is not something to be cast aside with feminist rhetoric along the lines of accepting the "real me" - that autonomous feminist subject lurking underneath or outside the constraints of culture. Women, she says, are embedded in and, indeed, cannot help but collude in the beauty system which oppresses them. As feminist strategy, Bordo advocates analyzing the "collusions, subversions, and enticements through which culture enjoins the aid of our bodies in the reproduction of gender" and recovering the body as a "political battleground for feminist practice" (Bordo 1989b:28).

Davis (1995) responds that Bordo's analysis consequently does not make apparent how any practices, feminist or otherwise, might escape the hegemony of cultural discourses in which the female body is enmeshed. She points out that the major strength of Bordo's analysis resides in her sophisticated framework for linking individual beauty practices to a broader context of power and gender hierarchies. By analyzing the complex and contradictory workings of cultural discourses around the body, control, and femininity, Bordo shows why women are especially susceptible to the lures of the beauty system. Since women do not stand outside culture, Bordo makes a convincing case for why feminists have to be suspicious of the possibility of discovering an authentic feminine self who is able to free herself from the constraints of the beauty system. She alerts us, says Davis, to how women's attempts to liberate

themselves are continually in danger of being reabsorbed into repressive discourses of femininity.

The theoretical contributions of Bordo and Davis take social scientific explanations for women's concern with their appearance a step further than any other perspective. The feminine preoccupation with body improvement is not reduced to undesirable role behaviour, and therefore something to be cast away with a little more willpower. It is also not seen as just an expression of women's concern with their appearance which is relegated to a pathological feature of femininity itself. The feminine health/fitness/beauty system is not simply a gender-neutral artefact of consumer capitalism, the feminization of culture, or of the contradictions of modernity; it is central to the production of relations of domination and subordination as well. By adding gender and power to their theoretical frameworks, feminist approaches such as these can uncover why women engage in the beauty system and how their participation perpetuates the constraints and disciplinary effects of femininity, without casting them as cultural dopes.

Davis (1995) agrees that feminist approaches to the body have until recently tended to label women who pursue body work as cultural dopes.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>. The term, "cultural dope", was coined by Harold Garfinkel (1967) in criticism of functionalist or Parsonian conceptions of agency where the human actor has so completely internalized the norms and values of society that his or her activities become limited to acting out a predetermined script.

She rightly claims that analyses have not done justice to the questions which concern women's active and knowledgeable involvement in practices if, at the onset, these practices are considered only detrimental and/or degrading to them. The cultural dope perspective, says Davis, rests on a faulty conception of agency. Whether women are viewed as oppressed victims of patriarchal capitalism or as embedded in the cultural discourses of feminine inferiority, body work cannot then be explored as something which can, at least in part, be actively and knowledgeably chosen. Women's actions can only be construed as compliance, serving to reproduce the conditions of their subservience. It is impossible to even entertain the possibility that performance of body work might be a 'solution' for a particular woman under the prevailing circumstances, as Davis' findings indicate concerning women's motivations for cosmetic surgery.<sup>40</sup>

By ignoring how women defend, legitimate, but also criticize their decision to participate in beauty practices some feminist approaches make it difficult to imagine not only what tips the scales in favour of participation in body work, but also what makes the commitment to these practices

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<sup>40</sup>. Her investigation into the decision-making process surrounding women's inclination to have cosmetic surgery illustrates how the cultural dope label forecloses the possibility of exploring the ambivalences in women's desire. She reveals how women grapple knowledgeably with opposing cultural discourses of femininity to justify their decisions to have their bodies altered surgically. Such women maintain/reinforce discourses of feminine inferiority while they simultaneously resist them.

problematic for the recipients themselves. For Davis, feminist intervention in the work of beauty:

... becomes restricted, on the one hand, to the moralistic strategy or propagating self-acceptance in the hope that women will see the error of their ways or, on the other hand, to waiting until some miraculous shifting in the discursive constellations enables this particularly nasty cultural phenomenon to make way for other - less oppressive, it is hoped - cultural practices (1995:58).

While Davis (1995), Beausoleil (1992, 1994) and others see that contemporary feminist scholarship has made a strong case for linking beauty to an analysis of femininity and power, they view it as less successful in finding ways to understand women's lived experience with their bodies. By implication this observation extends to how women actually decide to commit themselves to forms of body work, how they manage to sustain the effort, and how they evaluate their actions in the midst of involvement in these practices. In order to avoid relegating women who participate in these practices to the position of cultural dopes it is necessary to explore their lived relationship to their bodies, recast them as agents, and to analyze the contradictions in how they justify their decision to willingly participate in the performance of body work.

While mindful of the hegemonic quality of dominant discourse through the adoption of Bordo's two models for discourse, this dissertation purposefully introduces a third model into its conceptual/theoretical framework so that we may consider expressions of counter-hegemonic discourse in the realm of

feminine health/beauty/fitness. The third model for (counter)discourse considers how individual women manage, individually or collectively, to resist or even subvert the beauty system. The adopted framework acknowledges women's practical relationship to their bodies while remaining acutely aware of the ways women collude or comply with the norms and practices of feminine beauty.

This dissertation proceeds to examine accounts of the body offered by a group of women varying in age, body type, level of commitment to body work and social class of origin. It engages in a tracing of the ongoing relationship with the body through developmental stages, purposefully attempting to reveal how the 'self' is referenced in this equation, and how women understand the role of regimens of body management as having/not having been employed at various life junctures to mediate the relationship with the body.

### 3.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to trace and account for the emergence of the body in social theorizing, and, drawing selectively from this discussion, to justify and make explicit the conceptual/theoretical framework which guides this dissertation. Clearly, in the discipline of sociology, the body has been finally embraced owing to the reappraisal of all knowledge as something inescapably embodied. While occupying an 'absent presence' during the



classical period, the human form has now claimed a centrality in social theorizing, the consequence of the 'long reach' of the critique of Cartesian thinking.

Developed especially from the work of Bordo and Davis, the adapted theoretical framework for this dissertation ultimately treats women as potentially knowledgeable actors (active agents) while at the same time acknowledging the hegemonic quality of the health/fitness/beauty system for women. In agreement with Davis (1993) it recognizes how the postmodern shift in feminist theory enables a sensitivity to the multiplicity of meanings surrounding the female body and the workings of power in and through cultural discourses on femininity, but laments that the emphasis is still mostly on how these practices work to control or discipline women.

Out of this discussion we might well ask ourselves who plays the role of the disciplinarian in the disciplinary project of femininity. As a genuine discipline in the Foucauldian sense it must be constituted by a system of "micro-power" that is "essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical" (Foucault, 1979:222). The postmodernist theorizing presented in this chapter shows that the power shaping femininity in the female body can be discerned everywhere and nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and no one in particular. It is the anonymity and the pervasive quality of this disciplinary power that has such crucial consequences for understanding the disempowered female body. In so

far as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a "subjected, practised, inferiorized" body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination (Bartky, 1988:75).

The conceptual-theoretical perspective derived from the literature reviewed in this chapter is guided by a research problematic involving the tension between the active participation of women in the self (re)construction process, manifest in and through the self-body relationship, and the harsh reality of imposed structural constraints premised on and perpetuating gender inequality. As summed up convincingly by Davis and Fisher, the concern rests with how we investigate the ways women's activities are limited through asymmetrical power structures and at the same time, treat women as active and knowledgeable participants in the constitution of social life.

Davis' study (1991) of the personal accounts of women considering cosmetic surgery serves here as a case in point. Paralleling the previous work I have undertaken in the area of women's participation and ongoing involvement in body work, personal accounts draw heavily on individualistic discourses of body control with their attendant fantasies of getting one's life in order through self-reconstruction. At the same time, however, the same women express an awareness that body work is not the real solution or maybe not a solution at all.

This dialectical relationship is a complex and inherently paradoxical one, whereby women actively attempt to mediate a foundational sense of self within the largely prescriptive realm that is femininity. As Davis points out, however, while expressions of resistance to the disempowered female body may be contained by the hegemonic quality of gender categories and idealizations of the body that attend them, the "rumblings of resistance" demand to be heard (p.233).

Chapter IVResearch Methodology

Previous chapters have outlined the general problem pursued in this dissertation. From this discussion, the central methodological concern is one of how best to elicit and interpret the words of women vis-a-vis the female gendered body and its relationship to identity.

This work focuses on 'self' referenced motivations for engaging in particular forms of body work. The present study examines, therefore, the meaning-laden character of the discourse of femininity and how women who routinely engage in body work negotiate or make sense of often contradictory messages surrounding the body and its connection to identity. This chapter presents a detailed explanation for and description of the research techniques and practices which were employed during data gathering. It outlines the ethical problems which surrounded data collection, describes how these were ameliorated, and goes on to identify the limitations of the data that were gathered.

This chapter also introduces the thirty-four women who participated in this research. This is realized through the presentation of a series of demographic dimensions collected from a brief survey instrument administered prior to each individualized interview (Appendix 3). The research sample is

introduced by such attributes as age, occupation, marital status, education, body work preferences, and the like.

#### 4.1 Methodology

Because this research is interpretive in character, I chose a qualitative approach to guide the investigation, where meanings rather than frequencies assume greater significance. The methodology situated the researcher as a participant-observer in the initial stages of the project, so as to provide the required opportunity to engage in and with the discourse of the body within its special setting, the fitness facility. The participant-observer phase consequently provided the opportunity to learn the discourse and help explain the behaviour of the group (Kirby & McKenna, 76:1989).

Unlike conventional scientific procedure, a qualitative approach of this sort focuses on the understanding of what just happened in the setting, rather than on the prediction of the value of one variable given a knowledge of the values of others. As described by Agar (1986), knowing what to do next in the 'field' is not possible unless you know what just happened. Understanding consequently involves a connection between something said or done and some larger pattern, so that, for example, a participant's words or actions are linked to the conventions of the group. At its core, this research approach involves a process of "mediating frames of meaning" (Giddens, 1976:26), so that the

product emerges not only out of the research goals and objectives, but also the relationship among the traditions of the researcher, the group, and the intended audience of the final report.

The traditions of the researcher and, as Agar terms them, "the researcher's taken-for-granted procedures of knowledge" must be made explicit at the onset and should be inspected and subject to critical assessment at every stage of the research process (Agar, 1986:107). He describes the qualitative approach as neither subjective nor objective, but rather interpretive, an attempt to mediate two worlds through a third. Inquiry of this sort admittedly reflects the personal characteristics of the researcher, but then, all knowledge can be considered subjective and cultural in some sense (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Hammersley, 1990).

Fieldwork, as described by Hammersley (1990), can therefore be viewed as the product of complex processes of cognitive interpretation, as well as social interaction. In this study, women's words about the 'self' and its connection or lack of connection with body work were observed in an appropriate context, and resulted from formal and informal conversations with the researcher. The participant observation component of this project provided an opportunity to learn the discourse and helped explain the behaviour of the group (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Denzin (1970) describes this method as sharing in people's lives while attempting to learn their symbolic world. The

way it is used will depend on the precise role carved out by the researcher, says Denzin, varying from that of a 'complete participant' to a 'complete observer' (p.73).

The epistemological and ontological position which guides this project derives from a repudiation of thinking that attempts to separate the researcher from the phenomenon under study. Indeed, inherent in its conceptual/theoretical orientation is the rejection of the idea of an objective social reality 'out there' independent of and accessible to the observer. At the methodological level, this social inquiry is therefore deliberately guided by a framework such that the researcher's role in interpreting and defining reality is acknowledged.

Dated field notes, interviews with individual participants, and the content of two focus group discussions<sup>41</sup> constituted the main sources of data. The conceptual categories which initially guided the interview process arose from the critical literature and included such areas of questioning as: personal diet and exercise history, bodily experiences of puberty, current level of participation in body work, notions of the idealized female body, and so on (see

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<sup>41</sup>. A focus group was arranged in each of the 2 research settings. Group #1 (Club Small) involved 5 participants, while Group #2 (Club Big) had 6 participants.

Appendix #3). Data collection was semi-structured <sup>42</sup>, however, in that throughout the research process some questions/issues were narrowed or expanded, while others were changed substantially or abandoned altogether.

The transcripts of the individual interviews and those of the two focus group discussions were analyzed to examine how women articulate their understandings and experiences of female embodiment. The concept of discourse is useful for analyzing potentially contested areas, for it acknowledges variability rather than consensus or consistency in the way that people represent phenomena. Discourse analysis works from the premise that individuals commonly use competing or contradictory as well as cohesive explanations in conversation, drawing upon various interpretive repertoires for different tasks and to present themselves in certain ways (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:156).

In other words, this particular methodological approach accepts and attempts to access ways of talking about the body with an awareness that discourse is a product of hegemonic culture but also a potentially malleable resource from which individuals can make sense of their own experiences. Close examination reveals a hierarchy of discourses as selected by participants

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<sup>42</sup>. Discursive categories guiding the data collection phase and analysis evolved through the course of the interview process and after it; unanticipated areas of questioning were pursued depending on the life experiences of the individual woman and the topics they also saw fit to introduce (see appendix 4).



and also demonstrates that among a group of people there exist conflicting and contradictory discourses. As Hermes (1993:501) describes this approach, it has the advantage 'of directly addressing the messy character of everyday talk, and, on the other hand, of stressing everyday creativity.'

Transcripts of individual interviews and group discussions were treated in this research project as socially constructed texts, that is, they were not used as representations of 'true' or 'false' versions of reality but as 'situated narratives', or expressions of perspectives, belief systems, assumptions and moral forms (Silverman, 1993:107-8; Tulloch and Lupton, 1994:132; Lofland & Lofland, 1995:22).

#### 4.2 Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and systematically. As promoted by Kirby and McKenna (1989) analysis involved a comparative approach, whereby features both common and uncommon to data categories were arranged and rearranged until patterns of coherence emerged. An ongoing and evolving analysis of this sort was employed to uncover and further develop, through the course of the research process, salient interrelationships within discourse pertaining to women's notions of identity as mediated/not mediated by qualities of female embodiment. Analysis was driven to discern women's impressions of their social roles and how they understand

the relation, if any, between perceptions of an embodied, self-possessed identity, and the social realm as informing and even constructing these concepts.

In addition to the insights provided by the participant observation phase, I recorded my personal reflections prior to the first taped interview and immediately after each subsequent interview. Ongoing reflection of this sort as interviews proceeded marked the beginning of the analysis. In addition, "thematic patterns" (Spitzack 181:1990) in the stories told were noted and included recurring topics and issues, choices of words, and metaphors. Inconsistencies and contradictions were also noted and explored. The analysis of both the narrative and thematics proceeded in this manner.

Conceptual/theoretical contributions from sociological sources were formally reconsidered later in the analysis process, after feedback and confirmation of analytical concepts from interviewed research participants. Critical reflection, at that later date, involved considering the personal accounts of women against the social-political structures or macro-level forces alleged to influence the experience of embodiment for women.

Each individual interview was approached as a conversation between two women. Due to the intensely personal nature of the narratives, a formal, rigid interview schedule seemed inappropriate. While women were given the chance to tell their story with little interruption, I answered any personal

questions they posed to me, and, when asked, offered my own experiences and opinions.<sup>43</sup> Analysis proceeded in a similar fashion with each subsequent interview, and emerging data patterns were often shared with participants and revised accordingly before being written into the analysis.

As was previously pointed out, participant observation was employed in this research project to help formulate more sensible questions in the "native" language (Bernard 1988:149), and also to facilitate understanding of the social context; that is, to make sense of what was going on. In this particular research project, however, I became not only the instrument but also the object of data collection and analysis, through both direct participation in body work and by personal involvement throughout the interview phase. Because my personal reflections were recorded prior to the first interview and immediately after each subsequent interview as part of the data, this evolving analysis proceeded in a hands-on fashion. Each interview was subsequently connected to the next interview, and so on, constituting a cumulative, evolving research exercise.

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<sup>43</sup>. I was asked very few direct questions during the individual interview process, my comments mostly taking the form of acknowledgement that a comment had been understood, that I needed more information to understand what was being said, etc. In the two instances where direct questions were asked of me, neither question was on the subject of my own body work practices. One woman (age 51) wanted to know if I would ever consider marrying again and another (age 41) was curious about what my two daughters thought about my research topic.

In conclusion, it should be re-emphasized that this research project makes explicit, at the onset, conceptual/theoretical considerations which give rise to the gender and health related questions specifically investigated. While it employs an evolving, comparative analysis, it does not claim to work only from the data. As previously indicated, however, conceptual/theoretical contributions from existing theory were reintroduced for formal consideration later in the research process, after conversations (interviews) confirmed analytical categories as having salience to the research sample.

Van Maanen (1988) rightly claims that theory has the most relevance during the analysis and writing phase, where the researcher's selection and choice of facts and arrangements of them create the text. For example, the same informant's account or activity, says Van Maanen, can be seen as an example of false consciousness or as situationally appropriate and creative behaviour. This insight is especially relevant to this research study, as the problem of labelling nonfeminist women as suffering from false consciousness is a problem that has been identified as pervading much of early 2nd Wave scholarship on the beauty project (Beausoleil, 1994; Davis, 1995).

These insights gave rise to a number of questions which underscored some of the current dilemmas in the analysis of feminist qualitative methodology and had to be considered, especially during the analysis and writing phase of this project. Among them were: to what extent should the

researcher utilize her own voice; to what extent should the members of the setting have control over the product; and to what degree should data be interpreted in ways that diverge from members of the setting (Reinharz 1992:72)? While remaining cognizant of these tensions throughout the research and writing phase fostered reflexivity tremendously, these insights show that, ultimately, there is no sovereign method for establishing 'truths'. With these issues in mind, data analysis humbly proceeded by comparing the narratives given by women in terms of the prevalence of beauty/fitness/health rhetoric, noting how abstract thoughts were/were not connected to concrete examples, and assessing the degree to which accounts expressed a shared understanding.

#### 4.3 Ethical Considerations

Data gathering techniques were selected and employed in a manner mindful of the need to preserve the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the information divulged. Fitness club owners and/or managers were contacted first and each site was provided with a formal letter of introduction provided by the doctoral thesis supervisor. Once formal access was obtained and participant observation begun, I personally approached prospective participants and informed them in some detail of the nature of the project. Because the introductory phase of the research project involved participant observation,

during this period, I could approach prospective participants individually and discreetly. To those who agreed to participate, it was emphasized that while they had consented, they could withdraw from participation at any time during the interview or refuse to converse on any topic introduced during the interview session. All respondents were required to sign a consent form (see Appendix 1) and interviews were audio taped only with the permission of participants.<sup>44</sup> Each interview was initially numbered sequentially and fictitious names were assigned to each respondent at a later date. Similarly, the names of the fitness facilities were altered to assure confidentiality.

#### 4.4 Data Collection

As previously mentioned, I participated and engaged in direct observation of various forms of body work during the initial stage of the research process. Observations, personal impressions and reflections pertaining to the setting, the participants, instructors, and the like, were incorporated as part of the data in the form of dated field notes (see Chapter V). The second phase of the project involved human subjects as oral sources of biographical information.

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<sup>44</sup>. An unanticipated ethical consideration came to light during the oral defense of this doctoral thesis, which took place on December 18, 1998, at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Dr. Sandra Kirby (University of Winnipeg) rightly pointed out that because confidentiality and anonymity on behalf of focus group participants cannot be assured, an additional consent form expressing these conditions is required.

Interviews took place at a variety of times and locations, determined mostly by the participants' work and recreational schedules. They ranged in duration from approximately one hour to entire afternoons and evenings. Each woman was asked to complete a brief questionnaire before the audio-taped session, simply to provide descriptive information on demographic background (see appendix 3). A more intensive, semi-structured interview followed which included topics or issues outlined in appendix 4.

As promoted by Lofland & Lofland (1995), the researcher and the respective participant determined the ultimate direction of the interview, the particular questions asked and answered, and the length of time given to each topic or issue. At the conclusion of each interview, the respondent was asked if they could be approached at a later date, as the analysis evolved, in order to clarify comments, expand on details, and so on.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.5 The Interview Process

Interviews were conducted following the general structure of an open-ended topical format, as suggested by Michael Quinn Patton (200:1980). There were similarities among interviews due to topical headings, but, as has been

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<sup>45</sup>. Only in one instance was it necessary to contact a respondent after the individual interview for purposes of clarification. In this case the tape recorder had been situated next to a halogen lamp and the recorded conversation had been drowned out in some places by the buzz from the bulb.

mentioned, also much diversity because some questions were based on discussions or anecdotal evidence offered by the respondent. As expanded upon by Hammersley (1990), the research process within the qualitative tradition is thought of as inductive or discovery-based, so that theoretical ideas can be developed over the course of the research process in response to descriptions and explanations of what is observed or heard.

Once the data collection phase had begun, it became clear that certain questions within set categories were superior to others in eliciting biographical information. Each interview informed the next, so that the questions asked, the words used to pose them, the links made between them, and so on, were altered accordingly. It was felt that each woman should be permitted, with minimal guidance, to tell her own story about her relationship with and feelings toward her 'self' and her body. Consequently, at the onset of later interviews only general areas or topics (e.g. childhood activity level, diet history, exercise history, etc.) were offered to provide a loose framework on which women could expand. They consequently told the story providing their own connections between times and events as they saw fit rather than in response to topic-specific questions. Interjections were only used to elicit what was felt to be important background information for the narrative, such as, their age when a certain event took place, or the kinds of feelings they had about the event at the time it took place, or on reflection, how they felt about it at a later point in



their development.

As stories were told, connections between categories of experiences and feelings were noted and formed the basis for the analysis. Because women were asked to give a biographical account, narratives generally followed a chronological sequence; sometimes in the telling, however, the description and understanding of the emotions arising from meaningful events required that the individual draw from a feeling/event from another period in their lives. In this manner, connections revealed themselves in ways independent of chronology. For example, all women were asked to speak on their sense of 'self' throughout their childhood years, into adolescence and adulthood in terms of pivotal moments, abrupt life changes and, in turn, how this might have been experienced in the mind/body. Childhood was generally described as "typical" or "usual" but reassessed in hind-sight, especially during adolescence, as "inadequate" or "too unstructured" to properly prepare them for the demands of young adulthood. Failure to develop athletic skills in childhood meant that competition in such activities during junior and senior high school was not uncommonly a negative experience. Thus the connection between the character and level of childhood activity to later feelings of incompetence is acknowledged, giving emphasis and primacy to what is perceived to be the problematic period, adolescence. In this way interrelationships between data categories are volunteered by participants in their own telling of the narrative

rather than by formal prompting by the researcher.

Only after each woman had told her story were substantive supplementary questions broached. The information sharing segment of the interview then began, conversational in character, and often guided by comments that had been offered by other women from previous interviews. For example, early in the data collection phase, one woman spoke at some length about how the birth of her daughter had evoked feelings of guilt about how, by example, her practices of wearing make-up and obsessing over her body might send her infant daughter the wrong messages about womanhood. Whereas she had previously understood the attention to her body as "making the most of her assets to get ahead in the world", the arrival of a female child caused her to re-evaluate her strategies.

When this experience was related to other women during subsequent interviews, reproduction itself was revealed as a particularly important life event greatly informing women's self-perceived identity. Giving birth to a female child or just thinking about what it would mean to do so, more often than not, elicited from the women interviewed a feeling that it was/would be a pivotal moment in their evaluation of themselves as women. Not only did giving birth mark a significant interruption in the time available to the devotion to body work but the birth of a female child often resulted in much self-reflection as to the meaning of body work itself. This subject of inquiry therefore provided an

excellent backdrop against which to explore women's perceptions of the ideology of motherhood and femaleness versus the lived experience, and in consequence, consider how one does/does not maintain a stable sense of self in the midst of these important life events.

While all women responded with some interest to issues such as these, other subjects proved to be relevant to only a few participants. Younger participants expressed only a passing interest in the effects of ageing on fitness/beauty/health and even less of an interest in the possibility of chronic or acute illness changing their bodily integrity. These issues seemed too abstract or maybe too threatening to warrant their serious consideration, giving some credence to the axiom that young people believe they are invincible. Predictably, only younger participants who were currently coping with chronic illness voiced developed opinions on the subject of death, viewing mortality as mitigating against an obsessive concern with body work. In the words of one young woman, "I figure that we're all going to die anyway...you can work out all you like but you can't really guard yourself against disease and death...it happens to healthy people all the time."

Taken together, information obtained in this semi-structured manner provided angles on issues relating to the body and self-identity that could not have been anticipated otherwise. Because data collection evolved in this way, generated in large measure from areas of interest determined by the women

themselves, it spontaneously revealed how significant life events often fracture notions of agency via the body. Body work was thus revealed as a major vehicle through which both the physical and symbolic body is strengthened to meet the demands of a harsh, external environment at these critical times. Physical regimens thus constitute, among other things, adaptive strategies for "gaining an edge", enhancing physical assets and/or literally constructing a physical shield of taut muscle against an uncertain world. While these experiences of female embodiment will be explored in greater depth in the chapters that follow, they are introduced here to argue for the efficacy of a loosely structured, and evolving interview format.

#### 4.6 Limitations of This Research

Due to time constraints, ethical considerations, and methodological concerns, this research undertaking was confined on several fronts. For example, while attempts were made to interview a range of women by social class at each research site, time constraints and the perceived paucity of participants from working class origins meant that the sample was skewed toward middle class participation. Attempts were also made to access interview subjects who ranged in ethnic background, and especially in sexual orientation, but these two dimensions were not, in the end, reflected in the range of women interviewed.

Ethnic background was homogeneously Anglo-Celtic, especially in the Club Small setting. This is understandable given that the surrounding community is predominantly of Scottish, Irish and English descent. Over half (8) of the Club Small participants were not native to the surrounding community, however, but rather originated from other regions of Atlantic Canada, speaking to the predominance of these cultural groups in eastern Canada more generally.

Club Big offered more ethnic diversity but not overwhelmingly so; of these participants, one woman was born and raised in Croatia and another was English born but reared in Kenya. The remaining women were all Canadian born and raised, albeit originating from virtually all parts of the country. Apart from some personal observations and anecdotes which referenced cultural difference offered by the two women born and raised outside of Canada, no discernible variation in world-view or personal attitudes toward female embodiment emerged in the Club Small versus Club Big settings. That the rural versus urban experiences of and motivations for engaging in body work were congruent arguably attests to the pervasive and standardizing quality of health/fitness/beauty rhetoric in North American culture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>. Though not a subject of investigation directly addressed by this research undertaking, the fact that Club Small participants would subscribe to views on body work that closely comply with Club Big members raises some interesting questions about how outside influences permeate small town/rural settings, and how these interests succeed in attracting some women and not others.

In short, the research sample from which this investigation is derived was confined to the experiences of White women, almost exclusively of Anglo-Celtic background, and of predominantly heterosexual orientation. Sexual orientation, especially if alternative to the dominant heterosexual model, is understandably a matter of a highly personal nature. All but 2 women identified themselves as heterosexual; of the 2, one described herself as decidedly lesbian, and the other as having had bi-sexual experiences, but as mostly heterosexual in her sexual preference.

Snowball and opportunistic sampling also introduced the possibility of some bias in the research sample. Obtaining some participants through personal contacts and relying on volunteers may select for a certain kind of interviewee. Women selected in these ways may represent only a certain type of body worker, e.g. the socially adept, the out-going, or the extroverted. While this concern continually informed ongoing attempts to broaden the range of women interviewed, it remains as a possible limitation of the data.

Lastly, the issue of the interviewer's presence throughout the participant observation phase should be mentioned. There is the possibility that the researcher's presence alters the participants' behaviours and attitudes toward body work (Hawthorne Effect). As previously mentioned, while a strong point of participant observation is that it allows the researcher to become situated in and familiar with the participants and their activities within the research setting,

an acknowledged draw-back is that the researcher's presence can effect the behaviours being investigated (Schaefer et al., 1996:20).

#### 4.7 The Women Interviewed

A total of thirty four women participated in the individual interview phase of this study, fifteen in the Club Small setting and nineteen in the Club Big setting. The result of the short questionnaire administered prior to the more intensive, semi-structured interview provided some demographic information on the women who participated.

The women interviewed ranged in age from 22 years to 59, with numbers of participants spread fairly evenly between the oldest and youngest. In addition to individual interviews, two focus group discussions were conducted, one in each interview site. Out of a total of twenty women who attended these focus group discussions (5 in the small town setting, 15 in the city setting), only 3 participants had not been previously interviewed individually.

At the time of the individual interviews, 15 of the women identified themselves as single, and an additional 2 were engaged to be married. Of the remaining women, 7 were married, 3 women were living in common law relationships, 6 were separated from their spouses and one woman described her marital status as divorced. All but 2 women claimed to heterosexual; of the

2 self-described non-heterosexual women, one was recently separated from her female spouse of 7 years and the other reported that she, too, was currently single and bisexual in orientation but that she "preferred penises".

As a group, the women interviewed had received considerable formal education with no individual failing to complete high school. In all but one instance, women had either equalled or surpassed the educational attainment of both parents. Thirteen participants had obtained undergraduate university degrees, while an additional 11 had gone on to complete graduate degrees. (2 had attained Ph.D. degrees while the remaining 9 had completed Master of Arts degrees.) Six women had completed high school only, and the remaining 4 had achieved grade twelve plus a diploma programme (3) or grade twelve and some university credits (1).

Information on current employment status revealed that almost a third worked full-time (11), while 7 were employed at part-time work only. An additional 3 worked both full-time and part-time while an additional 2 identified themselves as full-time, self-employed, one as a managerial consultant, the other as a small business owner. Of the 11 participants who were unemployed at the time of the interview, only 3 were actively looking for work; the remaining 8 had returned to university for full-time study.

Predictably, the nature of paid, full-time employment for the women living in the city setting more closely complied with their formal educational



attainment. Four such women had trained for and were currently employed in the health care realm, 3 as registered nurses and 1 as a respiratory technologist. Other women who worked full-time were employed within another traditionally female occupation, that of teaching. One worked as a guidance counsellor/teacher in a junior high school, another was a teacher at the junior/senior level, and 2 were teaching at the university level, one as an assistant professor, the other as a sessional lecturer. Of the remaining women who worked full-time in the Club Big setting, 1 worked as a secretary, 1 as a cashier and 2, as previously mentioned, were self-employed.

All three women who worked both full-time and part-time were from the Club Big setting, where part-time work took the form of fitness instructor either in Club Big itself, or in other fitness facilities. For those Club Big women who were employed part-time only, paid work took the form of retail sales representative (1), research assistant (2), and library clerk (1).

Club Small women were also almost all engaged in paid work traditionally regarded as female dominated. Only 3 were employed full-time, 1 as an assistant professor at the local university, and 2 as secretaries. Of the women who worked part-time only, 2 were library clerks, 1 provided day-care to pre-school children in her own home, 1 was a fitness instructor to senior citizens, 1 was a retail sales clerk, and 1 worked as a part-time journalist, writing what she described as "fluff about social events" for the town newspaper. Of the

women employed in this small town setting, only the university professor was engaged in paid work appropriate to her formal educational achievement. Not uncommonly the women who worked only part-time had completed undergraduate and even graduate degrees, but were engaged in jobs that were low paying relative to their formal educational attainment.

Information on annual income revealed that 6 women, single and all but one childless, earned between \$10,000 and \$20,000, putting them well below the poverty line for single wage earners. This observation cannot be explained by lack of formal educational attainment, for only 2 had completed just high school; the remaining 4 had attained either undergraduate degrees (2) or graduate degrees (2). Underemployment coupled with the prevalence of only part-time work accounted for this income disparity relative to educational attainment. Understandably, these women either share living accommodations with room-mates or live at home with parents, arrangements which are noteworthy in that this group of women is not especially young. The age range for this group of 6 women was from 29 to 44 years. By comparison, of the single women reporting annual incomes of \$20,000 to \$30,000 all but one lived alone.

At the other end of the income spectrum, 4 participants reported individual and household incomes of over \$50,000. What is remarkable about this sub-group is that in all four cases earnings are directly attributable to the

contribution made by the woman; while 3 of the 4 reside in a cohabitational living arrangement (1 married, 2 common law), all 4 women are full-time employed professionals. In other words, no woman reporting a household income of over \$50,000 is referencing the contribution of her spouse as the lion's share. Such was not the case where annual household income fell between \$40,000 and \$50,000. In these instances (3), if women worked, they held part-time jobs and the male spouse was the primary wage earner.<sup>47</sup>

With regard to bodily attributes, self reported heights and weights within the total interview sample ranged from 5 feet tall to 5 feet, 9 inches in height and from 103 pounds to 300 plus pounds. Of the 13 who reported that they were satisfied with their current body weight, all but 2 were dissatisfied with and would change some feature of their body, such as height, length of torso, shape of the nose, hair and overall muscle tone of the body. Two women wanted to have larger breasts and one woman complained of the boniness of her knees. Dissatisfaction with the body was more generally expressed by referencing the relative proportions of the body or by referring to the problematic conformation of a particular physical feature, especially hips, stomach and thighs.

Of the 11 who expressed concern over their total body weight, all

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<sup>47</sup>. Regrettably, 9 participants chose not to disclose their individual or household income.

desired to lose rather than gain weight and to lose it in specific areas of the body that were seen as especially problematic - stomach (6), chest (3), thighs (3), hips (3). All of the women interviewed were very aware of their self-perceived physical flaws, but only one was receptive to the idea of cosmetic surgery. This participant had undergone a breast reduction procedure during her late teens, followed by a second surgical procedure undertaken to remove the excessive scar tissue that had resulted from the initial reduction. She spoke in effusive language about the positive changes to her self-image that resulted from the breast reduction, such that she is now considering further cosmetic surgery, especially to the face and neck, as she ages. All other women, while not receptive to the idea of changing their own bodies via the cosmetic surgery route, expressed ambivalence toward these surgical procedures. Responses to the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery ranged from utter disdain for the time, expense and risk involved to a restrained fascination with both the nature of the technology employed and the bodily effect that could be achieved by "going under the knife".

Women were asked to identify their preferred form of body work with the following range of responses:

weight training - 4 women

martial arts - 1 woman Tae Kwon Do  
1 woman T'ai Chi

running	-	4 women
swimming	-	5 women
aerobics	-	1 woman aquacise 3 women aerobic dance 5 women aerobic step
power-walking	-	2 women
yoga	-	3 women
cycling	-	1 woman
cardio-fit	-	4 women

For reasons outlined in the methodology section of this submission, a composite generalized from demographic information to describe the "type" of woman who participated in this research study is deliberately avoided. A feature common among those interviewed, however, should be duly noted in order to set the personal context within which the more detailed interviews took place. All of the women interviewed lead very busy lives in terms of paid work and/or engagement in further formal education, as well as committed involvement with family and friends. Given the numerous demands on their time, the readiness with which women participated in this research study and the detail with which they openly discussed their perceptions of their bodies, underscores their interest in and concern for the issues investigated. All of the women interviewed alluded to how, through the course of their lives, they had

reflected on their relationship with their body vis-a-vis wider societal values and ideals. In short, there was no hesitation to speak at length about the topics formally introduced; in fact, there was great interest in going beyond them.

Chapter V:In the Field

This chapter begins by introducing the two research sites, and proceeds to examine the specific body work activities promoted within these privately owned commercial enterprises. Through the inclusion of selected field notes, the social dynamics of the fitness facilities are reported and considered against both the profit motive and fitness mandate of the setting. Aspects of gender and race are particularly salient to this discussion, as well as the ethos of rugged individualism versus communalism which surrounds particular forms of body work.

The objectives of this chapter are to provide the reader with some vicarious experience of the social setting, to report on the participant observation phase of this project, and consequently, to consider the unique social realm within which this inquiry was conducted.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>. Anecdotal evidence is selectively drawn from the field experience toward these stated objectives. Consequently, while a three month participant observation phase was conducted in each setting, recollections may reflect more emphasis placed on one setting on a given subject than the other.

### 5.1 Entering Club Big

Club Big<sup>49</sup> was the same fitness facility at which I had conducted research on participants in the aerobic dance programme in 1992-93. I deemed it an appropriate site for this research project because of a number of factors: the physical setting of the facility itself is an urban one, a location that contrasted well with the small town locale of Club Small; it was located in the commercial core of the city and thus could be viewed as the consummate postmodern locale for self-improvement through the body. Selection was therefore based on its urban setting and the large size of the facility with its varied array of body work offerings in the form of equipment, class types, and one-on-one instructional services.

Occupying a large, open space and serving a corresponding large membership, this facility offered a number of distinct but also potentially overlapping body work activities - aerobic dance and/or aerobic step (Robik-Fit classes), classes in total body shaping with light weight resistance training and classes devoted to specific muscle groups (Body Shaper class, ABS - strengthening and toning for the abdomen), individualized programmes in cross training (Circuit Fit - a complement to Robik Fit and Cardio Fit), free weight

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<sup>49</sup>. The participant observation phase took place at Club Big from January to April, 1996 and at Club Small from June to August, 1996.



training (Flex Fit), hydraulically aided resistance training (Nautilus Training System) and cardio-fit programmes (Cardio-Fit) expressly designed to improve cardiovascular fitness.

Because I was familiar with Club Big from my previous work I dispensed with a scouting visit and instead arrived to take out a membership in the midst of the legendary "January rush to get fit".<sup>50</sup> Taking out the general membership on my first return visit in three years was marked by greetings from a half dozen regular members who had remembered me from 1992. With my researcher identity therefore fully revealed, I spent the next four weeks becoming reacquainted with the layout of the gym whilst trying to coax my body into demanding and varied exercise regimens.

Whereas my earlier research had focused strictly on aerobic dance as a form of body work, this project was to focus on a variety of fitness pursuits. I wanted to experience different regimens of the body and get a sense of their

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<sup>50</sup>. Through the course of my now considerable experience within different fitness facilities I've taken note of the ebbs and flows of human traffic corresponding to the seasons of the year. Without a doubt, the early part of January is the heaviest traffic month, followed by the last part of March and first part of April. Owners have confirmed this observation and the common sense explanation for it: January brings new members in the form of those who have received Christmas gift memberships from intimates and those who feel particularly out of shape after the excesses of the Holiday season. Getting in shape is also notoriously referenced in New Year's resolution lists, so that even members who have let their memberships lapse often reappear at the gym in the first part of the new year. Spring is another high demand time because it heralds the coming of the beach season and the adoption of more revealing clothing during the summer months.

corresponding idealizations among participants. Ultimately I wanted to access a broad range of women with presumably different motivations for and attitudes about pursuing body work.

Feeling more confident about the realm of aerobic dance from my earlier research experience I initially concentrated on the other, more unfamiliar activities offered at the gym. Beginning with strength training machines I moved to weight training with free weights and then to cross training, spending approximately three weeks on each regimen, three times a week. Moving from one regimen to another required instructional sessions from the trained personnel on staff over the first nine weeks of my return to Club Big. The following account describes the technical and social process whereby I was formally introduced to each training regimen by "qualified" instructors prior to embarking on my individualized programme.

## 5.2 Programmes and Staff

The day I rejoined Club Big I inquired about the weight training programmes and was promptly booked for an appointment scheduled for the next evening with Jaime, the instructor touted by the club manager as the "resident expert in resistance training". At our 7:30 p.m. appointment on the following evening Jaime and I began with cursory personal introductions after which he initiated a fitness-related question and answer session. Dressed in

the requisite t-shirt with fitness centre logo mandatory for all staff, training shorts and athletic footwear, Jaime physically resembled the fitness success story often portrayed in advertising images. A clean-shaven, twenty-something White male, he was of average height, very blond, tanned, and flashed perfect, white teeth when he smiled. Encased in well-defined, but not overly bulky muscle, his body closely resembled the idealized Aryan type portrayed in the propagandist material created by the Nazi regime of the Hitler era.

He asked me about the general goals I had for my body, more specifically about what it was that I wanted to "correct", and also inquired about just how serious I was about committing my personal time to "getting in shape". Aware that my researcher past was common knowledge at the gym, I responded by explaining that I did want to get in shape but that I was also a graduate student whose research area was sociology of the body and that I was thinking about using the gym as a possible site for the research component of my doctoral programme. Jaime responded very positively to this revelation and asked me several questions about my programme of study, my views on fitness, and the like. He shared with me the fact that he was a competitive body builder in the middle-weight class, and that he had also been selected twice to act as a judge for the Provincial Body Building Championship. During the past summer he had worked as a rickshaw driver in the historic part of the city and had earned "some good money". He explained that he had not only been pleased with his

summer earnings but felt extremely good about being able to stay in shape by pulling the rickshaw all summer.

Now working as a fitness instructor at Club Big, Jaime was adding to his income by selling "nutrition supplements" (on-the-side) to body builders. He was also waiting to hear if he had been accepted into the police force, explaining that failing this outcome, he would likely become a personal fitness trainer, possibly moving to California where there might be a higher demand for his talents.

Sadly for me, Jaime was accepted into the police academy shortly after instructing me in the ways of resistance training. After monitoring my progress informally over the first month and occasionally chatting about issues surrounding fitness, he subsequently left his job at the gym to begin his basic training. He had provided very practical knowledge concerning the technical aspects of resistance training but also an incisive personal account of the emotional/psychological impact of acquiring and maintaining physical strength and conditioning. Very much the motivational speaker Jaime was regarded as an important asset to the club in terms of his knowledge and professional attitude. His physique as an aesthetic feature of the gym decor was not lost on the owners of the facility either; it clearly served as a walking testimonial<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>. While Jaime had been the key source of information on the subject of resistance training during the first few weeks of my participation, two other fitness instructors at Club Big offered their assistance after his departure.

to the effects of regular exercise and sound nutrition on the male body.

### 5.3 Machines for the Muscles

The individualized programme in weight training devised for me initially involved the use of several machines, each designed to work a major muscle group of the body. These devices use "selectorized" plates to operate so that the exerciser merely slides a pin in a stack of weights to select the desired amount of weight for the lift. My individualized programme was designed to encourage the development of long, lean muscles, which meant that through the course of my programme I would gradually work up to a routine involving a high number of repetitions with a relatively light weight.<sup>52</sup>

At first I was very intrigued by these machines; they occupy large spaces, make a clanging sound when in use, and are in high demand, especially

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Claudia and Beth were equally knowledgeable about the mechanics of working out with weights but since I had been well established on my individualized programme by Jaime, my direct contact with them was more infrequent.

<sup>52</sup>. In weight training, results are determined by the programme adopted and by one's genetic makeup. For the building of bulky, "short" muscles, lifters work toward moving heavy weight for a small number of repetitions. For longer, lean muscles - a look more often preferred by female lifters, programmes involve lifting lighter weights for many repetitions.

during the evening hours. With my programme in hand<sup>53</sup> I began with a series of warm-up exercises to stretch my muscles before starting the routine Jaime had designed for me. During the first week I would concentrate on form, and gradually increase the number of repetitions and sets in the weeks to follow.

The first few sessions were demanding on every front. Mastering the use of the equipment, concentrating on maintaining appropriate body posture, counting numbers of repetitions and trying not to hold up the other participants who were waiting to follow me demanded my full concentration. The muscle soreness that followed these first workouts extended to my entire body; because all major muscle groups were exercised, every area of my body hurt. Diary accounts of my experiences during the first few weeks of training included many observations about my body. At the risk of using a cliché, I was sore in places I didn't know I had muscles - discreet, vague aches and deep pulls at the sides of my calves, my back and my thighs, as well as the raging, excruciating pain in the major muscle groups. I was told that the appropriate

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<sup>53</sup>. The "individualized programme" devised by club trainers is clearly modelled after the medical chart maintained by health care practitioners. Not only is the "prescribed" exercise programme initially documented (what kinds of exercises, numbers of repetitions per set, and so on) but progress is monitored and recorded in a detailed manner with the days, dates and times of work-outs, changes to the programmes, and the like. Other information such as age, previous exercise history, chronic health problems, etc., add to medical aura of the document, as does the fact that the charts are kept confidential. Filed behind the reception desk a chart is presented to the client only with the presentation of a club membership card (with photo-ID).

response to these painful sensations was to stretch, a response which was, in my opinion, counter-intuitive. I wanted to rest and limit my movements because, like the oil light coming on in my car, I felt that pain was nature's way of telling me to stop what I was doing.

It was immediately apparent to me that I was among the oldest members of club, the majority of participants clearly in their mid to late twenties. Feeling conspicuous about this and about having never performed this type of exercise routine before, I nonetheless began to glimpse what the attraction to resistance training was all about. After two weeks much of the soreness diminished (it never went totally away) and I felt discernably stronger and also more assertive in my body language. I began to walk around the exercise equipment with the purposeful strut of one 'in the know' and my more confident demeanour mirrored that of the more experienced machine users. I made a few contacts among the 'regulars' and continued to track my own progress.

While I really liked the effect of the training regimen on my body, particularly the way it increased physical strength, the monotonous quality of the workout soon made itself known. After grasping the workings of the machines and acquiring an almost second-nature body posture while executing the moves, the workouts became very boring indeed. Very telling was the fact that I began to lose count of the number of repetitions I had performed, and would invariably opt to overestimate the number when I resumed counting.

Before the end of the three weeks of my strength training programme, I started to cast a longing glance at the free weights. Located in an area of the gym occupied mostly by very large men, the free weights were positioned in stations facing the back wall. Exercising with one's back to other body workers was no private event however; the wall was composed entirely of mirrors from the floor to the ceiling so that one might not just watch themselves in the mirrored image, but also see who might be watching.

#### 5.4 Pumping Iron

As a training method, free weights are considered by 'lifters' as "the real thing".<sup>54</sup> Not uncommonly lifters will employ machines during a segment of their workout to "blast" a particular muscle group, but purists overwhelmingly use barbells and dumbbells as the preferred training method. They explain that free weights allow a variety in the range of motion (how far your limbs can move in any direction) whereas machines typically allow for only one exercise action. While not disputing this interpretation, I also feel that free weights have an aesthetic appeal, especially to male lifters, in that the human body is not dwarfed in comparison, as is the case with most strength training equipment

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<sup>54</sup>. An interesting observation made during the participant observation phase was that the term 'lifter' only applies to those who train with free weights; resistance training with machines, where the user is, in fact, also lifting, does not bestow on them the title, 'lifter'.



(i.e. machines).

In the use of free weights to resistance train, weight plates are subsequently added to barbells and dumbbells to increase the weight lifted. As might be expected, this kind of resistance training is most often employed to build bulky, "short" muscle rather than the lean and "long". The objective, therefore, is usually to move as heavy a weight as possible for a small number of repetitions. Women who use free weights fall along a continuum in terms of their physical objectives and consequent training regimens. Very few resistance train to build bulky muscle, a few more do so to improve athletic performance, and the largest group employ light weight for a high number of repetitions to build long, lean muscle.

I was to discover that training with free weights requires far more concentration than does the use of machines. For one thing, balancing the weight is the responsibility of the lifter, and also, the continual maintenance of correct body posture is critical in order to avoid injury, particularly to the back. Not uncommonly experienced weight lifters (both males and females<sup>55</sup>) wear weight belts to reduce pressure on the back, either as a proactive measure or

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<sup>55</sup>. An amusing anecdote from Club Big involves a gendered dimension of the use of weight lifting belts. In an ill-fated attempt to cater to female lifters, Club Big offered pink belts for sale (\$79.) alongside the same version in black. Very few, if any, of the pink variety were sold, however, because, as reported by one female lifter, "everybody knows that if you wear a black one it makes your waist look smaller".

in an attempt to support a back left vulnerable from previous lifting injuries.

Training with free weights is also more challenging by virtue of the more sombre and sometimes confrontational social dynamic surrounding the activity. Whereas a spirit of camaraderie prevails among the participants in other forms of body work such that equipment is generously shared and neophytes are made to feel welcome, lifters are most often loners with attitude. Sometimes paired with single training partners or opting to train alone with the use of spontaneous "spotters"<sup>56</sup> weight lifters are a different breed of body worker. The free weight region of the gym is not a warm and friendly place. Covetous of particular barbells, weight plates, or positions in front of the mirror, the social atmosphere is decidedly unfriendly, even adversarial. Newcomers like myself are shunned mercilessly so that they often end up retreating to other regions of the gym to pursue other fitness activities. The only option if one should decide to stay is to dig in and work hard to establish and maintain the serious, impenetrable demeanour of a lifter.

Committed to the higher purpose of engaging in sociological research, I avoided the impulse to retreat and instead involved myself in participant

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<sup>56</sup>. Because resistance training to build bulky muscle involves moving heavy weight, the activity requires that someone be present to oversee the lift in case something goes wrong. For example, when performing a heavy bench press (the lifter is lying on his/her back and lifting a barbell off the chest) failure to complete the lift can result in chest or neck damage if the weight falls. The spotter, in the form of a training partner or a bystander, watches the lift and steps in to offer help if he/she discerns that the lifter is in trouble.

observation of free weight training for the required three week period. I was initially instructed by Anne, a fitness trainer who guided me with respect to both the technique of training and the etiquette of sharing free weight equipment with mostly very large and unfriendly men.

Ann was a very short young woman (well under five feet tall, twenty eight years of age) who was training in her spare time to compete in the Provincial Bodybuilding Championship to be held during the following September. Her own training regime included not only weight training but also aerobic step classes and an unrelenting high protein diet, designed to build muscle while displacing subcutaneous fat. During the four month field work phase of data collection carried out at Club Big, Ann's enthusiastic commitment to this goal never waned, and during these months we spoke on several occasions about her rate of progress and her ongoing relationship to her body.

Ann had been "turned on" to body building by her current boyfriend, and had been working out for the previous year and a half. She described herself as "very body aware but in a positive way". She claimed that, both as a young girl and as a woman, she was never self-conscious in a negative way about having her body scrutinized by others. She described how, unlike most other women she knew, she preferred being in the nude, and felt most comfortable when wearing no clothing, a practice she engaged in whenever she was able to do so. Ann related with some amusement how, during her last trip to her

small home town during the summer, she had worn a thong bikini at the local beach and had "raised some eyebrows".

Extremely outgoing in her personal style and noticeably well respected by the male lifters, Ann exuded a tremendous physical and mental confidence which she openly acknowledged, and attributed in no small way to a life devoted to body work. Her only physical flaw, as she saw it, was that her breasts were overly small owing to genetic predisposition and the relentless imposition of fat-burning aerobic exercise.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas the gender ratio of machine users had been slightly in favour of female participation, the use of free weights (barbells and dumbbells that are hand-held) was overwhelmingly a male dominated activity. Involving also the hypermasculine attributes of aggressivity and the confident claiming of physical space, this was the area of the gym characterized by much posturing, grunting and clanging of metal, to the extent that a rule had to be instituted that: "Loud Noises and Profane Language are Prohibited". While this prohibition no doubt applied to all regions of the fitness facility as a general club rule, it was clearly posted on the wall of the free weight region, presumably to remind the recalcitrant lifters.

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<sup>57</sup>. Ann was convinced that she had been a Southern Belle in a previous life because she had recurrent dreams of attending balls on plantations dressed in elaborate gowns of the period. She described herself as a woman who was "destined to be seen and admired".

I learned that other club regulations had been inspired by the composition and the nature of the social interplay among lifters. Club rules pertaining to appropriate dress, for example, included such things as:

- Hats and scarves are not permitted.
- Ripped and torn clothing are not permitted.
- Aerobic bra tops must be covered while in the equipment area.

Depending on whom you speak with, the explanations for these bizarre dress regulations range from concerns about public decorum to covert expressions of racial and sexual discrimination. For example, it had struck me as very odd that a regulation prohibiting hats and scarves would be necessary in a setting devoted to extreme physical exertion. After all, I thought, who would seriously consider wearing extraneous clothing while lifting weights, and for that matter, why would anyone care if they did? I was informed (in hushed tones) by an informant that the prohibition was put in place as a way of discouraging Black membership<sup>58</sup> or at least ensuring that Black participants wouldn't act "too Black" at the gym.

If the total number of Black club members and their patterns of interracial contact could be viewed as measures of the success or failure of this

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<sup>58</sup>. This finding reminded me of a similar prohibition against the wearing of hats that I had seen posted in a bar several years earlier. Once again, when I asked about it I was told "unofficially" by the bartender that it was an attempt to control the number of Blacks who frequented the establishment.

regulation, it would have to be judged as fairly successful in bringing about both low Black participation and noticeable segregation by race. While a small number of Black males did frequent the gym and involve themselves exclusively in free weight lifting, they did so only at a ratio of about one to ten White participants. Not coincidentally, Black males always trained together, never in mixed racial groups or alone.

Dress regulations pertaining to ripped or torn clothing had apparently been instituted at the very inception of the facility to discourage the sloppy dressing associated with old style gyms. Wanting to promote the facility as an "upscale, sexy club devoted to the good health of both men and women" the founder wisely avoided all connotations of a gym as "dark, sweaty and only for jocks". This vision, operationalized in part through the "no slobs" dress code not only served to make middle class females more comfortable with the "lifter" clientele but also foreshadowed the possibility of additional revenues earned through the sale of athletic clothing at the gym.

According to a reliable source the regulation prohibiting ripped clothing had been invoked prior to my arrival to discourage behaviour labelled by management as too overtly sexual on the part of female body builders. Reportedly several female lifters had over-exposed their bodies through strategic rips in exercise wear, causing some consternation among the male lifters. The reference to covering aerobic bra wear in the equipment area also

pertained to this same concern over the exhibitionist tendencies of some female body builders.

Observances of sexual decorum achieved through the regulation of female dress are especially interesting to consider, given that the wearing of the singlet<sup>59</sup> by male body builders exposes much more flesh than does any form of aerobic bra wear. Whereas the latter is designed to completely contain the chest area to provide substantial support so breasts are kept immobile during aerobic exercise, the singlet favoured by male lifters works on the opposite principles of minimal and loose coverage to the entire chest area.

To further confound matters concerning the propriety of body building attire, a widely endorsed technique among body-builders is to deliberately expose portions of the body felt to be particularly problematic, i.e. in need of extreme training measures. A body-building tip originally credited to Arnold Swartzenegger, it promotes the idea that physical flaws should not be covered up but rather placed in plain view so that one is made acutely aware of them every time one looks in the mirror. Predictably, the body builder becomes obsessed with their flaws and therefore works all the harder to 'correct' them.

Owing to dress regulations, this rather significant tenet of the sport of

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<sup>59</sup>. The so-called singlet favoured by male body-builders is a loose, sleeveless t-shirt that consists of a very low-cut neck-line with a single strip of fabric running down the centre of the chest and down the back. It works on the principle of minimal coverage i.e. one can be said to wearing a shirt, but one that is only barely there.

body building cannot be practiced to the same extent by female participants. Whereas the male can, in effect, work on a 'defective' chest by wearing a singlet, a female cannot expose her chest before the mirror in the same manner<sup>60</sup> without violating club regulations. To further confound matters, she can (as can he) almost fully expose the buttock region to the training mirrors by wearing very brief, tong-like bottom wear.

Taken together, these efforts reportedly taken to manage (hetero)sexual tension through the imposition of formal dress codes focus exclusively on the females' responsibility to conceal breasts. These measures contravene the idea of dress prohibitions as gender neutral, as based strictly on the degree of flesh exposed - if this were the case, the singlets worn by males would be prohibited before aerobic bra wear.

Notwithstanding these curious dress regulations, (hetero)sexual tension runs high in fitness centres and the reported experiences of female participants not uncommonly result in self-imposed prohibitions against getting sexually involved with male club members. As one female cross trainer described it:

I now make a point of never getting involved with any guy from the club. The last time I did that when the relationship was over I had to go look for a different club to join because I couldn't stand

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<sup>60</sup>. It is noteworthy that the region of the fitness facility characterized by 'problematic' female dress such that formal invocation of the dress code was undertaken by management is the one characterized by predominantly male, one might even say, hyper-male participation.



seeing him around all the time. It was a shame too, 'cause I really liked that club and now I have to drive further to get here, I had to make all new acquaintances and everything. He just wasn't worth all the hassle.

### 5.5 Machines for the Heart, Lungs

Upon entering Club Big, one immediately encounters an array of equipment devoted exclusively to cardiovascular conditioning. This includes stationary bicycles, treadmills, rowers, cross-country ski simulators and stair climbing machines. These machines are designed to exercise and strengthen the heart and the lungs. Most of this equipment has a computerized capacity so that options may be preprogrammed; for example, one such treadmill can be pre-set so that you encounter slightly inclined terrain on the warm-up portion of your 'walk' followed by increasingly hilly terrain as you approach the highly aerobic portion of the work out. Most stationary bicycles and stair climbers also have this pre-programming capacity along with read outs for the number of calories burned during the course of the workout and a monitoring of heart rate.<sup>61</sup>

Constituting a third discrete region of Club Big, this equipment is designated for the special (but not exclusive) use of the "Cardio-Fit" and

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<sup>61</sup>. These calculations are based on information the participant provides the computer prior to starting the work-out; for example, heart rate and calorie expenditure will be based on age, height and weight.

"Circuit-Fit" devotees among the club participants. While all offerings at Club Big promise to decrease body fat and build muscle, the cycles, stair machines and treadmills are a particularly popular option among those who are either interested primarily in overall weight loss and/or are utilizing such equipment to complement another physical fitness regimens (i.e. they are cross-training or circuit-training).<sup>62</sup>

Instruction in the use of this equipment was very straight forward. Other than for being walked through the pre-programming of computer aided equipment, the activities themselves are extremely repetitive, even mindless. Not uncommonly, participants read magazines while cycling or while using the stair machine and the positioning of this equipment facing the "storefront" windows provides some entertainment in the form of watching sidewalk traffic.

The use of this equipment doesn't allow for much social interaction; one is either using the equipment in the solitary fashion the technology dictates or one feels odd standing around not doing so. Other than for managing to claim your right to a reserved life cycle or stair climber, very few words are exchanged. The sole purpose of these body work activities is to produce

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<sup>62</sup>. Circuit or cross-trainers have a set number of activities in their "circuit" which must be performed within a specific time period. For example, they may do aerobic exercise for six minutes, quickly move to strength building exercise (anaerobic exercise) for three minutes, and then back to aerobic, etc. Consequently, circuit trainers have the right of way in the Cardio-Fit area; machines in this area are only to be used by non-circuit trainers if the three prior circuit stations are not in use.

copious quantities of sweat for exactly specified periods of time. In short, this area of Club Big is the most individually isolating of all and is consequently one characterized by a decided treadmill quality (literally and figuratively).

#### 5.6 The Realm of Aerobic Dance/Step

After participating, observing and making some useful contacts within the first three body work regions of Club Big, I finally re-entered the more familiar world of aerobic dance and step. At Club Big aerobics is a discrete world by virtue of the fact that it occupies an entire level or floor of its own and is almost completely occupied by females. Residing in the basement level of the large facility, it is attractively lit, lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on one complete wall and is laid with an exquisite hardwood floor.

This is a woman's world and one that I was very happy to become reacquainted with. While some minor features of the aerobic dance/step programme had been altered since I had completed my research there in 1992-93, the array of classes offered was familiar, as was a small core group of fitness instructors. Of the fourteen women I had interviewed in my previous study of aerobic dance, five were still actively enrolled in the programme. I began my three weeks of participant observation by taking classes from the morning, afternoon and evening offerings, as I had done in the spring of '92. In what seemed like comparatively little time I was back into the swing of

aerobic dance/step, my body more easily adapting to what was a familiar exercise regime.

The physical and psychological/emotional ease I felt upon returning to aerobics was not lost on me at the time. Field notes recorded during this period are less stiff and 'academic' in tone and reference with more frequency personal anecdotes involving instances of camaraderie and humour. One very telling example of group humour took place during the floor work<sup>63</sup> portion of an early morning aerobics class attended by approximately thirty women. Attempting to motivate participants during the execution of very unpopular inner thigh exercises, the instructor yells to the class:

"I know you're all asking yourselves, 'when will we be finished these leg lifts'!?' The answer is - NEVER!!!" The entire class spontaneously grasped the grain of truth contained in this attempt at humour - for women, body work is never over.

The single most obvious social distinction between the female dominated realm of aerobics and other, more gender neutral or male dominated body work activities is illustrated by this humorous encounter. Synchronized movement in the form of aerobic dance and step brings with it a curious but indisputable

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<sup>63</sup>. All aerobics classes include a brief warm-up session, followed by the longer 'aerobic' portion of the class (devoted to elevating the heart rate), and then a brief cool-down period after which ten to fifteen minutes are devoted to 'floor work'. This last portion of the class targets parts of the body not directly addressed by aerobic exercise, e.g. the stomach, the inner thighs, etc.

basis for group solidarity. The comfort felt when the entire class "moves as one" is such that out-of-step newcomers are immediately subject to unsolicited instruction from more experienced participants to "bring them up to speed". The ambience of the class is discernibly disrupted by these amateurs, and it is incumbent on regulars to see that newcomers "catch on". Many women, including myself, are somewhat hesitant to admit to the pleasurable aspects of perfectly synchronized group movement. Quite like the military battalion performing precision drills on the parade square, simultaneous movement has connotations of brainwashed groupthink. A Durkheimian illustration of solidarity achieved from "moving like one" is nonetheless undeniable, but difficult to reconcile with the maintenance of and elaboration on individuality deemed so vital in Western culture.

#### 5.7 Club Small - A Cursory Note

Because the participant observation phase of this project was initiated at Club Big, introductions to and descriptions of body work activities overwhelmingly reference it as the wellspring of information in field notes. Following the three months spent at Club Big, the subsequent three at Club Small involved to a greater extent the establishment of reliable informants, the scheduling of interviews and the organization of the focus group. Participant observation continued at Club Small but notations mostly involved those

aspects of the smaller facility and its clientele that departed in significant ways from what was experienced at Club Big.

The most obvious distinctions between the two research settings had to do with the scale of operation and the emphasis placed on some body work activities over others. Club Small occupied the upper floor of a compact, two story, commercial building located on a quiet side street just off the main town thoroughfare in a town of approximately five thousand persons. Owned by a local family prominent in the small business community, it was inaugurated in 1992 in response to the aerobics craze that was spreading across the United States and Canada. This commitment to aerobics was still evident in 1996 in that the limited floor space was overwhelmingly devoted to aerobic exercise classes. The one free weight station, Nautilus equipment <sup>64</sup>, single Stair Master and two stationary bicycles were grouped together in a too-small space in the high traffic area next to the reception desk.

Another indicator of its original purpose was evident in the club membership. Female involvement in Club Small outnumbered male by a ratio of 3:1, with female participation manifesting itself primarily in the aerobic dance and step programme. With a total membership of 120 persons, this facility reflected an extreme division of body work by sex. Virtually all male members

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<sup>64</sup>. The Nautilus Training System (a registered trademark) is a hydraulically aided resistance training programme.

participated by working out with free weights only. It was a very rare occurrence to observe a male using the Stair Master, Nautilus System or stationary bicycles, as they preferred to run outdoors for the aerobic component of their physical conditioning. During the three month participant observation phase at Club Small, only one male ever participated in aerobic step classes. A football player from the local university, he took classes with his girlfriend for a short-lived two week period in an attempt to lose a few pounds in the off-season.

While the facility was small and therefore at times uncomfortably crowded, a far more worrisome feature was its location directly above a thriving dry cleaning service. This meant that during the daily hours of operation fitness devotees were subjected to the smell of dry cleaning compounds, as well as the passive heat and the vibrating sounds of the cleaning process. Concern from club members over the chemical content of the fumes emanating from below warranted the posting of a sign by club owners dubiously claiming that, "Mist Rising From the Area Below is Steam Only". Concern over this matter was voiced especially during the spring and summer months, when windows had to be kept open to improve ventilation during aerobic fitness classes. Club Small boasted of air conditioning in its promotional flier and newspaper advertisement, but the system was considered by club members to be inadequate to meet the demands of the crowded facility.

Differences in scale of operation and air quality aside, the 'product' sold as fitness was found to be profoundly standardized within the two settings chosen for this research. Specialized vocabulary, shared values like those attached to commitment and hard work, the fitness ideal, etiquette of equipment use, and the like, were virtually identical in both settings. Size and the more narrow array of body work offerings at Club Small were the only notable feature of difference between the two fitness centres, understandably owing to the size of the surrounding population base from which Club Small drew its clientele.

### 5.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the two research sites chosen for the data collection component of this dissertation so that the reader might gain an appreciation of these locales as generating and perpetuating fitness discourse. Fitness clubs specialize in scrutinizing, quantifying and monitoring the body. Quasi-medical experts authoritatively place it on the road to fitness, and attempt to reinforce continued devotion to body work. Different approaches to working the body within these privately owned business enterprises have been explained in this chapter in some detail, as have some noteworthy features of the field experience. Body work in the form of various types of resistance training, heart and lung conditioning and aerobic



dance/step classes underscores the voluntaristic and allegedly tailor-made quality of the product offered as fitness, concepts that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter VII.

At the conclusion of the six month participant observation phase it was obvious that this approach had been indispensable as a means not only by which personal contacts could be made and the discourse of body work better understood, but through which the experience of the physical regimens could be directly felt in my own body and compared to the accounts of women. The bodily sensations produced from different training regimes could be clearly linked to the corresponding motives women cited for their participation in their preferred body work activities. I began to understand the attraction to and preference for particular fitness regimens by virtue of having experienced at least intimations of these same empowering sensations in my own body and psyche. Feelings of mastery in both mind and body brought on by participation in body work manifested themselves in an amazingly short period of time.

Participant observation also served the purpose of revealing, on a day-to-day basis, the rhythms of social dynamics within this highly specialized setting. As primarily a profit-driven enterprise the fitness 'club' is a hyperphysical microcosm within which a variant of the American Dream is offered under the wholesome banner of fitness/health/beauty. Achievement through systematic and taxing physical exertion promises success in the form of a new and

improved 'you' in every respect - buoyed self-image, better relationships, improved mental acuity - generally the promise of greater productivity and longer life span, as well as increased cultural worth.

A dream promoted by on-site motivational speakers, and arguably unattainable by most mortals, the idealized image of the fit body symbolizes a social distinction achieved through passive display. While embodying a modernist image of implied capacity to perform physical labour (muscle groups well developed and further defined by the virtual absence of subcutaneous fat) the contemporary fit body exists only to be seen. The physical action takes place primarily in the gym, and is pursued with an ongoing scrutiny against physical standards modelled from both science and art. As a hybrid of science (mostly medical) and art (especially sculpture), the fitness/health/beauty mandate of the gym functions to seriously downplay the profit motive which drives the industry.

The women who were interviewed for the research component of this dissertation range across a number of attributes, including the demographic features discussed in the closing segment of the last chapter, as well as in their overall commitment to body work. While some can be said to be fitness zealots, others are more sporadic consumers of the fitness 'product'. Central to this issue of commitment is an appreciation of the personal histories of the women themselves, for not uncommonly zealots will be couch potatoes at

some life junctures and vice versa, depending on the perceived efficacy of body work to life stages and circumstances. We now turn to the major issues identified in these personal accounts and proceed to read them in the context of the previous discussion of embodied subjectivity.

Chapter VI:Embodied Lives

The following two data chapters expand on themes surrounding experiences of female embodiment and, as a consequence, look at how this knowledge informs ongoing notions of the self. The biographical approach to the analysis of body work/improvement identifies significant personal events, physical/emotional developmental periods, and the like, which surface from the offered narrative.

This chapter highlights the embodied histories of the women interviewed in developmental sequence starting from the earliest recollections of childhood. It proceeds to identify menstruation and the development of secondary sexual characteristics as central to women's memories of struggle surrounding the body during adolescence and, as a result of these struggles, to the subsequent relationship to their bodies in adulthood. Connections women make in their account of the body during puberty to the (non)adoption of body work practices underscores the learning curve involved in assessing and subsequently adopting/rejecting the social prescriptions for the well-managed female body. In the life histories related by women, adult perceptions of an embodied, 'female' self are directly linked to the way(s) the 'problems' of menstruation,

the development of secondary sexual characteristics and the social consequences of inherited body type are discerned and resolved during adolescence.

It should be noted that while virtually no difference by social class emerged in the imagery used by women to describe the experience and social consequence of menstruation and physical maturation, noteworthy dissimilarity surrounded both the appraisal and the social consequence of excessive body fat depending on the social class setting. This chapter identifies an important association between social class and perceptions of and judgements about female body weight.

### 6.1 From Childhood to Early Adulthood

Whether from rural or urban backgrounds, few of those interviewed remembered themselves as highly physically active young children. Most had involved themselves in the usual kinds of unstructured mixed gender play, such as learning to catch a ball and later forming informal neighbourhood ball teams. Those few who recall their childhood as being extremely physically active (four in number) invariably reference male playmates and/or brothers in such play, but generally did not participate to the exclusion of involvement in activities with female friends.

Interestingly, all four who recall themselves as "tom-boys"<sup>65</sup> describe their role as ring-leaders in play with males, not simply as honorary or token members of male dominated activities. In two instances when queried about the understood gendered hierarchy which emerged in these play groups their achieving highest status was attributed to being the oldest child in the group; in the remaining two examples, female leaders were at least as old as the next male participant.

Women from small towns and rural settings described their childhood activities as almost always unstructured and outdoors. In settings where formal recreational programmes did not exist, skills in swimming, skating, climbing, and the like, developed in a more casual and opportunistic manner. Three women from rural settings recall having to perform physically demanding chores in the agricultural settings in which they lived. They were fully expected to labour with fathers and brothers on the mixed farms where they grew up, often picking rocks, loading hay, feeding cattle, and the like, on a seasonal basis.

None of the women interviewed expressed regret about the quality or

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<sup>65</sup>. When asked about what it meant to be a "tom-boy", women mention that, if given a choice, they had preferred the activities and the general adventurous attitude of males. They were labelled "tom-boys" usually by parents around the age of ten or eleven, when it was noticed that they didn't like to do "girls things". It is noteworthy that this label had/has a very positive connotation for the women who received it.

quantity of physical activity experienced in early childhood. Although they were involved in "girl things", such as hop-scotch, swinging, "playing Barbies", often as much time was devoted to the ball field, or to mixed games of tag. Only two participants recalled deliberately avoiding so-called "girl things", both preferring the wider sphere of exploration and physicality accorded to boys. For example, Sarah, a middle child with one older and one younger brother, recalls:

I didn't feel pressure from my parents to act like a girl, but in other people's homes I found there was more gender division between what was appropriate for girls and what was appropriate for boys. I always made it clear that I wanted to play with the boys...I played with girls too, but when it was my choice, I preferred to do things with the boys. I figured out quite young that what the boys did was more fun; I enjoyed it more. If people treated you like a boy you got to do more interesting things, but if they treated you like a girl you had to stay inside and sit still.

While all of the women were generally satisfied with their levels of physical activity as children, they also generally felt that early childhood levels of activity were inadequate to meet the demands of physical education programmes and intramural sporting competitions they later encountered within the school setting. It is noteworthy that of the total of thirty-four women interviewed, all but four deemed their experiences in physical education programmes within public school settings as mostly negative. They claimed they lacked the skills required to make teams and found the competitive and aggressive atmosphere at school a further impediment to their enjoyment of participation. In contrast, the four women who felt most comfortable with and

thoroughly enjoyed formalized physical competition were those who had been introduced to such activity in a highly structured way early in childhood.

## 6.2 Puberty

All but two of the women interviewed considered the onset of menstruation as demarcating the move from childhood to adolescence. In fact, much more emphasis was placed on the onset of menses in the acknowledgement of the bodily sensations associated with female puberty, than on the preceding and more gradual development of secondary sexual characteristics. In keeping with Emily Martin's much-cited findings (1989), first menstruation was, more often than not, regarded as "gross", "messy" and shrouded in secrecy due to lack of information and/or shameful connotations surrounding the sexual maturation of the female body. This reaction was especially pronounced among the women interviewed who were over the age of forty. Carrington (age 44), reared in a predominantly Catholic-Scottish rural setting recalls:

...for me, it was when I was thirteen years old. It wasn't welcome because my mother didn't explain anything to me. Everyone was really modest in my house. I was the oldest kid in the family and I remember one day when I was home sick, she gave me this book from the Kotex box. She must have thought my period was going to start soon...the book was called something like, "You're a Young Woman Now". Wow, I just realized I got educated on this from Kimberly Clark! (laughs) anyway, I read it and I thought, "my God, does this happen to everyone?!" I tried to be real cool and



I just told her, "yeah, I know all that stuff", but I really didn't. I didn't even talk about this stuff with my friends. One told me about her sister having to buy Kotex and there being lots of blood, but we didn't think it was going to happen to us.

Other women over the age of forty also emphasized the degree to which menstruation and other female bodily processes were not mentioned, even within all female social groups. Some recalled having to steal feminine hygiene products from their mothers because they were uncomfortable bringing up the subject of menstruation with them. Maggie (age 51) describes the prevailing social climate surrounding the female body:

I didn't get my period until I was sixteen and I had a lot of problems. I got really bad migraines and even now that I don't have a flow anymore I still get them. You know, when we were growing up you didn't talk about menstruation or even pregnancy. If you had any problems that meant extra time in the bathroom you said you had diarrhea...when someone was pregnant you said they were "*that way*". If you asked what "*that way*" meant, they would tell you, "you know, *that way*". I didn't see a condom until I was twenty-one years old...I had no idea what sexually transmitted diseases were.

Younger women, who were all forewarned of the event mostly by older sisters and/or female peers, viewed first menstruation as problematic, but responded to it in a more matter-of-fact fashion. They report that aside from warranting a series of covert new practices and behaviours, it was "no big deal". Franca (age 34) states:

I had an older sister and things were a lot simpler for me; I remember this one time that she couldn't go swimming and I clued

in that it was because she was having her period. My sister was really embarrassed by this though because we had those belts and big pads. In Croatia, I remember my neighbour telling us girls that we could wash ourselves when we were menstruating but we weren't supposed to wash our heads, our hair. Our Mom was really cool, though...she told us to forget about it.

While younger women were generally more knowledgeable and accepting of the changes associated with physical maturation, no woman regarded the onset of menstruation as a positive bodily experience. The appearance of menstrual blood was seen as especially upsetting ("disgusting", "horrible") and attending uterine cramps left young women feeling "diseased" and "cursed". Younger women were better informed about menstruation and could more openly share their resentment of it with sisters, mothers and female friends, but this did not appreciably diminish their negative assessment of the physical sensations experienced. Carrington comments:

I wanted to know the point of the whole thing (menstruation); I remember thinking how this useless, gross thing is going to go on for years, and for what reason? It made sense to me that if you were going to have children you should be able to go to the doctor and have some surgical procedure done or have them flip a switch so you could have periods only when you were trying to get pregnant...because that's what it's for.

Of significance is that the shared quality of this "gross" physical process contributed much to female bonding, such that those who experienced first menstruation later than their peers felt left out and rejected. Menstruation, although regarded as "gross", was considered a sign of membership among

adolescent girls and provided them with a shared secret from which they derived a kind of honorary status among peers. Of concern to women who menstruated for the first time at the age of sixteen and seventeen was the fear that there was something wrong with them, and that they would never fit in with the other girls who had experienced menses earlier.

Often code words for menstruation like "George" were used by girls at school, and at least one woman remembers having thoroughly enjoyed the secrecy surrounding it during her adolescence. More often, though, the covert quality of managing menstruation is recalled as fraught with anxiety and fear of embarrassment.

Halley recalls:

Starting your period brought with it a real concern about security. You had to be concerned about when it was going to start, where you would be and how you would handle it. There were those usual horrific stories about how someone would be standing in line somewhere with white shorts on and their period would soak through. I remember the concern that started about trying to keep your dignity, not to have an embarrassing situation develop...trying your best.

The business of acquiring feminine hygiene products and keeping them from public view was a cause for concern as well. Susan recalls the "work" and potential loss of face involved in managing this, an experience shared by virtually all of the women interviewed:

Taking this paraphernalia to school wasn't fun either because so

much secrecy surrounded it...I mean, it was referred to as "the curse" for a good reason. My most embarrassing moment came from swimming when I was having my period actually. I had a pad on and the blood just flowed when I got out of the water. I was in grade eight or nine and I was so embarrassed.

Halley adds:

I remember being at the Parliament buildings in Ottawa when my period started. Luckily my mother was along as a chaperone as we went to all the washrooms trying to find a pad or tampon and there weren't any to be had....(she laughs)...guess they weren't used to having females at the Parliament Buildings back then.

In all accounts of their adolescent experience, women remembered readily identifying menstruation with the ability to have children, although the anatomical/physiological processes through which this occurred were generally not clearly understood at the time. The experience of menses, a singularly private event when managed properly, coupled with the development of secondary sexual characteristics, led to the realization that the body, itself, was "up to something" and had an agenda quite outside of the wishes of the subject. Some women described feeling alienated from their bodies during this time, a sentiment which was exacerbated by the messages they received from others.

Elizabeth explains:

I really felt like I couldn't handle it at all. I mean, I sort of wanted to grow up but I wanted to do it when "I" wanted to. I knew I had to eventually but it was as though my body was doing something I wasn't ready for. I hated my periods, but I could manage that...it

was the development of breasts that troubled me. I couldn't hide it and I really hated it.

While women talked about the body "being out of control" and "like a stranger to them", it was often the crude remarks of teenage boys within the school setting that gave rise to the discomfort they felt about their changing bodies. Young women were increasingly sexualized<sup>66</sup> through the responses of others at this time, most particularly through the gratuitous negative comments from boys, but also through worrisome messages from parents.

Several women reported that they felt uncomfortably tall during their adolescence, and because they developed secondary sexual characteristics sooner than their peers, they felt self-conscious and gawky. Halley states:

I was always really big for my age. I mean, there might have been three guys at my school who were as tall or taller than me. Then to develop early on top of that was hard. It resulted in a lot of attention, unwanted attention at that time. I wanted to be smaller and I was always in school pictures at the back of the class with the guys because I was so tall. I was very self-conscious. It's as though your body matures far quicker than your sense of self and you don't know how to handle it.

In retrospect, the women who physically matured early felt it to be a disadvantage in that they received male attention long before they were ready

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<sup>66</sup>.Only one participant did not identify with this sentiment, explaining that she really didn't feel sexualized by others until she started drinking alcohol during her teen years. Consumption of alcohol marked entry into adulthood among her peers within the small town setting where she spent her adolescence and early bodily maturation notwithstanding, she felt still entrenched in childhood until she adopted the behaviour.

for that added dimension to their adolescent lives. This was confirmed by the self-described "late bloomers", who were able to have males as friends for a longer period of time and develop other interests before becoming sexualized through their bodies. Susan points out the social acknowledgement of developing secondary sexual characteristics:

The other thing (besides menstruation) that was really a big deal was when you'd get your first bra. The comment at school would be, "she stuffs her bra". I actually did that for a while, with Kleenex.

Many of the women interviewed felt self-conscious about breast development, describing the unwelcome attention it drew from males during adolescence. Wearing a bra for the first time was a significant event, not only in that it marked further entry into female adulthood and was a further basis for female solidarity, but also because it provided a sense of concealment, hence security to young women. No woman interviewed had or currently perceived the wearing of a bra as so symbolic of women's oppression that they chose for political reasons not to wear one. The women interviewed could identify with the feminist reasoning behind the highly sensationalized "bra burnings" of the 1970s, but they preferred to manage breasts socially by wearing one.

Now well into adulthood, the women still reference the wearing of a bra the same way; although now some view it as a foundation garment that presents female breasts in a socially acceptable form, all derive a security from

wearing one which exceeds any resentment of it as a compulsory, imposed practice. Elizabeth, who didn't start wearing a bra until well after she began menstruating, comments on the significance of the garment to her self-concept during adolescence:

I started my period when I was ten and a half and my parents were very resistant to the idea that I was physically maturing. I couldn't bring up the subject at all in my house...my mother was absolutely, totally up-tight about anything at all sexual. What finally happened was that I went to my sister's for the summer...she was much older and off on her own. Anyway, she took me out and bought me my first bra. I couldn't believe the difference it made in the way I moved and my posture. I was always trying to hide my chest before; I wore undershirts under sweaters in the summer! Just wearing that bra for the first time was really liberating to me...I felt protected, almost insulated...and although I knew in a way said that I had breasts to everyone, somehow I could handle it then. They (breasts) were still there but now they were better managed.

Breast development was quite like menstruation in the sense that young women were aware that a kind of competition existed among their female peers; to not develop with female peers was potentially disastrous to feelings of same-sex solidarity, such that young women like Susan stuffed their bras to comply. There existed an ambivalence, however, toward developing breasts and curvaceous hips. On the one hand, the body was experienced as out of control, a sentiment reinforced by the unwelcome comments from males, so much so that impression management was made very difficult. On the other hand, lagging behind other girls meant that one risked being ostracized by one's

female peer group.

Accounts from women give rise to a clear set of guidelines that prevailed during adolescence regarding the optimal development of secondary sexual characteristics: while one must be judged as on the road to physical maturation, excessive development or underdevelopment was viewed as socially unacceptable, as deviant. Excessive development results in the escalation of derogatory comments from males; underdevelopment elicits rejection from developing females. Interestingly, males have no difficulty with underdevelopment; as previously mentioned, in all instances where adolescent females were "late bloomers" they report that they were better able to manage and maintain what they consider in retrospect to be very healthy relationships with male friends.

The operation of these guidelines are well illustrated in the account given by Susan. From a middle class background and now in her mid-thirties, she remembers entering puberty fairly late compared to her female friends. Still very slim, she recalls that she was "a really skinny kid" and that during adolescence she was concerned that she wasn't having her period or developing breasts along with the other girls. While this was a cause for concern, Susan recalls that she maintained some very good friendships with boys as a result, an experience she feels has had very positive consequences for her ability to work with male colleagues in her adult life. She began



menstruating at fifteen, managing her lack of breast development all the while by stuffing her bra "with Kleenex".

Ironically, Susan reports that when she finally did begin "to fill out" during senior high school, she developed "enormous breasts" that were really out of proportion with the rest of her slim body.

She recalls:

One thing that did take place when I was in high school was that I had a breast reduction. It was a body consciousness thing, because I remember feeling really awkward about my body because my breasts were so large compared with the rest of me. I just felt that large breasts didn't fit me....I didn't like the attention I got from guys and men either. Even at that age I knew it was really important to feel comfortable about my body and I really didn't...I mean, this was something that really, really bothered me. I even considered suicide a few times because I couldn't deal with it, or felt that I couldn't deal with it. I mean it was physically uncomfortable, too...I had a lot of back pain, and more importantly, I felt like this was not who I was.

The body is felt to be out of control, needful of management to the extent that something must be done, some action must be taken to bring it back into alignment with what Susan perceives her embodied form should be. She identifies the bodily attribute as 'the' culprit in the changing character of her interactions with males, most likely because the attribute is changeable through cosmetic surgery, whereas the reaction of males is not so simply managed. Susan opts to undergo the surgical procedure during summer vacation, pointing out that because she lived in a rural setting, she was unlikely

to encounter her classmates until the next fall. This way she could start on a new footing with her peers.

Like the accounts of other late bloomers, Susan felt that she was able to 'pass' with boys and men for a longer period than her sexualized female peers, and, like them, she was generally pleased with this fate. In the end Susan chooses the most acceptable alternative of all; through surgery she becomes a small breasted woman, equally acceptable in bodily conformation to her female and male peers.

Similar to the subjects of Davis' (1995) study of women who pursue cosmetic surgery, Susan doesn't understand the procedure as perfecting her body, but rather as rendering it normal. While presumably genetic predisposition has resulted in a slim body with large breasts, Susan sees this 'natural' body as out of proportion and therefore deviant, as 'unnatural'.

By choosing to have breast reduction, Susan successfully meets the expectations of both her male and female peers. She remains one of the girls because her altered form is still seen as indicating female maturation. At the same time, she is able to recapture some of the preferred quality of the interactions she had enjoyed with boys prior to the arrival of the excessive flesh. The altered attribute is rendered acceptable to male peers owing to its diminished dimensions and she can thus better manage the bodily reality of female maturation with them. The 'self' Susan felt herself to be is now in

keeping with her bodily attributes and she can see her way clear to becoming a mature female.

In retrospect, Susan acknowledges her good judgement in opting for the surgery, justifying it as an extremely good return on the investment. She adds that the female surgeon who performed the procedure told her at the time that she had never met a woman who regretted having it done, a claim further supported by Davis' (1995) study. While Susan says she felt much, much better about herself after the reduction she notes one persisting reminder of her experience:

One added dimension of this is the effect the operation has had on my experiences sleeping with men. I can honestly tell you that I probably would have had many more sexual experiences if I hadn't had the operation. The scar tissue is such that, it's not that I feel I have to offer an explanation, but that I have to say something to explain the scars...it's really a private thing.

#### 6.4 Impact of Social Class

While the women were overwhelmingly from middle class backgrounds similar to Susan's, the six participants who identified their origins as working class provided suggestive contrasting evidence of the role of social class in forming self-perceptions of the body as a form of cultural capital.<sup>67</sup> Working

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<sup>67</sup>. Cultural capital is a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to stand for types of knowledge that give certain persons an advantage in social life or mark them as members of a distinctive social status or class group (Bourdieu, 1977).

class culture and the desire for upward social mobility emerge in the accounts of these six women as powerfully defining features of the interplay between the maturing female body and the active or passive power such a body can potentially wield.

Average to low body weight for the working class female apparently brings with it a very potent realization: successful adoption of body management practices during adolescence can generate direct benefit in the form of enhanced social status derived from achieving physical beauty. Jessica and Elizabeth, both from working class backgrounds, were of average weight at the onset of adolescence, and remember initiating the practice of body work in the form of diet and exercise in an effort to set them apart from their female peers.

Jessica had her fortieth birthday shortly before the time of the interview. She is a single parent of two teenage boys, having been divorced for approximately four years. The youngest of five children from a small coal mining town, she recalls how she adopted body work with some seriousness during her adolescence:

I remember making a conscious decision in grade six that I wasn't going to have a life like my mother's. She comes from a long line of peasant stock and married the first man in the neighbourhood who expressed an interest in her. I wasn't interested in that for myself...I wanted out of the town I was living in and had no time for boys who weren't going to amount to anything. When I finally got my body together, got my teeth fixed, and clued into the

clothes that looked good on me...not cheap, but flattering in a slightly sexy way, I guess I just looked around for the best deal I could find. I married 'up' you could say, but I lived to regret it. In my heart I never did fit in with that lifestyle...never could understand what my role as a wife and mother was supposed to be. At least my mother had some power over her own life...her life was hard but she wasn't pretending to be something that she wasn't. Yes, I definitely put too much effort into my body for all the wrong reasons.

Also of average body weight at adolescence, Elizabeth recalls that working class culture sent her very clear messages within the school setting about the importance of enhancing good looks as a way of moving up for young females. Now a physical education teacher in the public school system, she remembers in great detail how a grade seven teacher dealt with this issue in class:

I went to this really small school that went up to grade seven and we had this teacher who would just go wild on a daily basis because we had these two girls who would always hook off and go down town to hang out with the boys who had dropped out.

One day she started talking to the class...well, it was to the girls really, about how these two girls were making the wrong choices. She looked around the room and picked out a few girls...I was one of them...and she started talking about our bodies. She told us basically that because we weren't fat we had a choice; we could start really taking care of our bodies to keep them slim and improve our chances in life or we could let ourselves go...just get fat. The message was that if we looked good **and** stayed in school we were making the wisest choice of all.

It made an enormous impression on me...I remember everything about what she said very clearly. I guess I was at a kind of cross-roads about my body anyway because I remember listening intently to what she was saying...I was really, really interested. After that I took much more interest in the way I

presented myself. I guess from her point of view she was sick of seeing girls being treated like sex objects and ending up pregnant and leaving school...she was telling us in her own way that we could use that attractiveness along with a good education to make a better life for ourselves.

In contrast to these two women of average weight, the remaining four from working class backgrounds were overweight as adolescents, and recall, owing to their body type, internalizing prescriptive images of femininity differently. They report that, for them, the emphasis was on bettering oneself through formal education and hard work, rather than on what their bodies could achieve for them. Their more corpulent bodies apparently precluded investment in them as a form of cultural capital.

For example, Scarlett, who was one of eleven children born into a working class family, describes herself as having been "a fat child". She has experienced a persistent history of obesity, reporting a body weight of over three hundred pounds at the time of the interview. As a middle child in a large family she felt it was both expected and necessary that she become very independent early on, and she claims that her physical size during childhood contributed to her projection of a mature demeanour.

Like other participants in the study who recalled being overweight during childhood and adolescence, Scarlett claims that, "puberty didn't mean a demarcation between child and adult because it was never there for me in the first place...I remember when I was about eight years old my mother told me

that I'd never been a child". Living in "the roughest neighbourhood in the city" Scarlett deliberately cultivated a tough image and was encouraged to do so by her parents. She remembers:

There was a lot of violence in my neighbourhood and at my junior high school. Kids in my class trashed teachers' cars, the police patrolled the school grounds at lunch time, and gym was a nightmare place where a lot of violence took place. I was involved in a lot of those fights because I would be jumped for no reason and have to defend myself. I had a lot of friends from the 'wrong side' and still do and the whole thing left me feeling like a very powerful person. Because I was used to violence, used to getting hit, I know that if anyone smashed me I'd smash them right back. My mother taught me that too, to fight back. Both my parents come from tough working class backgrounds and they taught me that you have to be tough to live...you have to fight.

Scarlett had two older sisters and one younger sister who more closely complied with idealized female beauty in that they were "slim and gorgeous", but rather than attempting to emulate them, she recalls wanting to escape their fate as objects of interest for men. Abusive relationships, unwanted pregnancy and single parenthood were their fate, and Scarlett recalls deliberately trying to avoid this outcome for herself. While she says she cultivated "the look" during adolescence, replete with lots of make-up and "big hair", she credits her size for allowing her to project a toughness that kept males at bay.

Scarlett describes herself as being very vain and states that while she could have had many relationships with males she instead wanted to "make something of herself". She recalls that boys weren't interested in her; she

scared them with her size and tough exterior, and confused them with her attention to hair and make-up. As the only student from her neighbourhood to be placed in enriched classes during senior high school, she recalls with some amusement the clash of working class and middle class reality:

In high school I was put into all enriched courses. I thought all the girls were air-heads and rich bitches and this was war. I mean, I was from the other side of town and I had no friends in these classes. My friends were all put in general classes or had failed grade nine.

One funny story I remember was from the enriched biology class during that first year in high school when this guy kept bugging me. You know how when a young guy likes you and he throws spit balls and all that to bug you? I just went over to him in the middle of class and I grabbed him and said, "you don't stop bugging me and I'm going to smash you into next week". Well, the whole class just went up cuz they'd never seen anything like that before. I just walked back to my desk like nothing had happened. So then, during grade twelve graduation, three and a half years later, he comes up to me and says, "I'm really sorry about that, Scarlett". I mean, he had lived in fear for three and a half years that I was going to smash 'im...I had forgotten all about it but he hadn't.

Scarlett talks about the goals she focused on during adolescence, how she didn't want to end up like her older sister, a single mother on welfare. She observed her sister finally getting off welfare by marrying another man and her younger sister, who she describes as very, very attractive, working as a bartender because she only has a grade nine education and has been "dragged around backwards by men". To clarify her position on the subject of body work and the project of femininity, Scarlett presents a photograph of herself taken



at the age of eighteen. She explains:

I brought this picture of myself at eighteen because I want to talk about how it was for me. I knew I was beautiful...I cultivated that image with the hair and the make-up. The point is that I was still over fifty pounds heavier than what they say my ideal weight should have been when this picture was taken. I was this large-boned, sturdy, powerful woman. I felt very much in control. The largeness made me feel very much in control and at the same time I cultivated "the look". I guess I got lot of enjoyment out of being beautiful and, at the same time, being very powerful...not being a little waif, but rather big and in control.

Currently in the process of completing a graduate degree, Scarlett looks back on the impact her body has had on her experiences as a woman and is simultaneously able to respond to what current literature has to say on the subject of the female body. She vehemently disagrees with what is written on the subject of female fat as summarized in Orbach's Fat as a Feminist Issue:

The psychoanalytic literature I really, really hate. I mean, they're telling me that I'm choosing to be fat to be sexually unattractive. I'm a very sexual person and I've had great sex with men who appreciated how I look. I mean, there are some women who won't make love in the daylight because of some fat they have on their thighs, but I'm not like that. I don't have any hang-ups about this stuff. Overweight and its relation to low self-esteem doesn't apply to me that way. It's very Western based and very middle class in its thinking. The man I've had this ongoing relationship with for fourteen years accepts the fact of my size though...he comes from a very large working class family like mine and all the women in his family were big. I'm much more accepted and appreciated for my size among Blacks and Middle Eastern people too.

I'm not saying that it isn't hard being heavy in this culture. I'm very happy with it but what makes me unhappy is that other people expect me to be unhappy about it. When people meet me it's as though they expect me to be troubled and to admit to some

deep psychological problem that makes me heavy. Even guys...I once had this relationship with a guy who couldn't deal with taking me home to meet his parents because I was big...the social aspect was impossible for him. Another guy I was actually in love with could handle the fact that I was big but couldn't handle the fact that I wasn't submissive.

Also reared in working class settings, both Arlene and Barbara reference their over-weight bodies during adolescence in ways similar to Scarlett. Both report that the girls who were considered desirable by males were more likely to become pregnant and have to quit school. They claim that in hindsight they were fortunate to have invested their energies in schooling rather than in relationships with males, as it was formal education that eventually provided a way out of the working class for them.

Interestingly, neither Arlene or Barbara married up in social class, underscoring their upward mobility as achieved through their own hard work alone. Arlene is a high school teacher who married a plumber, while Barbara teaches microbiology at a community college. Her husband is a heavy equipment mechanic who is employed only seasonally.

Arlene and Barbara share Scarlett's view of the corpulent female body as expressing a unique kind of power and strength.<sup>68</sup> They claim that males

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<sup>68</sup>. These three over-weight women from working class origins only sporadically participate in body work pursuits. Arlene was involved in weight training at the time of the interview, having been away from the gym for about six months. Barbara periodically takes classes in aquacise, tai chi, and step aerobics, but doesn't like to stay with any particular activity for too long due

who feel the most insecure in the presence of big women are White professionals from the middle class. While all three women would like to be slimmer for both health and aesthetic reasons, they emerge as very confident, and self-made women. For example, now weighing over three hundred pounds, Scarlett explains that she consciously makes people reflect on her body size by purposefully wearing a lot of bright colours to attract attention. Because of her large size she has to sew a lot of her own clothes. She recalls going into a fabric store:

...this woman was trying to sell me the browns, navies and blacks because it would diminish my size. I said 'no'; I'm not going to look that much smaller wearing brown so why not look bright and fresh in fuchsia or purple? She really had a hard time with that.

By way of contrast, the accounts of women from middle class backgrounds who reported that they were overweight as children and adolescents paint a very different picture of the consequence of excessive flesh. Beginning in adolescence, Langdon and Franca have devoted considerable effort to control their body weight through diet and exercise, with intermittent success. Both women remembered being very active during their childhood, to the extent that they recalled themselves as leaders in physical play in mixed gender activities.

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to boredom. Scarlett prefers to take a slow swim and spend extra time in the sauna.

During adolescence, however, Langdon and Ana take on the project of managing the female body with seriousness, prompted upon recollection, by strong pressure from parents, and especially from behaviour modelled by older sisters. Both Langdon and Ana describe in some detail the expectations of middle class families with regard to the maturing female body.

Langdon recalls:

Well, I had a lot of energy when I was a child. I was exceptionally active but I was a fat kid. I did ballet (my sister was into ballet and later pursued it as her career)...I remember one revelation I had while doing a recital through the ballet school when I was in grade two or three...I felt like a cow...My sister was involved in the same performance and she'd been dancing already for four years by that time.

I think I thought I was a lot heavier than I really was. I was just a chunky kid. My sister was a dancer and quite into bodily things and I really looked up to her and her beauty. She was a model for attractiveness and I had a brother who teased me mercilessly about my weight, so I'm sure my image of myself as heavy came a lot from that. To this day I feel that I'm governed by my body. I have a twenty pound fluctuation in weight and I don't like it when I get fat and out of shape. I mean, I grew up in a household with an older sister who was always incredibly fit and considered the epitome of female beauty by my whole family. She was never fat...that was my sibling role model.

Whereas in the accounts of the working class women it is the environment external to the family that initiates the emphasis on body work, and only as a resource they may draw from if they have a suitable body type, accounts from middle class women point to the well managed female body as virtually mandatory for normalcy within their own social class. Ana, a thirty-

two year old woman whose parents are both medical practitioners, comments on her experience of her body during adolescence:

I always thought of my body as ugly, but I think that when I was a teenager it was more the result of my family than because of any males in my life. My sister was this gorgeous woman and I kept thinking I could never, would never look like her and my mom was always at me about my stomach, telling me that I needed to lose some weight.

Middle class values emerge as having a notable impact on a young woman's self-perception. The almost mandatory requirement that the middle class female body be well managed suggests that female gender construction within this social class involves far more emphasis on the body as emblematic of self. Marnie makes this observation while reflecting on the plight larger women like herself have to endure trying to manoeuvre within the professional middle class:

It's strange but it seems to be middle class men who have the biggest problem with larger women...it's not the guy fixing my car who has the biggest problem with me but the professionals. I have a good friend who's an engineer and I think the thing she has going for her is her littleness...she's really short and petite and it seems that the guys can accept her as an engineer because her body kind of apologizes for it.

Having spent her young adulthood battling her weight through "crazy diets and exercise binges", Marnie, now in her early thirties, does low impact aerobics semi-regularly, and generally tries to "watch what she eats". Not unlike the other heavy women from middle class families who have attained

professional credentials (5) she still feels her accomplishments are somewhat diminished by her inability to keep her weight down. She explains:

I don't know...I guess I'd just about trade everything sometimes to have been able to control my appetite. I'm much better about this than I used to be, but there are times when I still really, really hate myself.

Women who identified their backgrounds as working class were much more accepting of their assessed body type, tending to work within the social confines of what was tactically in their best interest given their 'natural' body conformation. For example, having made the judgement that one's overweight body is 'read' as sexually unattractive, the working class female moves on to invest time more sensibly in non-corporeal means to access social mobility. Alternatively, if of average weight and 'read' as attractive, a woman is faced with the dilemma of how this resource might be maximized as a form of cultural capital. Body work can be a good investment of time, money and effort. In working class hindsight accounts, the maturing female body is assessed for its instrumental value, rather than internalized as emblematic of the self.

## 6.5 Conclusion

All of the women interviewed refer to their bodies, first and foremost, as emblematic of the social self; that is, as an acknowledged form of cultural capital. They are acutely aware of its instrumental value as a lever in day-to-day negotiations with lovers, would-be lovers, employers, and the general public. Women know that they are perceived as more in control, more worthy of attention, and that they have more credibility as individuals who exude self-worth, when they conform to Western norms of attractiveness. In bodily terms, this means keeping the conformation and the bodily processes associated with the female body well managed, a project that begins in earnest during adolescence.

This chapter has shown through the life history approach to the analysis of body work, that physical-emotional developments taking place during puberty greatly influence a young woman's sense of what her future might hold. Not surprisingly, the personal accounts offered by body work participants over-represent the experience of women whose current material means would be regarded as middle class. The fitness facility by virtue of its cost to members and the primacy it places on cultivating the fit body selects for individuals who have sufficient disposable income and interest in cultivating the fit body, attributes purported to be more prevalent in the middle class.

The findings of this study with regard to social class of origin and

connection to female identity, while only suggestive, are, however, noteworthy. All six women who identified their origins as working class report having achieved upward mobility through or in spite of their bodies. As an upwardly aspiring group they may be considered gatecrashers, ensconced in the middle class as the result of marrying up or from acquiring their own professional credentials. There was a relationship solely of instrumentality toward the body during adolescence, a calculation made on the basis of *their* body's material reality. If possible, it would be mobilized as a form of cultural capital; if genetic predisposition precludes this option, other non-bodily means are located to achieve social mobility.

In contrast, narratives from females born and raised in the middle class suggest that managing the body is a duty for them to the extent that failure to do so is a sign of deviance, and success, merely a marker of class membership. Interestingly, this suggests that the middle class female must work the body even harder to set it apart as exceptional. Employing the female form as cultural capital is therefore more difficult in the middle class, as successful management merely confers normalcy.

These narratives draw overwhelmingly from poignant recollections of puberty and are a window on the relationship between female physical maturation and conceptions of female identity. Keeping these highlights in mind, we will now turn our attention to the role of body work in the



(re)construction of self by looking at women's responses to the areas of questioning which arose from the literature reviewed in Chapters II and III.

Chapter VII:The Discourse of the Body

The focus of the following two chapters is on why women do body work, with some attention paid to the fitness activities themselves. This chapter continues the theme of the struggle women experience with their physical embodiment and its social consequences by looking at how motivations to adopt body work are related to or mediated by the desire to maintain or reimpose order in their lives. Whereas the previous chapter dealt primarily with adolescence, this one deals more specifically with the appeal of different types of fitness work to adult women by examining the reasons they give for their ongoing engagement in them.

Implicit in the discourse analysis that continues in this chapter and the next, is the assumption that the words of women represent for them a coherent version of their experience of individual identity and embodiment in the social world. With these interpretive suppositions in mind, we will now begin to turn our attention to women's responses to the first three research questions which arose from current literature in order to examine the role of body work in the (re)construction of 'self':

1. On the basis of what 'self' referenced values and/or motivational messages are women attracted to body work and how might physical archetypes or various idealized images of the female body be associated with women's

reasons for adopting fitness regimens?

2. Do women who participate in various forms of physical exercise such as weight training and/or the martial arts understand their involvement as an attempt to emulate the male form in any way and/or do they feel they actively modify or restate the activity at some level?

3. Do participants understand their ongoing participation in fitness activities as an elaboration on 'a core sense of self' or as involving an attempt to reconstruct or recreate the 'self' in some fundamental way(s)?

### 7.1 Motivational Messages

Accounts from women overwhelmingly confirmed the idea that during periods of their lives characterized by psychological-emotional crisis, the performance of body work is a direct and proximate means through which order can be reimposed from the inside-out. Women such as Marianne express this motivation as: "While all around me is in chaos at least I can look good and feel good in the midst of it". The rhetoric of the fitness movement, coupled with positive reinforcement from intimate others, confirms and reinforces the efficacy of body work as a coping mechanism, and as a way to significantly and immediately effect change to one's life. Externally generated motivational messages coexist with and reinforce a strong sense of personal satisfaction from having imposed personal will against something as immediate as the body.

As the identified site or container of the self, the body, especially if well-managed, symbolizes for the majority of women interviewed, an expression of

resistance against external elements that threaten to throw the self off balance. Working the body is generally felt to offer a good return on the time invested in this respect, and efforts spent pursuing fitness also constitute a rare opportunity for women to overtly self-nurture. Daring to claim time away from the care of others is identified as, in itself, an extremely positive and symbolic step toward self-care for many women.

A tension perpetually exists, however, between a woman's ability to invest in this form of self care for extended periods and the expectations of others. Responsibilities placed on her by family and/or paid work mean she negotiates the desire and requirement that she tend the body with the fact that others lay claim to much of her time and physical/emotional energy. Regardless of marital status and/or the responsibility of caring for dependent children, all of the women interviewed considered the expectations and demand levels placed on women by paid work and intimates as unrealistically high. Many consequently viewed the time taken to do body work as deservedly claimed, guilt-free opportunities for self-care. Taken even further, working the body simultaneously represents for some an acceptable expression of total self-absorption, a socially sanctioned form of narcissism. Guilt feelings are dispensed with through fitness rhetoric which promotes the idea that one is achieving a moral responsibility to do the right thing by caring for the body, and that by doing so, one may ultimately, in all other contexts, labour even harder.

Lynn, for example, describes how she started working out after the birth of her first child. She recalls:

After Trevor was born I was feeling rather baggy and saggy. I wasn't feeling too good about the way I looked and my general lack of energy. Once I started exercising I got so much pleasure out of it for two reasons: first of all, I was just taking time to do that for myself...I would do laps in the pool at the gym and no one was talking to me, making demands of me...so that was my quiet time to think, to let my mind wander.

I started to feel really good physically too...I had lots more energy and I just felt more positive when I was feeling good physically and taking care of myself. I couldn't have done if there hadn't been day care at the gym...it was really supportive because it was right there on site so I didn't feel guilty about leaving him.

A "no pain, no gain" ethos of the gym coexists with these motivational messages extolling the virtue of self-care. As a result, a somewhat unforgiving approach to the body also pervades the project of improving it. Glassner (1993) points out that with the rise of the fitness movement leisure has, in fact, become work in the lives of many contemporary North Americans, and this is an observation not lost on the women interviewed. The idea that time off from paid work and family responsibilities should be spent "doing something productive" extends the concept of the work ethic into the realm of play.

To illustrate this point, one of the more unexpected findings of this research study was that the 'social' atmosphere of the health club was a drawing card for very few participants. The vast majority of women reported that they did not look for or foster opportunities to socialize at the fitness

centre. Evidently, self-care is thought of strictly in bodily terms, for as Willis (1990) points out, while the health club offers an escape from the job or domestic space, it severely limits the possibility for conversation and community. The atmosphere of the facility creates a "body rivalry" because mirrors are everywhere, and women are compelled to "compare but not share themselves with others" (p.7).

While women are apparently not drawn to health clubs to meet new friends, and the workout is invariably cited as the prime motivator for ongoing attendance, some body work activities rather than others foster marked sociability. Aerobic dance and step classes are predictably characterized by much more group solidarity than other, individually performed fitness regimes. As was described in Chapter V, by virtue of their all female participation and emphasis on synchronized movement, a more social environment prevails in aerobics classes. My own practice during participant observation, for example, was to arrive for a class early so that I might observe the end of the class just concluding. Evening classes are commonly scheduled back to back, and it was not unusual for a half a dozen participants to congregate and watch the last part of the class before their own. I learned a lot about aerobics terminology and technique this way, but also came to know a core group of women by name, a development that made the research process much easier than it had been within the other more individually isolating training regimes at the facility.

Often, women who had gotten to know each other in this manner would position themselves side by side in class, performing aerobics together, clearly trying to perfectly synchronize their movements. Not uncommonly, one partner sees the other as pushing the workout up to the next level of intensity, thereby improving on the fitness experience. Regular attendance fosters this kind of familiarity, and not uncommonly, when highly committed individuals miss a few classes, others will comment on their absence. Instructors also like to keep up on the chronic health problems of regular participants, and locker room chatter before and after class revolves around all manner of bodily related issues. Such conversations might include the best aerobic shoe deals in town, useful tips on how to avoid "pigging out" at parties, who the best instructors are, and how to find the right health club in other towns while on vacation. While in some ways not unlike the banter that goes on in the workplace, conversation in the health club rarely extends beyond the physical body; discussion mostly revolves around one's general health and a status report of the quest for fitness.

While most women did not identify social interaction as a vital component of the self-care ethic that attracts them to health clubs, the management of psychological tension was central to their understanding of what constitutes good health. Stress reduction achieved through physical exertion was voiced as the major motive for exercising the body, followed by the desire to control body weight. These two features of physical exercise are

regarded as indisputable benefits, especially by women who are otherwise engaged in "head work" as the source of their livelihood. A very prevalent sentiment among the women was that they never felt worse, only better, both physically and psychologically after a workout.

Women report that they ultimately seek to achieve "balance", "harmony" or "integrity" to the self through body work. By the choice of these descriptors and the summaries offered of their busy schedules, women confirm the prevalence of chaotic and fragmented social conditions characterizing their personal lives. Multiple roles with conflicting responsibilities are felt to intervene in or even foreclose the possibility of integration among the elements constituting social life. Coupled with the lack of job security, the holding of several part-time jobs, chronic underemployment or unemployment, and the like, many women seemingly rely on the body for its ability to be controlled in the face of the instability discerned in other aspects of their lives.

Here, liberal feminist rhetoric supports individual commitment to body work, in that the motivational messages of the fitness movement emphasize the importance of self improvement and the goal of realizing individual potential.<sup>69</sup> Not only does body work constitute for women a socially

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<sup>69</sup>. One example of the competitive, self-improvement ethic that pervades the fitness movement is illustrated in the most popular motivational message at Club Big (written on a t-shirt) that reads: "Life is just sudden death overtime...and the clock is ticking".



sanctioned, even compulsory, avenue through which self-nurturance can be expressed, its discourse promotes the body as a proximate, ongoing site through which self-actualization can be accomplished. By extolling the traditionally masculine ideal of physical hardness, the idealized image of the contemporary, fit-for-battle, female self suggests that power, previously denied, can now be accessed. Marianne states:

Once you get into weight training you start feeling like a real Amazon. You claim space in a different way and it kind of affects your personality too. You become more confident and sort of aggressive in your body posture and general outlook. It's kind of like using male knowledge of how strength is power but expressing it within a female body. I became aware of how intimidated men can be by that image of physical strength in women and I just loved it. Your body gets real hard and you walk around like you own the world. The funny thing is, though, the more you do it, the more aware you become about little things about your body...when you get a strain or pull you get devastated...when you can't do a work-out you get really sullen and crabby. It's really addictive and not in a good way.

Crisis in the form of acute and chronic injury from overworking the body brings to the fore what is felt to be the foundational reality of corporeality, an essentialist quality which clearly contradicts the open-ended imagery of the malleable, perfectible body in postmodern thinking (Bordo, 1990; Edgley & Brissett, 1990; Glassner, 1990). In the motivational messages surrounding fitness and health, the physical and psychological benefits of fitness regimens are well publicized, while overuse injuries in the form of bursitis, achilles tendonitis and the like, are seldom alluded to, but are not rare occurrences.

Incongruent with the notion of physical perfectibility in fitness discourse, injuries are commonly perceived by sufferers as owing to inherent weaknesses in the individual body, rather than as the consequence of too zealous practice and/or poor technique.

More persistent reminders of the flawed body are forms of chronic disease and the inevitable deterioration of the body as a consequence of the ageing process. Combined with the reported "off-putting" features of contemporary social life such as family dysfunction, economic uncertainty, "the wearing of many hats", and the like, apparently preordained physical imperfections bring to the fore feelings of disjuncture, or fracture to the self. This socio-physical instability is not, however, in the estimation of the women interviewed, giving rise to a postmodern self characterized by fractured identity, as described by Glassner and others. Rather than accepting or modelling identity after the image of the particularized or itemized body, rebuilt or reconstructed in the sense of pastiche, the idealized, embodied self to which these women aspire exists in oneness, is imagined in a wholeness of stable life elements.

Containing vestiges of an Enlightenment notion of the principled, maturing self, realizing its destiny with the steady, guiding hand of its self-reflective possessor, this self aspires to wedding the body with mind and spirit, thereby giving rise to a fully integrated identity. Youthful New Agers and ageing

Baby Boomers alike aspire to this version of an uncompartimentalized whole, an embodied, self-reflective and spiritual entity.

## 7.2 Physical Archetypes

Given this emphasis on the merging of mind, body, and spirit as integral to the contemporary Western definition of health, it is perhaps not surprising that the accounts of women by and large do not allude to culturally generated archetypes as motivations for doing body work. Far more salient than archetypes as motivators were the memories of previous life stages which had been characterized by a harmonious relationship between life events and self-perceived fitness/health/beauty status. Women often spoke longingly about wanting to return to a particular body weight or body conformation they had experienced during a particularly positive period in their own lives. For example, rather than wanting to look like some pop cultural figure of the moment, women more often aspired to getting back to the weight they were when they got married, or being able to fit into the jeans they wore before they had children, or when they were in university.

When pressed to speak on the connection between the health/beauty/fitness status of the body and the life events associated with this memory women often replied, "I don't know why I remember it as so great, but I know that I just felt really good, everything was just really good". These

references to glory days suggest some very interesting features of the 'embodied' memory in that the positive experience of being inside the body is recalled as inextricably linked to the events outside the body. In their yearning to weigh 120 pounds again is the associated hope that the happy days will be here again as well. In keeping with the New Age concept of holism, the recalled, phenomenological body is imagined as simultaneously the contributor to the positive life phase and a consequence of it.

Elizabeth recalls:

Funny enough, the point in my recent past I would like to get back to is about ten months after my first child was born. I had lost a lot of weight from breast feeding, I started jogging again about three months after she was born, and around seven months, she started sleeping through the night. I just remember thinking about how everything was falling into place, my body felt really good again, and I had started back to work. The routine worked...it just all started to work well and I remember feeling really great, inside and out.

Another poignant example of this relationship is recalled by Clara. Now forty-two years old, and a married woman with a two year old son, she still aspires to what she describes as "a boyish figure". She explains that as an actively dieting and athletic teenager, she looked very much like an adolescent boy, except for the fact that she had very long, beautiful blond hair:

I'd like to lose weight to get a boyish figure back, to look like a man. My personal ideal was always to look male, to have a boyish male physique. I know I can't look that way now...my hips are too broad, but in high school I came very close.

I think one of the reasons I don't like to gain weight is

because I think I look like my mother. Even now, I know I'm a carbon copy of her and I hate it. She was a housewife and took care of three children. I never wanted that... to look like that and fought against it for years and years.

I think, too, that if you look too much like a woman you have to bear the consequences of that...being a second rate citizen, a sexual object, less accepted and less powerful. When I was younger I was worried about sexuality too. If I looked too sexually attractive, I would be too close to men. I liked the barrier of the boyish body...I felt that if they could get beyond that boyish exterior they would find out what I was really like and then it would be o.k., but I didn't want to be too easy for them. The boyishness was a camouflage and weight control was a way to continue it. Over the years I've always fought femininity...I never wore dresses but I would buy them. If I tried them on they would never fit right...they wouldn't make me feel like it was me.

When women do mention a physical archetype as a guiding principle, (like Clara's wish to look like a man) it is alluded to in a circuitous manner through a negative assessment of particular physical features they possess. Identified "problem" areas of the female body were, almost without exception, the abdomen, thighs, underarms and "butt", the parts of the body that symbolize female maturation as identified by Markula (1995). While all but three of the women interviewed reported what they perceive as their physical flaws without any hesitation, only Clara and Rose referenced clearly articulated physical archetypes in describing how they would prefer to look. While the others might have been guided in their negative physical self-assessments by idealization(s) of the female body outside of their own personal histories, they did not say so.

The condemnation of at least one physical attribute of their body was expressed by all but two women, but in no instance was the flaw so overwhelming in its consequence as to drive women to alter it through cosmetic surgery. Instead, there is a resigned acceptance of the physical feature that is virtually normative among women and is said to increase with age. Aware of the enormous effort required to change the conformation of "problem" areas of the body, most women over the age of thirty-five have generally made peace with their self-described physical flaws. They reason that owing to circumstances beyond their control (genetic predisposition and/or the magnitude of family and work-place responsibilities) the body work required to substantially alter these features would yield a poor return on the time invested. As Linnaria puts it:

I figure that if I diet and beat my guts out with lots of exercise I might be the weight I was back in senior high for about five minutes. All that work and it would be so temporary. Now I just try to watch what I eat and when my clothes start getting tight I work a little harder on the exercise bike. That's about all I'm willing to do anymore ....after all, you have to have a life.

### 7.3 The (Hetero)sexual Dimension

The research sample was almost entirely comprised of individuals who reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, but they did not, by and large, express contentment with the quality of their intimate relationships with men.

Among the reported motivations to perform body work, achieving sexual attractiveness ranked fourth, but pair bonding relationships themselves were described as both difficult and tenuous, with women voicing marked cynicism toward the notion of romantic love. As a subject spontaneously generated from focus group gatherings, males were collectively depicted as emotionally and intellectually deficient relative to women, but as having a definite advantage in the form of power that accrues to "the one who chooses" in the realm of heterosexual pair-bonding. Men's "animal nature" was seen as evidenced by their preoccupation with the female body, such that women, regardless of age, consider men "easily figured out" and fairly susceptible to manipulation through the trappings associated with the feminine arts. Marnie comments:

I can go out to any bar with a female friend and know that I don't have to go home alone. Guys are so stupid you can string them along all night, tell them what they want to hear, giggle when they say something funny and they have absolutely no idea you're making a fool out of them. You can make them do whatever you want because they're after sex...that's what they're there for and they really don't notice anything else about a woman but her body.

Unattached heterosexual women express ambivalence about pair bonding; they want to be desired by the men they find attractive but hold in dim view both courtship rituals and the idealized images of romantic love that inform them. Flirting and then rejecting sexual advances are viewed by some as an expression of female power, but, according to others these practices are

"undignified", "beneath me". Attached or not, women claim to favour the emotional richness, constancy and complexity characterizing their other, non-sexual interpersonal relationships over the sexually intimate relations they experience with males. It is especially within the context of long-standing relationships with other females (mothers, daughters, female friends) that women find their emotional needs better met, and women express regret, if, for some reason, they have not had these same-sex relationships to draw from.

Ana states:

I know I'm missing something by not having any close female friends. I've always moved around so much that I guess I missed out on that. I'd love to have that in my life because I've seen how close and sisterly women can be with each other. I guess I've always looked for closeness with the guy I've been with and have missed out on some important stuff with women.

Intimate relations with male partners clearly offer an element of positive reinforcement for the well-managed female body, though, but with some added, confounding dimensions. While women report that they are perceived of as more competent and sexually attractive by male partners when they successfully manage their bodies, as previously mentioned, women must 'claim' the opportunity to systematically pursue the fit body in the midst of caregiving responsibilities to intimates. Women report that domestic division of labour by sex still overwhelmingly places the responsibility for household duties primarily on women, even if they are involved in paid work outside the home



and/or in continuing their education.<sup>70</sup>

Beyond an unequal division of domestic labour that limits women's opportunities for engaging in body work, women discern a deep ambivalence on the part of males toward the successfully managed female body, a sentiment that reveals itself within the context of intimacy itself. Women report that men feel threatened if a woman expresses too much of a concern over her physical appearance once in a committed relationship with them. Several women went so far as to suggest that men they had been in relationships with wanted them to "let themselves go" because it constituted a signal to outsiders, especially to other males, that these women were spoken for, that they were not working on or advertising their attractiveness in an attempt to attract other males.

Women felt that while men formally promoted the idea that meaningful relationships are not primarily sexual and that women needn't worry about their bodies once in committed relationships with them, the same men would on other occasions suggest they lose some weight and/or express overt sexual interest in the well-managed bodies of other women. Lesley spoke of this within the context of a focus group gathering:

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<sup>70</sup>. Of the thirty four women interviewed only one woman was unemployed and not looking for work owing to the disabling consequences of chronic disease. All other women who were currently unemployed and not looking for work were engaged in some form of continuing education in an effort to improve their chances of eventually securing well-paid jobs.

Men that I have known and have been with for any length of time have been really intolerant of any change in image in me. So, for example, if I were to put on make-up or change my make-up they would really not like that. The suggestion is, I think, that you might be trying to attract other men or something. You really feel confined by it, as though now you're supposed to hide your sexuality or something. I mean, you get comments like, "you don't need to wear make-up, you don't have to worry about how you look". It's considered vain or something.

It was very evident in my last relationship that it was o.k. to try to look good until the relationship was solidified, until we were unified or something...it was o.k. to look like a hot tamale while we were dating, but then when we were a couple I was supposed to tone it down.

The general impression voiced within both focus groups was that Lesley's experience was not at all unusual. While linking a woman's well-managed body and the attending feminine arts which embellish it to the realm of 'nature' adds to its (hetero)sexual appeal during courtship, a concerted effort to maintain this image after the relationship is established is discouraged by more than a few males. Tanya remarks:

They say you don't have to wear make-up, they love you with a few extra pounds, they love you just the same....and then you go out with them and they're ogling the other women with the little skirts and tons of make-up. They want you in that familiar preppy zone. Even your mother tells you that there are girls they want to have sex with and then girls that they'll marry.

Within focus group gatherings, women voiced much more unqualified optimism about the changing quality of gender relations within the work environment than within intimate relationships. They reported getting along

better with men in the workplace because of the more formal structure as opposed to the "too intense" confines of domestic life. An argument in favour of separate but complementary spheres within the public realm is prevalent among the words of women. They are aware of the structural barriers that still exist to exclude full participation of females in the public sphere, but report that they manage to work around them, strongly referencing the role of the managed female body in realizing that end.

Sexual dimorphism, whereby the female body is conspicuous by its smaller size and lower body weight, is acknowledged by all women as an adaptive mechanism to women's participation in the public realm. Consistent with feminist thought, women know that a narrowly defined, socially dictated female form exists, and they have also noted that it is profoundly incompatible with the bodily attributes that most women possess. Smallness is considered the most non-threatening way of invading "male space", an observation Naomi Wolf made famous in her widely read work, The Beauty Myth, (1990). An interesting illustration of an intergenerational perspective on the beauty myth is offered by Dierdre, a thirty-four year old single mother with three children who has taken a variety of women's studies courses at university:

It would be nice if women could just accept what they are; if they could realize that they're never going to look like the cover of Vogue or have lives like that. Those who keep trying and trying will be the most unhappy with themselves. Even knowing about the futility of it is not enough. For example, my daughter comes

home from school and tells me that there's this really skinny boy in her class and people tease him all the time about being really skinny. At the same time there's this really skinny girl in her class and no one ever teases her about it. My daughter says to me, "that's the beauty myth, isn't it Mum?" So she knows all about that but then she's the first one in front of the mirror putting on her make-up, shaving her legs, the whole trip. I understand she's rewarded for that, so knowing about the beauty myth is not enough. Maybe when you grow up and become more mature you let some of that go, but at the age of thirteen, at that point it's not enough to know about it.

In keeping with Wolf's thesis, small body size, childlike enthusiasm, attention to dress, etc. are not viewed by women as impediments to being taken seriously as colleagues, but rather as impression management devices that function to decrease the tension surrounding gender relations in the workplace. Several women alluded to a 'healthy' presence of (hetero)sexual tension in the work environment, such that attractions between co-workers are seen as contributing to, rather than detracting from collegiality and productivity.

Women are aware that their body conformation has social consequences, and they will embellish dimorphism to their personal advantage when conditions allow them to do so. They report that violation of these tenets, however, especially those surrounding body weight, work against women. Evidently, more than any other single bodily attribute, excessive female body weight is the most powerful negative feature informing men's perception of woman as threatening.

#### 7.4 Why Body Work?

Living under social conditions such as these, the reasons to work the body may appear obvious. We might ask, though, how it is that women themselves grant primacy to self-care and self-improvement in their selection of the body as 'the' site of attention. Clara explains it this way:

I think for women there's a component about trying to improve their lives by feeling better physically and by looking more attractive to others, but it's very cultural. In other cultures, you might accomplish the same thing by memorizing poetry.

Women seek out and acknowledge the immediate physiological benefits derived from the implementation of a physical exercise regimen which include heightened body awareness, increased muscular strength and improved aerobic capacity. These improvements not only result in the ability to work with greater physical stamina, but also in the capacity to think more clearly, to play more sincerely and to reflect more deeply. Clara continues:

When you have a good relationship with your body, you like the way you look and feel and it can't help but impact on your relationship with the opposite sex, your job, all of it. And, all the things in your life that you don't like have less impact on you because you, yourself, feel good about who you are, feel good about getting up in the morning. You do everything better and deal with everything better. When you're 'body-happy' you project an aura, you carry yourself better, you think more clearly, and it affects how you feel on the inside.

Other women confirmed the "body happy" state of which Clara speaks, and some emphasized the extreme psychological strengthening effects of

particular forms of body work such as Tae Kwon Do and kick boxing.<sup>71</sup> According to the women, these activities not only train the body in techniques of self-defense, but also in the purposeful experience of pain so as to gain some kind of lasting mastery over it. One martial art enthusiast explains:

Well, especially in Tae Kwon Do you develop a higher pain threshold...I mean, I was covered in bruises from my wrist down to my elbows from blocking punches. I'd been kicked many times and eventually got used to it as part of the sport. After the first few times the punches and kicks don't have the same impact. I think it makes you feel in yourself a certain strength...that you can deal with that contact to protect yourself and you can tolerate the pain that's involved in doing that. You're not some fragile, little thing anymore. Because your body gets stronger, your inner emotional self becomes stronger too. That's why I think doing sports or just activities like the martial arts or whatever can be so beneficial to women, physically and emotionally...to their sense of self so they can walk out in public, out at night without feeling so much fear. It's even apparent in your body language that you're stronger.

Similar comments alluding to the connection between working the body and building psychological strength were voiced especially by women who had a history of involvement in competitive sport. Development of physical power and mental toughness is viewed as a major pay-off from pushing the body to

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<sup>71</sup>. Women's reported experiences of competitive sport and/or martial arts were explored and consequently included in this study as forms of body work. While arguably these activities fall outside the realm of work imposed on the body strictly to alter its conformation, they are acknowledged by participants as important "fat-burning" opportunities similar in this respect to aerobic fitness classes. Tae Kwon Do is a modern Korean martial art, similar to karate, which translated from Korean means the art of hand and foot fighting. Kick-boxing is a form of boxing characterized by the delivery of blows with the feet as well as with gloved fists (Guttmann, 1991:261).

its limits and from learning to work through pain. These sentiments were expressed most vociferously by women who had backgrounds in highly competitive, organized sports such as ski racing, running and swimming. According to these women, it is not coincidental that these sporting activities emphasize the singular performance of the lone participant as opposed to the more collective effort which characterizes team sports. Psychological-emotional strength is apparently best developed within sporting contexts that isolate and thereby highlight the individual performance of the body and rank the achievement vis-a-vis the performance of competitors. Now forty-two years old and still very physically active, Patricia reflects on her past as a competitive swimmer for her university team as an undergraduate:

In terms of the hard training for swimming, I remember the physical and mental cleansing effect it had. You know, it's like how you feel when you have a duty and you feel like a good person for having done it? With the training, I felt good about setting a goal and then going out and accomplishing it. It's sort of a nonsensical concept to many people, but others do share it.

When I was on the swim team, I was one of the ones that would finish the workout no matter what. Some would drift off during the last few laps but a few of us would always make a point of finishing. The thing about competitive swimming is that you're either bored and not in pain or in pain and not bored. Swimming hard is quite painful and you can't think....the only way you can deal with it is to not think. You can't think about lap 4 when doing lap 3, for example...you think about exactly where you are and no more. You just do.

Swimming is an analogy for life...I try to live the way I swim. Sort of like all the practice you do to get ready for a meet, but when the meet comes, you're only in the water for about 3 minutes. The practice is what's important...doing things in little

bits and working toward the big competition. For people who do sports, that ability to focus is a real asset. You deal with acute pain better, for example, because you can just close your mind off. You have better control...you can endure more.

The appreciation of a competitive atmosphere as one that produces psychologically bolstering effects is a sentiment not shared by all women however. In fact, the selection of the physical activity to be pursued clearly underscores both the prime motives women have for working the body and the social conditions under which they feel most secure in doing so. Charmaine explains:

When it comes to this whole topic you have to distinguish between the body as a perfectible thing and the project of body work, and the sheer enjoyment of the physicality of movement, like the experience of your body when you dance or ski. My involvement in physical activity was never about body work; it was simply about enjoying the activity for its own sake, the social aspect, the post-exertion feelings in your body - those endorphins. I think that's very different from body work that's devoted to looking a certain way, presenting yourself a certain way...that's an external kind of motivation.

Ski racing gave me more of a sense of power, of myself as a player in the world as a woman....much more so than if I had been into aerobics or body building. I mean, exploring the strength of your body, the limits of it, is an intellectual thing too - delving into the body as an investigation. Not that I wasn't obsessive in a similar way to women who do body work for appearance sake; when you train for ski racing you do have to be obsessive about it. But it's toward a different sort of end. Even the judgement at the end is not a subjective one - either you trained and were able to pull off a good race or you didn't...the success of your training isn't as dependent on the subjective judgements of others like it is when you body sculpt or diet to look a certain way. When you race you produce something...nobody can dispute the results.



As representative of the sentiments expressed by the ex-athletes interviewed in this research study, Charmaine relates to the body in an instrumental way that she and the others liken to "a male style". Julia adds, "Men have known about the sheer pleasure of physicality for a long time; it's only recently that women have clued into that because for so long they were taught to be fragile and dainty. They never really got to know about what their bodies could do and how much of a sensual pleasure it can be."

But, as reported by other women, all forms of body work contribute to "body happiness" to varying degrees, regardless of their more traditional association with femininity. Confirming to some extent Charmaine's analysis, women who engage in fitness regimens which focus on sculpting particular parts of the body, either through weight training and/or cross training, do tend to more closely subscribe to particular aesthetic standards for the female body and also generally eschew competition. They attach greater value than do the athletes to developing 'proper' proportions of the body, and consequently, view the body as a potentially modifiable object ultimately admired for its overall attractive appearance. Such women are strongly motivated to engage in body work to correct self-perceived physical flaws, such as Angela, for example, who has recently begun to increase weight training specifically targeted toward the upper body:

I'm doing a lot of heavier lifting now for my upper body

because I realized that you can really make your hips look smaller by having bigger shoulders. The proportion is the main thing...an overall, balanced look...that's what I want.

While the number of women interviewed in this study who exclusively weight trained was small (3), this activity and preference for aerobic fitness classes (10) more typically characterized those who were primarily interested in ultimately correcting figure flaws, and who also wanted to deliberately avoid physical activities that involved direct competition with others in their performance. Weight training (or body sculpting) and aerobics classes were preferred because the individual could progress at their own pace and performance is not measured by others, unless one deliberately chooses to compete in formal events that involve the assessments of appointed judges.

These women say they were all initially motivated to engage in these forms of physical exercise in the hope of reducing and reshaping particular dimensions of the body that were seen as too big, such as hips, stomach and/or legs. But as a corrective to Charmaine's view, they report they were delighted by the experience of their bodies in the midst of participation, not unlike the reports of "body happiness" offered by the ex-athletes. Further, all but two of the thirteen women describe how they have, with age, become much less concerned with what they describe as their physical flaws. In relating their history of exercise, they emphasize how they began through time

to more thoroughly enjoy the "body happiness" benefits of regular physical activity. While they are still aware that their bodies are not perfect by media standards, they are generally pleased with the return on their investment in body work. In the words of Langdon, "I just finally figured that to get the body I want, I would have to do too much extra work...what I do now is enough to control my weight for the most part and that's good enough."

In addition to numerous comments referencing the bolstering effects of body work to physical and psychological capacities in general, women over the age of thirty, in particular, voice the belief that physical exercise slows down the ageing process. One participant reported that regular exercise in the form of yoga and brisk walking had already "added years to her life" and also had immediately enhanced its day-to-day quality through increased energy and mental alertness. Now in her early fifties, Julia reports that, "when I start my workout I can be feeling like I'm eighty-five....but by the time I'm finished I'm feeling like a seventeen year old".

Exercise regimens understandably have a strong association with wellness generally, but in cases where women are coping with chronic ailments<sup>72</sup>, all such conditions are acknowledged as better managed through the implementation of regular physical exercise and proper nutrition.

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<sup>72</sup>. Chronic ailments included such conditions as diabetes mellitus (1), heart disease (2), depressive disorder (2), chronic fatigue syndrome (1), bone density loss (1), arthritis (3), and asthma (2).

Interestingly, in almost all cases of diagnosed chronic disease, the connection between the mind and body is underscored in a way similar to that of amateur athletes, both in the accounts of the experience of the disorder itself, and in the benefits derived from working the body. In other words, tending the body ultimately functions for most of these women suffering from chronic disease, as a direct way to control physical symptoms, and in so doing, also offers a way to assuage the psychological stress associated with the illness, especially the duress surrounding the knowledge that the illness has rendered the body inherently flawed. Exercise regimens are thus seen as a potential means through which ownership and control of a recalcitrant body can be restored to the embodied subject, even if only temporarily.

Not unlike the accounts of the bodily changes associated with puberty, women who suffer from chronic disease feel that the body is out of control, that it is imposing a set of sensations on the embodied subject not in keeping with the subject's self-definition. Women employ words and terms such as "betrayal", "body saying 'no' to me", "engaged in battle with my body", and the like, thus referencing the body as an 'unfriendly other'.

Imposed exercise regimens are attempts to discipline a recalcitrant body in order to bring it back into line with the integrated whole that women believe they are, and these pursuits are understood as undertaken not in the pursuit of physical perfection, but rather normalcy as defined by able-bodied. Internalizing

but reworking the notion that a woman 'is' her body, these women view identity or core self as originating from a self-reflective mind, partly acknowledged as the product of social expectations surrounding what an able bodied woman should be, and simultaneously understood and greatly valued as "what I really am inside".

Physical exercise as a vehicle through which self-mastery, able-bodiedness, and ultimately wholeness is pursued, realizes varying degrees of success or failure, depending on the nature and extent of the chronic disorder. Roberta, for example, credits regular aerobic exercise and corrective footwear with the successful management of an inherited and potentially crippling form of arthritis. She points out that by keeping physically active, she reduces the level of chronic pain, and is better able to cope with ongoing discomfort. The act of doing something physical makes her psychologically stronger. She proudly points out that while her grandmother had been "quite laid up" with this inherited form of arthritis at her age, Roberta has so far escaped this fate.

Chronic diseases such as diabetes mellitus, heart disease, and osteoporosis are reported as mostly controllable through the implementation of regular exercise and diet regimes, in conjunction with conventional drug therapies. Other reported conditions, however, such as depressive disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome are not so summarily dealt with through body work. These two conditions will be examined in closer detail, as they differ in several

key respects from the aforementioned illnesses.

### 7.5 Bodymind Work

While the symptomology and proposed etiology of depressive disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome include aspects of both mind and body, causation is given primarily to the mind by conventional medicine.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, the afore-mentioned chronic disease categories (diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, arthritis) are currently conceptualized by the biomedical realm as originating from, and manifest in, the body from the neck down.

Further, and not unconnected to this site related difference, the two outlier cases provide some interesting insights into illness categories that are currently under much medical scrutiny and therefore the source of notable controversy. Fated to deal on an ongoing basis with disorders not so easily understood or successfully treated by the biomedical realm and highly stigmatized owing to their association with the mind, women feel they must ultimately deal with these disorders by themselves.

The perceived connection between the mind and body is well illustrated through the account of Clark, a thirty-two year old woman, who has suffered from chronic depressive disorder since the age of sixteen:

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<sup>73</sup>. During the final revision phase of this dissertation, the Canadian Medical Association declared that chronic fatigue syndrome should be considered a disease of organic (bodily) rather than psychological/emotional (mental) origin.

My adolescence was the shits really. I started seeing a psychiatrist and he labelled it an identity crisis, but now from what I know it was clinical depression. The whole thing started again during university...I just became really anxious, I was having panic attacks and weeping uncontrollably...the crying thing was really traumatic for me. I was crying all the time, I was nauseous and had constant diarrhea.

Then I did a really smart thing and got hooked up with a good counsellor. That second episode took about a year and a half to get over but I'm very proud of myself - now I eat properly, I make myself go out. It's all about fending it (chronic depression) off and that's where the exercise comes in. The body is really important in that whole equation because when I wake up and don't know what to do, when I get anxious, antsy, obsessed with something, exercising really calms me down. Sometimes the objective is just trying to get through the next twenty-four hours so if I keep busy, especially physically, I find I get through and I feel better, my mind stops racing, I slow down.

Clark describes how for some time she saw herself as "defective", "disabled", as "mentally ill" and how that was detrimental to her sense of herself and her capabilities. Since getting involved in body work in the form of weight training, yoga and tai chi, and "exploring the mind-body connection", she has come to see the labelling she gets from the medical point of view as very Western, as "just one model". She says,

I've now come to see all physical problems as a result of what's going on up there, in part (she points to her head). I mean, we are composed of one body...the Western view is very dichotomized; the body and mind are very opposed quite often in that way of thinking. For me and my problem, the physical exercise is all about getting the control back, taking responsibility for my own health, for what I think and what I say.

When you've been labelled as depressed, schizophrenic, bipolar or whatever, it can be an escape. The labels can make you feel like you have a rock to hide under, that you're not responsible,

but I know you have to get on with it and have a productive life. The thing about doing physical exercise for me is that even if I'm feeling bad emotionally or mentally, I can still feel good physically while that's going on and I think that it eventually impacts on my brain chemistry or something. All I know is that it helps me.

Clark references the mind-body connection in a way different from those suffering from more strictly bodily located forms of chronic disease. They locate the cause of the problem in the region from the neck down, and use body work to both delimit the physical symptoms, and secondarily, to handle the psychological/emotional stress associated with feeling the body is inherently flawed and out of control. In contrast, Clark works the body to distract the mind from the symptoms located primarily in the head, and to bring about what she believes are chemical changes to the brain, the identified source or primary site of the disease.

To Clark, the adoption of body work in the form of regular physical exercise has been nothing short of a godsend in this respect. While she also acknowledges and values the degree to which working the body impacts on her appearance and general energy levels, its overwhelming merit lies in its usefulness in controlling the panic that comes over her when the mental/emotional symptoms of depression are discerned.

The belief in this direct connection between the mind and body, more specifically the idea voiced by Clark that disturbances in the mind are responsible for distress felt in the body, is also held by Charmaine, a forty-two



year old woman who has suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome for the past four years. Charmaine is clearly a high achiever, as evidenced by her successful participation in competitive ski racing as a young adult (ranked second in her home province), her brown belt ranking in Tai Kwon Do, and the fact that she completed an advanced graduate degree whilst pursuing a busy career in a medically related field. Given the controversial nature of her illness and her familiarity with the social research process, Charmaine has accessed and reflected on an impressive body of literature on the subject of chronic fatigue syndrome, and has sought out and sampled therapeutic treatments from both mainstream and alternative medicine in an attempt to get well.

Now in the fifth year of the disease, Charmaine only sporadically visits Club Big on a day-pass basis<sup>74</sup> to work out with light weights (body sculpting) and to use the sauna. She has much to say on the subject of her experience of chronic fatigue syndrome and the contrasting approaches of Western biomedicine with the competing alternative model of the body and its connection to the mind:

I've always tried to intellectualize this illness I'm experiencing. The only difference is that you can't remove yourself from it in quite the same way as you can intellectualize

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<sup>74</sup>. As opposed to monthly or yearly memberships, use of Club Big on a per day basis costs from \$5. to \$10., the cheaper rate available for those who hold memberships with other recognized clubs and/or partake of specified health promotion services (shop at listed whole food stores, vitamin/nutrient outlets, etc.).

other things...I mean, it's always there every day, that ill body.

At the same time, I can intellectualize the way other people deal with it...the way they respond...what they say to me, their misconceptions, the attitudes of health care workers. I can see different sides of it; from a feeling state, both emotional and physical and from the intellectual side.

It's very interesting because of its mind/body components. Massage therapists are very holistic in their approach for example, in the sense of attending to your emotional and spiritual state as best they can. They can't counsel you regarding your emotional health but will often refer you to someone...they've all seemed very attentive to the need to address that, the relationship between the mind and the body....they view healing in a much broader sense than regular practitioners...to alternative health providers, illness is also of the mind, the spirit and emotions.

Having been so physically and intellectually active through her entire life, Charmaine has had a hard time dealing with the physical and mental enervation resulting from her illness. To make matters worse, she is literally unable, at times, to participate in the discourse of fitness at any level. She explains:

When spring approaches every year, I consider how my body's looking. I tend to gain weight around my stomach area and I know that it can be really apparent in something like a bathing suit. I know this view is culturally constructed but I can't seem to escape it...For a while I'll tolerate the flab but eventually, I'll swing the other way. I'll think, "I've got to do something about this!" This creates a real paradox though, because with my illness I can't increase my activity level to help lose a few pounds and I can't decrease my eating to any extent either. That's one thing I find so hard to deal with because in the discourse of fitness the message is that you can't be fit unless you do these things. There doesn't seem to be a message for people like me at all. I'm just shocked by the disjunction between my life and the lives of others...the norm...it's that dominant discourse that you get subjected to as a disabled person.

Charmaine is particularly troubled by the body work component in the

"dominant discourse". She describes how, even now in the fifth year of her disease, she quickly flips channels on the television if she comes across "aerobics shows" because it depicts something she couldn't possibly do with her body and because of "that depressed feeling I get or that hopeless feeling...after all, I am my body and it's rejecting me". At the same time, and no doubt owing to the fact that she has been marginalized by her experience of chronic fatigue syndrome, Charmaine has reached some interesting conclusions about the dominant discourse:

While all this has a really negative and bizarre aspect, I know that if I ever get healthy again I'd never be so vigorous about fitness activities ever again because I got to see how superficial and meaningless it all is. When you've been seriously ill you've faced the limits of your physical body, even death itself. You cut to the chase when it comes to your values, what you want to accomplish and what matters to you about your time on earth. You learn things when you've been ill, like the importance of friends...a lot of the body stuff falls by the wayside. You know you can't do it but after a while you come to know that it's not an essential part of you.

I miss the physicality of it though - the strength and vigour associated with it...I look forward to being able to ski again, to enjoy the sensuous, dance-like character of it and the meditative quality of being in nature and in the quiet. But, I'll always be limited to the degree in which I can or would pursue it.

While Charmaine accepts the fact that her ski racing days are over and feels that seriously debilitating chronic illness has brought with it some new insights into the superficiality of body work, she continues to draw from it in an interesting way. She says:

I know that when I go out these days, as infrequently as it is, I get more dressed up, fuss more with my make-up, partly because I don't get the chance to go out very often, but also because I'm trying to forget that I'm ill. I'm trying to deceive myself and others into believing that I'm not ill. I don't feel so deviant then; I'm pretending to be normal. Feminine arts help me do that...you can look more alive, less weak and pale - the way the illness makes you feel and look. I guess there are still pockets of time when you can still feel good in your body, even if it's only through self-deception.

As the most physically debilitated among the chronic disease sufferers, Charmaine maintains a firm sense of core self. The constancy of self-hood in her account is virtually similar to those of the other women interviewed, but all the more significant in its steadfast expression considering her five year battle with chronic fatigue syndrome. While she states that "I am my body and I feel that it is rejecting me", the manner in which she employs the "feminine arts" and the degree to which she has adapted to her illness by finding other means through which to express her will and sensuality, points to the refusal of this firm sense of self to wither away. Charmaine explains:

The body is definitely problematic because so much of what you feel about yourself is contingent on it. Being so physical, this illness really has been a nightmare come true. For someone who related so directly with bodily things it's especially difficult. There are similarities, though, for example the degree to which you become aware of the body through aches and pains and your dealing with it...is somewhat similar to the way you used to listen to it as an athlete. It's just a much more frustrating experience because the objective is to just get well, not to train to perform with precision.

The sensuality part of it is just transferred to other things. I've developed a real love of theatre and classical music...I've

become more well-rounded as person. The sensuality is still there, it's just that I have to access it in a different way. I feel music in my body, viscerally. Creatively you find ways to enjoy your senses, your bodily being.

The interesting thing is that in the face of that you feel somewhat freed from the body too...being an athlete you feel really defined by your body. Through the course of this illness, I've acquired a more multifaceted identity. I'm still very much the person I always was but just have to be more creative in the ways I express what's inside. With this kind of illness you learn to live in spite of the limitations of your body because you have no choice...otherwise, you would kill yourself.

The self aspired to by all of the women interviewed is one that lives peacefully in increasing knowledge of its 'true' self. Order in the midst of chaos must be vigilantly cultivated to create the atmosphere conducive to knowing the self, and the immediacy of the body renders it a logical vehicle toward this end. Alive and well in the accounts of women is the Enlightenment notion of the principled, reflective and maturing self, realizing its destiny with the guiding hand of its possessor. The 'self' is seen as the consummate expression of private property over which one must keep watch against forces which would temporarily distract it from its journey toward self-realization.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has been mostly about discerning women's self-reported motivations for involvement in various forms of body work. They justify their commitment as primarily expressive of voluntaristic action taken to care for the

physical-psychological aspects of the self, and only secondarily about investment in the body as a form of cultural capital. Women's motives strongly reference the need to maintain and improve physical and emotional health, especially through the alleviation of the many stresses perceived to be originating from the external environment.

Fitness regimens are clearly thought of as virtuous ways to self-nurture and as proactive measures taken which highlight the individual's action of assuming responsibility for their own health. While women make a distinction between motives involving self-care and those surrounding the body as social currency<sup>75</sup>, the difference as clear-cut is questionable. Body improvement regimens are but one of many creative vehicles through which one can practice self-care. The efficacy of them surely revolves around their capacity to accomplish several, interrelated and laudable goals simultaneously: the self-reflective subject is highlighted as the actor, claiming time from a busy schedule to care for the self, and self-indulgence takes the form of a leisure activity that is ultimately 'productive' in bringing forth the socially sanctioned, well-managed female body.

For women coping with chronic disease, body work is identified as the vehicle through which the 'flawed' body can be temporarily restored to 'able'

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<sup>75</sup>. 'Self' referenced motivations for working the body that draw more directly from Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in the public realm are developed in greater detail in the following chapter.

status and/or the sufferer can assuage the physical/psychological stress of living with imperfection and chronic pain. Also, as a group, chronic disease sufferers voice a general lack of faith in biomedicine, such that body work constitutes a unilateral action taken to manage one's own medical condition. The dominant discourse of fitness is found to preclude women with more profound experiences of disability, however, as was illustrated in the case of chronic fatigue syndrome.

Motivations for working the body which involved aspects of the female form as a kind of cultural capital spontaneously evoked comments on the character and quality of (hetero)sexual relationships. These heterosexual women clearly express attraction/repulsion toward the rituals that surround pair bonding, and maintain that, ultimately, much more psychological-emotional satisfaction is had through sustained relationships with females.

Queries concerning the existence of physical archetypes which might guide the performance of body work revealed some interesting findings that grant primacy to the phenomenology of embodied recollections. In other words, when women were asked to describe the physical idealizations to which they aspire, they overwhelmingly drew from their own life histories rather than from media generated imagery. Further, because femaleness itself was considered foundational and consequently irrevocable, suggestions that depictions of strength and muscularity ape male archetypes were not endorsed as such by

women. Women saw themselves as having learned valuable lessons from 'male' physical styles (exploring the physical parameters of strength and endurance, working through pain) but as operationalizing, experiencing and applying these new-found capacities in uniquely 'female' ways.

All women, to varying degrees, acknowledge the acquisition of enhanced physical and psychological strength as a direct consequence of imposed exercise regimens, and some proceed to link this increased vitality to the male experience of embodiment. They do not, however, view the adoption of exercise regimens, even those associated with weight training or forms of martial arts, as attempts to emulate male bodily experience or the male physical form. Rather, accounts from women interviewed strongly confirm an embellished form of 'female' power in understandings of the physical and psychological strengthening effects of such fitness regimens. It is to this subject that we turn in the next chapter.



Chapter VIII:The Ascetic/Hedonist Dialectic

As has been argued throughout the two preceding chapters, women's discourses surrounding body work and the female body tend to privilege self-control and self-actualization. Female embodiment is generally understood by women as an experience that requires a continual exercise of self-discipline so as to impose order and assert agency in an otherwise disorderly life, to cope with limits imposed by their bodies, and only secondarily, to conform to societal norms.

Subjecting the body to routine and discipline through body work was also seen, in the preceding chapter, as symbolic of attempting to take control of one's life. Order is imposed on chaotic lives through regimentation of the body and the successfully managed physical form is considered formidable, literally "fit for battle" in the struggle to gain mastery over the constituents elements of contemporary life that threaten to throw the self off balance. Women are thus strongly motivated to work toward self-control and mastery, readily identifying the body as the starting point in that quest.

As the previous chapter has also shown, women are prompted to perform body work through motivational messages which emphasize the efficacy of 'self' care and the promotion of 'productive' forms of leisure.

Taking responsibility for one's own health constitutes a commendable goal and engaging in recreational pursuits which have measurable pay-offs to participants is considered time well spent. In the social realm the well-managed female form is received most positively; women confirm through their personal histories that even strangers, regardless of gender, are friendlier, and generally more attracted to them when they are successfully managing their bodies through exercise and diet regimens than when they are not.

Images of self-mastery and self-control aside, women allude to other meanings surrounding physical femaleness that valorize the body's special knowledge, and its pleasurable and hedonistic dimensions. This chapter explores these notions of female physical prowess and attending capacities for sensual gratification in the construction and maintenance of female identity. Women's involvement in and perceptions of the project of femininity vis-a-vis offerings from the beauty industry will be examined to acknowledge and ultimately reconcile discourses of self-control and denial with more hedonistic dimensions of these practices.

In this chapter we will examine how women understand the role of the beauty/fitness industry in luring or courting their participation in the discourse of femininity, for prescriptive offerings from the marketplace not only promise to tame the recalcitrant female form, but also to promote the celebration of its 'natural' beauty. Through these preparations designed to indulge sensual/sexual

dimensions, the discourse of femininity speaks to feelings of pleasure, enjoyment, and a sense of accomplishment associated with demonstrated expertise in the practice of the feminine arts.

We address these issues, first by examining responses to the research question: do women acknowledge playing an active role in the construction of femininity vis-a-vis commercial media offerings, and, if so, to what extent do they draw from 'self'-referenced values in their understanding of the process of constructing femininity? The views women offered on the subjects of ageing and sexuality will be discussed here as well, as these topics spontaneously arose within focus group gatherings as salient dimensions of the ongoing project of femininity. Taken together, the subjects raised in this chapter also offer some suggestive evidence of the ways women absorb, counter, resist or ignore the discourses of self-adoration and hedonistic consumption that surround the female body.

### 8.1 The Project of Femininity

Consumer spending habits in the form of the tending of the body with commercial preparations, as well as presenting the female body as attractive and as sexually desirable, were explored in the two focus group gatherings. An interesting connection between presenting the body through the feminine arts and the performance of body work emerged in this discussion. Women were

unanimous in their assertion that much less time is spent preparing the body with external preparations when the body is regularly exercised and muscles are feeling "tight". Women spoke about wearing less make-up, "feeling just great in just old jeans and t-shirt", not worrying so much about their hair, and the like, when the body inside the make-up and clothing is feeling fit.<sup>76</sup>

Opinion was also unanimous in its condemnation of the profit motive that guides the beauty industry, and much affront was taken over how media advertising images and messages increasingly seek to create an insecurity about the smells, shapes and hairiness of the female body. New and improved beauty products are received with more than a little suspicion, and due to the cost of such products and the work involved in using them, they are not adopted over the long term lightly. They may be sampled to assess the degree to which the product delivers on the pleasure inducing or beauty creating promise, but women report that they almost always revert back to familiar and affordable products.

Focus group participants were appalled at the cost of clothing and make-up, rightly pointing out that men largely seem to escape this kind of exploitation. Standards are such that males have fewer or no style changes

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<sup>76</sup>. Several women who had previously worn make-up abandoned their daily use of it after beginning to work out regularly. They claimed their skin tone improved so dramatically, especially in response to aerobic exercise, that lipstick and blush were no longer necessary. In short, the work out "naturally" provided what the make-up had accomplished through "artificial" means.

from season to season and have to do little more than present themselves as clean. This inequity was extended to the feminine hygiene products associated with menstruation, as women viewed the array of offerings designed for this purpose as "ridiculous in number", "expensive" and "really stupid". Television and magazine portrayals of women in advertisements for such products were seen as "comical", "condescending to women". While all women felt that the development over the last decade of more open discussion about menstruation was positive, some felt that media depictions promoting feminine hygiene products rendered the menstruating female body "dirty", "unclean", and portrayed menstruation as a bodily state one must go to extremes to hide.

While women were dubious of the ever-changing and infinite number of products offered to manage female hygiene and those designed to augment its 'natural' beauty, there was no question that they comprehended the preparation and presentation of the body as very important to notions of identity. Developing a personal style or "look" in a way compatible with individual identity is viewed as an important vehicle for self-expression and as a moral duty to the 'true' self. Women go so far as to say they have or ultimately would quit jobs over what they had to wear, referring specifically to the "ugly", mandatory polyester uniform of the food service industry, and the "demeaning" name-tag that characterizes many low paying jobs.

When women talk about their "look" many interesting and complex

interrelationships are referenced, and, not unlike connections to physical archetypes, childhood and early adulthood memories form the cornerstone of the manner in which they like to adorn the body to comply with this perceived, 'true' self. The style which time and time again reasserts itself after brief, impulsive indulgences in the "latest look" is the one felt to be in keeping with and expressive of what women perceive is their individual identity.

Lessons taught by mothers are salient to persisting guidelines for dressing and usually directly reference both propriety and practicality. A comment made by one woman (focus group #2) was that while white dresses were very attractive and "fresh looking" in store windows, they were to be avoided altogether owing to their tendency "to show every speck of dirt", a fashion tip imparted to her by her mother. The impracticality of the colour white met with total consensus within the discussion group, as was the assertion that, by and large, the style adopted in adolescence was, with only mild modification, the manner in which women dressed for the rest of their lives.

Carrington comments:

I could go out and dye my hair red and wear wild clothes to make myself over as a different person, but it would probably last one day. I don't know, your look is a combination of things - cultural, your upbringing. I stand on my feet all day, I'm climbing up and down on ladders moving pictures. I wear jeans, sneakers and my hair is pulled back. It fits the kind of life I have, but then I have a friend who does the same job and she dresses in high heels and leopard skin tights...it's an individual thing.

I might dye my hair a shade lighter when I feel dumpy and

frumpy, but basically, it's 'what you see is what you get'. I pretty well dress the same way I did when I was a teenager. Every now and then I'll flip through one of those magazines that show about fifty ways to tie a scarf and I'll be intrigued for about five seconds...then I'll just say to myself, "oh yeah....fuck this!".

When women did partake of feminine products in an attempt to bolster the ego, to look good for a particular occasion, and/or to deliberately catch the attention of males, they did so knowingly and insistent of the fact that they were drawing from beauty industry offerings for their own purposes, rather than being manipulated by them. Referring to these occasions as "playful", women maintained a steadfast notion of being in the driver's seat, as using products in an instrumental fashion. While they reported feelings of increased power and confidence when they were coiffed and colour coordinated, accounts gave primacy to the illusory properties of the beauty practices, and the social occasions that prompted them. The body thus altered through clothing and make-up was emphasized as a temporary, playful fiction rather than as a reliable vehicle through which one might ultimately transform or transcend a flagging or insecure self.

Younger, single women strongly related to the idea of creating a temporary fantasy through clothing, hair and make-up, the ultimate goal of which is to conjure up an image of an inaccessible sexual female being, the seductress-as-spectacle. Knowingly creating desire in others while remaining detached,

"standoffish" or inaccessible are essential components of this construction, if it is to achieve the intended effect. The goal is to tease, to engage and keep male attention purposefully at a distance so that one may then 'play' with the power of female sexual allure. Two young women, Franca and Susan share their personal insights on this subject:

Susan: Let's talk about your red vinyl dress to explain this to everyone. I've heard a few men talk about this red vinyl dress and you in it. They talk about it as being sexy in an aggressive way, in a dangerous way.

Franca: Yeah, I go for the whole look. I take care with it..I wear those black fishnet stockings and a Greek fisherman's cap with it. It looks very impressive, very bold. I feel good in it...it's funny, I get all kinds of attention and I know the attention is completely meaningless. I'm playing with them. I'm the one in control. There's no way a guy coming onto me when I'm dressed like that will get anywhere with me. And, I'm approached by a lot of women who want to talk about the red vinyl dress. I don't know, I guess I like the feeling of being invulnerable, being the object of fascination but having it just be playful.

Susan: Yeah, I know what you mean - you just know you look good, you glow, and you don't want to get involved, you just want to be there, be seen. You don't want some altered life experience or anything, you just want to be there untouched. For me to feel that way it has to involve cleavage, something low-cut.

Franca: Yeah...I even dance differently...I can get wild, sticking my bum out and dancing erotically...it's just fun, playful.

Susan: The really appealing thing about it is that it really shakes things up. You don't have to be serious or predictable..it really takes you out of the grind. From time



to time, when you look back on your life you think, well, I used to do this or that, but now, at this age, I do this. Well, I think there's no reason why you can't just do it all...whatever you feel like doing.

Younger women voiced a clear distinction between the idea of looking attractive and looking sexy that older women did not. Attractiveness to single women under the age of thirty was considered a "soft", "feminine" and "sweet" way to look and one that invited responsiveness and closeness from others, whereas sexiness was described as "menacing" and "threatening". Older women did not make this distinction between attractiveness and sexiness, mainly because to them, being and feeling sexy was not so much the result of a conscious attempt to construct it, but rather the consequence of a spontaneous, shared moment with another person. It was more of an internal state linked to the idea of being attractive to someone, making a personal connection with them, and therefore tended to be devoid of menacing or threatening qualities. As Collette explains:

For me, sexy comes from inside. I mean, when you're walking down the street and just smiling...a smile can be incredibly sexy. You just radiate it and men feel really attracted by it. Sexual feelings come about for me from some kind of contact, usually a fleeting kind of contact that's out of context, unexpected.

Understandably, this contrast in understandings is, in part, related to whether a woman is currently in a relationship with a man, or is single and

actively looking for a male partner, or single and not actively looking.<sup>77</sup> While in a relationship, women generally agreed that their sexuality is expressed more appropriately within the private context of the dyad; it is tailored, sometimes to their disappointment, to the expectations of the individual male and, as one focus group participant put it, other than in that context, it's "not out there at all". Nonetheless, a few younger women in long-term relationships insisted that aspects of their sexuality/attractiveness are always available for expression within public settings. Sue explains:

For me, there's always a dimension of the sexual in my dealings with men, especially the men I work with. As I've gotten older, I feel more comfortable being female and I'm not afraid to show it. Except for the occasional asshole, it works out really well. I find men are usually more comfortable and friendly if you act feminine anyway, and, sometimes you can get further if you don't leave any doubt that you're a woman who's comfortable with that. A little flirting never hurts anyone.

Other focus group participants vehemently opposed the idea that flirtations in the workplace are adaptive strategies. They countered that women who too blatantly declare their sexuality lose credibility as competent workers and colleagues. The general consensus was that management of one's sexuality in the workplace was best realized through understatement and

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<sup>77</sup>. Among the heterosexual women who were interviewed individually and/or who participated in group discussion, no woman who was currently single was unreceptive to the idea of engaging in a relationship with a suitable male partner.

"closed" interactive styles rather than through embellishments of femininity. This topic summarily opened up some lively discussion on the topic of women's power through sex and the relevance of ageing to this equation. It is to this complex of related issues that we now turn.

## 8.2 The Ageing Female Body

Women were not at all happy about the physical changes associated with ageing, but were more disturbed by signs of deteriorating physical capacity such as reduced energy levels, aching and stiff joints, and the like, rather than diminished physical beauty. Though only a relative few were greatly troubled by the appearance of wrinkles to the face and the greying of hair, only two women claimed they were not at all affected by these signs of the ageing body. They shared the pragmatic sentiment that because bodily changes brought about by ageing were inescapable, any worry, money or effort devoted to delaying the inevitable was wasteful, a poor return on investment. In the words of Maggie (focus group #1), "Life has so many real problems, why concern yourself with something you really can't do anything about?"

In addition to an acknowledgement of the physical markers and the diminished capacities that come with age, a few women regarded these indicators as semi-regular, unwelcome reminders of the passage of time and the harsh reality of mortality. Jessica, now in her forty-third year, talks about her

experience of this:

Around the age of thirty-five I really started to notice it. I would look in the mirror every now and then and it would hit me, "my God I'm looking so old"...and I really started to notice how I couldn't do the things I used to, like stay up really late drinking and then work o.k. the next day. The whole thing made me really aware of the fact that time is limited...I have to do the things in my life I've always wanted to do because now I can see that time really does fly by. When I was in my twenties I could never relate to that, but now I can.

Beyond revelations concerning the worrisome nature of physical changes and the apparent exponential rate at which time passes, women otherwise experienced ageing as significantly empowering. Middle age for women clearly manifests itself in enhanced social leverage within the public sphere, and, not coincidentally, in greater self-esteem. Within the context of focus group discussions even young women readily alluded to this reality, referring to how their mothers and older women friends dramatically "hit their stride" with the arrival of middle age. The tyrannical hold of the scrutinized, reproductive female body wanes as a woman begins to age discernably, and the transition can initially be met with some ambivalence. Charmaine sums this up very well:

The positive part of ageing is that you can walk down the street at this age and not be harassed, but for a while I thought, "gee, I guess I don't look very good because I'm not getting any comments made out in public from men on the street!" I did notice that was missing at about the age of thirty or thirty-five. Generally though, I find it positive...it gives me more strength, more dignity...you have more status, you're freed of your body that way by being allowed to do more and have people listen to you.

While the arrival of grey hair and a more matronly figure can be a direct assault on a woman's vanity, it ultimately translates into greater authority within the public realm. Middle aged women confirmed the sentiment voiced by Gloria Steinem (1981) and other second wave feminist writers that with advancing years a woman becomes invisible, that is, un-noticeable by virtue of her non-reproductive body.<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, it is in the midst of being unseen that she consequently stands a better chance of being heard. Some women are taken seriously for the first time in their lives during this stage of being out-of-sight.

Middle age is also reported to improve collegial relations in the workplace, especially with male co-workers, and this is coupled with a reduction in feelings of competition with other women. In this latter respect, women draw heavily from sociobiological imagery in their understandings of the female rivalry they observe among younger women and which they, themselves, experienced in their youth. Emily offers:

I feel sorry for younger women who feel they have to prance around wiggling their ass because they want to attract some man to have kids. It's biology, that biological clock thing. As

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<sup>78</sup>. One participant (focus group #1) used the example of Miss Marple, the fictional British crime detective, to talk about the power that accrues to women with age. Apparently on one occasion, the elderly Miss Marple herself makes the observation that owing to her age she has a competitive edge over other private detectives; she can more successfully eavesdrop on conversations and move about more freely because she is old and female - she is of interest to no one.

you get older you become much more knowledgeable about yourself - what you want, what you don't want. Also, if you've had the chance to be alone for a while, you realize that it's not so bad; you're not willing to just settle for anything in a man because you're not afraid of being alone. I remember when I was young and so and so would have a boyfriend and all the girls envied the one with the boyfriend...I remember that sort of thing being very important. I'm glad I've moved beyond that.

Young, nubile women are cast as perpetual competitors for the attention of high status males, an assessment not denied by younger women themselves. Women under the age of thirty acknowledged a comparative and contingent quality to their relationships with female peers, but insisted that genuine friendship and emotional maturity can temper it. As women age, however, they find that their female cohort becomes primary, members become less individually striving, and thus are more likely to offer support to and express genuine interest in the welfare of their female peers.

Irrespective of the competition among young females allegedly driven by a reproductive imperative, all women interviewed for this research study considered other females their primary source of reliable emotional support. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, they underscore the authenticity and constancy of such relationships, especially with sisters and mothers, and with female friends (some of whom they have maintained since childhood or adolescence). It is noteworthy that the same depth of mutual understanding and acceptance is not extended to relationships with males, even within the

confines of long-term, live-in, and apparently loving, heterosexual relationships.

The subject of female heterosexuality through the life course elicited some other interesting comments.<sup>79</sup> Ironically, while competition among young females for male attention is understood by all as expressing a conscious or unconscious reproductive imperative, advancing age for some women marks an undeniable transition toward more sexually assertive behaviour. Beginning for some in their early thirties, several women discerned a dramatic change in their attitude toward anonymous males in social settings, a modification they recount as predatory and consumptive in character. This is best described as "turning the table" on the male gaze.

As a subject raised during one focus group gathering, the four women who acknowledged this change in sexual attitude explained the transition in their public demeanour as a manifestation of "the personal is political". They recalled the sexual objectification they endured in their youth and take pleasure from "taking the power back" by objectifying males in a similar way. Drawing in this manner from their own embodied histories of "feeling like I was being hunted", these four women derive satisfaction from more boldly claiming public space and returning the predatory male gaze. Several spoke at some length about how they sometimes consciously look directly at men in public places,

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<sup>79</sup>. This discussion is confined to heterosexual experience due to the fact that focus group gatherings were comprised entirely of women who identified their sexual orientation as exclusively heterosexual.

hold their gazes longer than is socially acceptable and openly scrutinize male bodies. One woman (focus group #1) referred to this as "recreational hunting", explaining that she delighted in objectifying the male body because as a younger woman she was constantly averting her eyes, walking with her head down, aware that she was being "sized up" in an evaluative and consumptive way by men. She explains:

I feel more powerful as I age and I like not being assessed all the time as a woman by men on the street. I feel that I'm taken more seriously...it's kind of like you're finally allowed to be a person. You can be sexual when you want to be, but can blend in when you choose to.

The interesting thing is that I consume men now whereas I felt consumed by them when I was younger. When I'm out in public and I feel like doing it, I look at men quite like the way they must look at women in that consumptive, sexual way. I guess at my age (42 years), especially young men don't really see me and it gives me a chance to observe them. My sense of myself when I was younger was that I just kept my head down all the time and didn't want to invite their attention. Now I look at whatever I want to and when the guy being looked at glances at me, catches me at it, I just smile and keep looking. I feel it's fair...I'm finally doing what they've done to me all along.

Ageing consequently offers some women bold, new behavioural styles in the gendered realm of the public sphere, and they report enhanced self-worth from what they perceive as increased social authority. In the face of diminishing aesthetic value and declining physical capabilities, most women over the age of forty are delighted to discover that with advancing age comes freedom from the male gaze. Translating for some into social invisibility this



'freedom' can constitute a liberation from most appearance constraints, a license to be a bit eccentric, and an opportunity to not have to account for many behaviours.

Rather than culminating in a diminished self regard for failing to attract male attention, middle age provides the opportunity to play with gender stereotypes. For example, relegated to the role of matron at the age of sixty-two, and thus for all intents and purposes a non-player in the sexual realm, one woman explained that she is sometimes "outrageously flirtatious" with young men and delights in the confusion and social discomfort it generates.

The magnitude of freedom from the sexualized female body that comes with age was also well illustrated by responses to questions posed during individual interviews. Queried about perceived levels of power as young versus older women, it is very telling that no woman, regardless of current age, saw herself as less powerful than when she was younger, and in fact, all middle aged women regarded the older female body as acting in tandem with other factors to enhance power.<sup>80</sup> Further, while the idea of coping with the symptoms of menopause was not met with enthusiasm, the eventual freedom from reproduction that menopause offered was very welcome indeed. In short,

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<sup>80</sup>. This topic was pursued within the context of individual interviews in the following manner: "Some writers suggest that a woman is at the absolute pinnacle of her power while she is young and in her physical prime. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? How does it relate to your own experience of ageing and feelings of power?"

women report that they know themselves better, they know the world better, and they feel more at the helm with the arrival of middle age than they did when they were younger.

### 8.3 The 'Special' Knowledge

It is the foundational, material quality of the female body that informs the imagery used by women to describe and explain a kind of power that is quintessentially female in character. Menstruation as unequivocally linked to creative and nurturant potentials (pregnancy, child-birth, and lactation<sup>81</sup>) as well as the inevitable physical changes associated with the ageing process, are acknowledged by women as giving rise to a special kind of 'female' knowledge. As women understand it, these physical capacities create the potential for an intuitive knowledge about such things as the workings of the natural world, the character of the universe (in the form of an "order/chaos" dualism) and conversely, the rightful place of human beings in the cosmological order of things. By default, males are seen as not directly privy to this realm; they are rendered inferior by virtue of a biology holding no potential for an 'inherent' knowledge of 'natural' things.

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<sup>81</sup>. Bodily experiences of pregnancy, child-birth and lactation were not deliberately elicited during the research component of this project, but rather occasionally (and spontaneously) arose from the accounts of 'true' femaleness as offered by women in individual interviews.

Interestingly, in the accounts of this unique 'female' knowledge, some women reference with equal emphasis the scrutiny and practices of the body associated with the ongoing project of femininity in this on-the-ground, corporeal version of standpoint theory.<sup>82</sup> Sue comments:

I sometimes wonder if because women have from the very start become more aware of their bodies, they really have an advantage over men. I mean we shave our legs, we wax our bikini line, we become so very aware of every contour of our bodies that way. We menstruate and give birth to children. We just seem to be more familiar with our bodies in every way and are more caring and forgiving of them than men. Some men seem mystified that they have to cut their toenails; they don't seem aware of such things, or their body exists more remotely from who they are.

The vast majority of women interviewed for this study maintained the superiority of women over men on the basis of the "reality" of female bodily capacities and processes, ultimately linking them to greater capacity for self-knowledge and nurturance, empathy and spiritual development.<sup>83</sup> Radical

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<sup>82</sup>. Standpoint knowledge or epistemology argues that the point of view of a group is shaped by their social positioning and material activities. It also involves the claim that less powerful members of a society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than the powerful because their perspective is not limited by the need to justify or protect a privileged position (Anderson, 1996:479).

<sup>83</sup>. As has been previously argued in Chapter 7, these women draw from liberal feminist understandings of human agency, self-actualization and the self-reflective mind. Attraction to self-improvement is considered gender-less in this regard, as an expression of the human penchant to set worthy goals and work toward their accomplishment in the quest to fully actualize individual potentials. But the capacity to feel and express a range of emotion, to empathize with the plight of others and to act morally in the world is felt to be derived in large

feminist assertions abound in the accounts of women speaking on the subject of quintessential female power, as evidenced by this comment from Clara:

The whole thing about women and their bodies, I think, is that they are more in touch with them because of reproduction - their menstrual cycle and the rest. Talking to guys, there seems to be many things they don't even notice about their own bodies. I remember once when I was swimming, the coach was this young guy training to be a doctor and he prodded me because I was being sluggish that day. I turned around and said, "hey, will you get off my case, I'm ovulating today". I just thought he should know that women get signals from their bodies and that I wasn't being lazy, but I was incapable that day, at 6 o'clock in the morning, of doing any better.

#### 8.4 Conclusion

Women in this study perceive of themselves as critical and knowledgeable consumers, not only of fitness regimens, but of related health and beauty products more generally. They grant primacy to their choice-making capacities and to female creativity, especially in their 'playful' attempts at embellishing femininity. They sample from the vast and changeable array of commercial offerings on the body but with restraint, dubious of the pseudo-

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measure from deep reflection on the anatomical/physiological experiences of female embodiment. As a version of radical feminist standpoint theory, this view holds that women who have sufficiently reflected on these experiences are superior to all men.

scientific claims delivered through media hype which belie the profit motive of the beauty industry. Whether in the form of the latest anti-ageing skin treatments or the changeability of fashions from one season to the next, women view these offerings with scepticism.

Secure in their femaleness as ordained by nature, women report that they mostly participate in the "feminine arts" voluntarily and only sporadically. They know that "new looks" do not really remake them, and that "make-overs" are temporary, illusory, hedonistic and experimental. Femaleness itself is perceived as an irrevocable, self-evident truth, understood as nature's inscription, not only on the physical body but on the psyche as well. The gendered body is thus talked about as having an a priori nature, not as an ideological construct construed from anatomical sex.

Sentiments surrounding the ageing female body, especially its diminished capacity as a form of sexual currency, are discerned as mostly positive, because eventually empowering for women. Finally liberated from the burden of appearance constraints, most middle aged women reported improved self-esteem, and according to some, a marked boldness in their claiming of social space and appreciation of the male body.

In sum, the discourse of the body voiced by women in this chapter continues to suggest an undeniable endorsement of female corporeality and its connection to identity as stable and steadfast, and as emanating primarily from

nature. Reproductive processes and potentialities are thought to bring about a unique wisdom or special insight that indelibly marks female identity. Most surprising is the inclusion, on the part of several women, of various body management practices in contributing to this special female knowledge. This complex of elements suggests a basis for understanding embodied female subjectivity in contemporary Western culture, a topic taken up in greater detail in the following, concluding chapter.

Chapter IXConclusion

As was shown in Chapters II and III, the human body as a distinct area of social inquiry is characterized by an evolving complex of competing and complementary intellectual orientations. Corporeality has assumed a central place in contemporary social theorizing, no doubt instigated, in large measure, by the now extreme elaboration of individual bodies as powerful symbols in Western popular culture. There has been an acknowledgement that many social problems occurring on a global scale are incurred by the need to regulate bodies, and that it is the human form which provides the raw material from which notions of race, ethnicity and sexual difference are fashioned. The revival of social evolutionary theory in the form of sociobiology<sup>84</sup> alone speaks to the degree to which the materiality of the body, this time in the form of the

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<sup>84</sup>. The term sociobiology refers to "the application of biological principles to explain the social activities of all social animals, including human beings " (Giddens 1991:40). This perspective is thereby able to offer a set of most controversial claims about all aspects of culture, including gender roles, issues of sexuality, acts of deviance, and much more. Taken from the work of American entomologist E.O. Wilson (1975, 1978) sociobiology posits that much of human social activity is rooted in human genetics, and that much of human behaviour is, in fact, instinctual. Extended to the concept of gender, sociobiologists argue that females are 'naturally' more nurturing than males owing to their differential investment in reproductive activity:

information housed in DNA, is mobilized in an effort to understand human social interaction.

While far from offering the last word on the experience of female corporeality in contemporary North American culture, this research exercise draws selectively from varied literatures on the body to locate some important features of its meaning for women toward the end of twentieth century. From the review of literature and through the accounts of the thirty-four women interviewed, this undertaking examines 'self' located feelings of attraction/repulsion toward the performance of physical fitness regimens.

In this final chapter, major findings are discussed vis-a-vis the literature profiled in Chapters II and III, and directions for further study are considered. Following a summary of findings, central themes are developed in more detail. Among the themes considered are: the discourse of fitness, concepts of selfhood and identity as extensions of the ideology of self-actualization, the emergence of holism, and the body in foundational perspective. Views on these issues, discerned from women's narratives, are linked to the emergence of New Age philosophy in North America, and to the attending preponderance of alternative health practices associated with this perspective. Having a special appeal to ageing Baby Boomers and New Age youth, these alternative views grant primacy to the female body as imbued with special, instinctual knowledge.



### 9.1 Summation of Findings

Women's narratives strongly confirm the unstable, stressful features of the social structural conditions that shape their lives. Findings support the degree to which the body as a potent symbol derives from this discerned instability, and accounts from women reveal how the physical form comes to assume this importance by virtue of its malleability against the secure backdrop of essential femaleness. What is described in this submission as a beauty/health/fitness complex locates female participation as immersed in the project of holistic self-actualization, where the body becomes the conduit to experiences of spiritual transcendence.

As an exercise in interpretive sociology, this undertaking points to some common and not so common themes concerning body work and its connection to identity within a group of women ranging in age, body type, health status, social class background and level of participation and commitment to fitness pursuits. The shortcomings of this research study are many, and most significant among them is the fact that it represents only the experiences of White, almost exclusively heterosexual women. Further study should take the form of comparing these accounts with those offered by women from visible minorities, alternative sexualities, and varying material means. Diversity in the form of male experience by these social dimensions would provide even more far reaching insights, for male and female bodies exist in constant dialogue

wherever gender exists, and it would seem that is everywhere.

Taken together, the narratives of the thirty-four women interviewed for this study strongly contest a social constructivist view of the body, prioritizing instead the material foundation of the body in imbuing knowledge of corporeality. We can summarize the social/biological contexts within which their belief in physical foundationalism, and attending experiences of a phenomenological body occurs, underscoring the degree to which the material female body is met at certain life junctures with ambivalence by many women.

As accounts of the body elicited from women indicate, alienation from the body begins and reaches its pinnacle during adolescence and early adulthood. It is during this time that the body is discerned as foundationally 'other', as acting in spite of the wishes of the subject. Every woman describes having to come to terms with the kind of body she 'is' as told to her by 'nature', and she proceeds, within guidelines strongly influenced by social class, to calculate the costs/benefits of imposing regimens on the body to contain or subvert nature's plans. It is the physical maturation of the body that nature imposes and which marks the socially symbolic transition toward becoming irrevocably coded as female.

The body is perceived as having a foundational reality in this equation, such that the physical changes associated with puberty are inflicted by the body itself, apart from the individual's own volition. The possibility that the

foundational or material reality of the sexually maturing female body requires social interpretation of a certain character to give it meaning holds little sway with the pubescent female.

In the personal life histories of the women interviewed and the vicarious re-enactments of puberty they experience while rearing daughters, the adolescent period is described, especially by women from the middle class, as one overwhelmingly shaped by the requirement that young women do something about their bodies. Arguably because current aesthetic/health idealizations of the female form are extreme depictions of the well-managed body, pubescent females understandably feel anxiety over the possibility that their bodies might be, by nature, out of control. Such a fate can prove to be a source of extreme alienation from the body as was described by Susan before 'correcting' her body through breast reduction surgery.

The message socially created and reinforced is that women are in very large measure the consequence of their bodily attributes. The degree to which a young woman internalizes the idea that she 'is' her body and works from this premise, will be reflected in the extent to which she will both institute body work practices and derive satisfaction from prolonged commitment as an accomplishment of self-mastery. Acquiescence to this definition of 'self as body' takes the form of investing in and through the body to achieve self control because, according to this thinking, body work itself functions to restore

agency.

With increased life experience, however, women come to reconcile themselves to the reality of the body through the resolution of a number of conflicts. First, one must realize that a 'true' body exists over and above the 'social' body and that to claim the agency one intuitively requires bonding or integrating the self with the 'true' body. Again, it is through discerned foundational or material qualities that this claiming of the body as holistically wedded to the self can take place. Ageing and the onset of chronic disease in particular are experiences that are received as proof that nature delivers the fatal blow to the perfectible body through physical deterioration and eventual death. What had once been a drive toward taming nature is transformed into the requirement that one surrender to its infinite wisdom to learn special, transcendent knowledge about the self. Value attached to the instructive capacity of nature is fuelled by the belief that access to this knowledge brings peace, now.

Women's accounts of their bodies strongly endorse Bordo's (1989) models for discourse and convincingly illustrate how they are inextricably linked. Women's route to self-actualization is discerned by them as involving significant corporeal elements, thus corresponding in large measure to the Western mind/body dualism where the female is metaphorically linked to the physical pole. Discourse referencing the imposition of order on chaos through

the bodily route reflects a female gendered adaptation to the preoccupation with mastery and control that Bordo claims characterizes highly individualized populations within contemporary industrialized societies.

Because overweight and obesity are highly stigmatized in Western society, it should not surprise us that most women, young or old, do not want to be fat or even slightly overweight. This is not to argue, however, that all women feel this way or that adopting physical fitness regimens should necessarily be considered only oppressive or blind adherence to dominant discourse around the female body. What is fascinating about the perceived pleasureable components of body work reported by women is not the fact that they coexist with or even cancel out the painful features but rather that, collectively, these experiences of the overly scrutinized body are seen by many as a route to a higher realm of spirituality.

Interestingly, it is under the rubric of essentialism that some women even identify the "feminine arts" as techniques which help access and further develop the special knowledge that is distinctly female. As self-selected practices which embellish and extend the intimate knowledge about the essential quality of the female body, all such regimens involving minute attention to and care for the body can be potentially viewed this way.

Synnott (1989, 1993) and Shiller (1993) rightly point out, that whereas in previous times and places techniques of the body had been communally

conceived, constant in social meaning through time, and collectively understood, a tracing of Western renderings since the Industrial Revolution reveals increasing complexity and changeability in presentations of the body. Sizes and shapes of bodies may now speak of subcultural contestations of the dominant model, as in the case of Heroin Chic or pictorial promotions for the Association for Fat Acceptance (Shiller, 1993:64). Idealized images also tend to be changeable from season to season, a feature which no doubt commends them from the point of view of the many industries that profit from them.

As pointed out by Lyon (1994) and others who speak on the subject of the social conditions which prevail under postmodernity, self-expression in the current era requires a knowledgeable participation in consumer capitalism to accurately project what is being said about the self at any point in time. To properly display the changeable and multiple cultural markers which deliver the intended, socially located meaning about the self being expressed, one must have current knowledge and considerable disposable income.

Presentation of the physical form under postmodernity can be understood as a potent vehicle for multiple self-expression owing to its malleability, a property of physical bodies confirmed by the many ways in which the flesh has been preened throughout human history. As a form of secular asceticism characterizing the high modern or postmodern period, body work is promoted as a set of practices that predictably underscores and elaborates on the

sovereignty of the individual. The dominant messages of fitness discourse examined in this qualitative research study reflect a variant of secular asceticism not manifesting itself in stoic silence (like the Post-Reformation sort of which Weber writes) but rather in vociferous announcements of virtue and confessional accounts of vice. Talk about the perfectibility of the body abounds in the rhetoric of health and fitness, and its link to "the good life" is one that is deservedly achieved through hard physical labour.

A noteworthy finding of this research study is that even in the midst of competing physical forms and seasonal variations in body fashion, the women maintain a strongly perceived foundational basis to the female form which grows in intensity with advancing age. The body is internalized as an irrevocable reality inscribed by nature, and as such, exists in constancy even in the midst of great change and instability. The female form is identified as the location of a 'true, unchangeable self', in a way most proximate and constant and not at all compromised or fractured by the changeability of idealized body types or the array of adornments offered by the beauty industry.

The ultimate goal in the pursuit of fitness for these women is not the perfect body-of-the-moment. Whereas deploying the fit body as cultural capital is an acceptable by-product of pursuing fitness and might have even been for some the initial motivation for working the body, this is not the ultimate aim of those who continue to pursue forms of body work, however sporadically. Best

expressed as a dream or a vision, the goal is to achieve, with the aid of the fit body as the stabilizing, foundational force, harmony and balance, a union of the constituent elements seen to comprise the human being - the wedding of mind, body and spirit.

## 9.2 The Discourse of Fitness

From the literature reviewed in Chapter III, we see that Second Wave feminist scholarship has understandably favoured a social constructivist perspective to explain the origin and persistence of gender categories and roles rather than those founded on notions of biological determinism. Indeed, this dissertation is guided by the supposition that humans make their social world and that conversely, that they can unmake aspects of it in response to the need or the sincere desire to do so.

Accounts from women interviewed for this research, however, strongly confirm the prevalence of aspects of biological determinism in their current understandings of the experience of inhabiting a female body. The highly 'personalized' discursive mechanisms through which women locate the meaning of the female body draw heavily from essentialist notions of sex and gender, to the degree that women comfortably adopt, reject, and/or alter formal discourse, knowledgeably pursuing self-improvement against a secure backdrop of a 'true' female body. Before examining the 'true' body as understood by



women in more detail, fitness/beauty/health discourse will be considered, first as a mechanism through which the quest for the passive power associated with traditional femininity is made palatable to 'liberated' women, and secondly, as a means of instilling a hyper-vigilant awareness of one's health status.

In Chapter II, the history of women and exercise and sport showed that medical pronouncements on the optimal levels of physical activity for women had, for some time, been premised on the idea of female invalidism. Although since the early twentieth century feminists have steadily challenged this idea, female athleticism is still viewed by many as conflicting with the conventional ethos of femininity, pointing to the dynamic tension between traditional prescriptions for femininity and the image presented by active, strong, women engaged in competitive sport. Findings from this study confirm those of Bolin (1992) and Markula (1995) that contemporary fitness discourse emphasizes, albeit circuitously, the physical appearance of women rather than their capacity to improve and enjoy physical performance per se. It is physical beauty that apparently continues to mark dominant concepts of femininity.

Within the dominant discourse of fitness, the idea that we have the bodies we deserve is a morally laden truism, which in one fell swoop, motivates the neophyte, congratulates the committed, and chastises the shirker. Virtually all women interviewed for this study acknowledge the disciplined body as a potent form of cultural capital, a belief they find is re-affirmed daily in private

and public realms. For a woman seeking upward social mobility, possessing a well managed female form greatly enhances one's chance of achieving success in every way. A disciplined body belies working class roots; by embodying the middle class aesthetic standard, upwardly aspiring women are imbued with the middle class values requisite for climbing the social ladder.

Women interviewed confirm that, in suggesting middle class membership, the well managed female body apparently does proclaim an attendant number of attitudes and intentions on behalf of the subject. They report that males, especially middle class professionals, are discernably more comfortable, more communicative, and generally more accepting of women whose bodies are slim and well-toned.<sup>85</sup> Disciplined female bodies uphold the fundamental rule of gender dimorphism that human males are bigger, and in so doing, apparently imbue the possessor with benevolent intentions. Constituting a social advantage that is identified as such by women, it is no surprise that this lever is further mobilized through the application of the feminine arts (clothing, hair style, body posture, and the like) to exaggerate dimorphism. If a woman has a mind to do so, and some do, this form of passive power can provide for her an edge in the public realm.

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<sup>85</sup>. This finding confirms the now conventional wisdom among writers/researchers on the female body in Western culture that excessive weight on the female frame evokes fear on the part of males, especially among those from the middle class (Bordo, 1989a; Spitzack, 1990; Wolf, 1993).

Findings from this research also strongly support those of Carole Spitzack (1990) and my own previous work conducted at the M.A. level which interpret contemporary diet and fitness regimens as appealing to women mostly because they grant primacy to investment in one's own body with a power it had until recently been denied. This connection to the rhetoric of women's liberation in formal fitness discourse takes precedence over the more subtle promotion of regimens as mercenary attempts to access the passive power associated with female physical beauty.

Promoting body work as the 'liberated' woman's rejection of traditional femininity rather than as conformity to contemporary beauty standards is facilitated by the quasi-medical approach taken by fitness clubs. Employing terminology drawn from the study of human anatomy and kinesiology (for the classification of muscle groups and descriptions of physical movement), the authority of science reinforces both the vocabulary and the technology through which regulated bodies are worked and interpreted by fitness discourse. In the quest for fitness, hyper-awareness of the physical sensations associated with the performance of body work is cultivated in the individual by quantifying it on an ongoing basis. With the help of the gadgetry of exercise technology, the 'talk' which surrounds the project of physical self-improvement emphasizes its technical rather than aesthetic features. These findings, revealed in large measure from the participant observation component of this research

undertaking, confirm those of Emily Martin's much cited work, The Woman in the Body (1987). While the women interviewed for this study generally preferred to see their bodies as existing in combination with mind and spirit, they could without any hesitation, also speak of it strictly in terms of its measurable depths, its spatial configurations, and its transformation toward fitness by discernible increments of progress.

With the application of devices that calculate and monitor, the 'lay' practitioner is clearly demarcated from the 'pro' on a daily basis, for the journey to fitness is chronicled through a record keeping system clearly modelled after biomedical practice. Sex, age, weight, height, health history, and the like, inform the 'individualized' nature of fitness programmes and vigilant record-keeping informs the talk. In true modernist tradition, progress is tracked by numbers: resting versus training heart rate, numbers of repetitions and sets performed in the various stages of programmes, calculations of oxygen uptake versus anaerobic respiration, and so on. Within this setting, the metaphor of the body as machine is fully operative, and, similar to Martin's findings (1987; 1990), the imagery describing bodily processes references production, efficiency, and economy of energy and movement.

Foucault's (1979) idea of a seductive, erotic charge emanating from confessions of virtue and vice is discerned in the ideological components of the quasi-medical discourse of fitness. Frequent reporting of virtue and vice

personalizes and further medicalizes the individual's journey toward fitness, and renders the participant completely accountable for their own fitness status. Incremental achievements and failings alike are duly recorded, and the participant becomes alerted to the subtle nuances of their physical/moral strengths and weaknesses such that they can speak on them at great length.

In addition to this scrupulous self-scrutiny is an equally discerning consumer appetite promoted by fitness discourse. To be credible in the 'talk' and 'look' of fitness requires not only working knowledge of how to read and track the body's progress employing this medicalized method, but one must also develop informed opinions on how fitness products measure up as well. A judicious application of the technical knowledge gained about one's body ultimately guides the body worker in choosing customized fitness gear.<sup>86</sup> Verbal exchanges that take place at the gym not uncommonly take the form of consumer reports on fitness equipment - the best shoes for various activities, the most breathable but water resistant fabrics in cross-training and running wear, the most comfortable, full-support, sports bras, and the like.

Especially pertinent to the construction of individual identity, fitness discourse promotes the project of self-improvement through the body as a

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<sup>86</sup>. 'Proper' shoes, for example, are without question the single most important and usually the most expensive investment the individual makes on a semi-regular basis. Nike versus Reebok comparisons invariably become reduced to "what my feet like best".

wilful, totally self-motivated, efficacious act. To invest in the body in this manner makes sense given the degree to which fitness accrues benefit to the subject as the result of rational calculation.<sup>87</sup> Coupled with the moral duty to consciously adopt practices of the body to promote good health, beauty and health become conflated, regardless of incompatible elements contained within each category. For example, while fitness discourse draws heavily from its association with proactive measures taken to ensure health maintenance and to postpone the physical signs of ageing, it is not uncommon for some fitness facilities to provide tanning beds among the services offered to clients.<sup>88</sup>

Notwithstanding this problematic conflation of health/beauty/fitness practices, the formal discourse serves to bolster a sense of self-possession in

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<sup>87</sup>. The impression management potential of the slim and fit female body has been much written about, to the extent that explanations for the alarming frequency of eating disorders among young women easily moves away from those that strictly invoke pathology and genetic predisposition, to explanations which posit over-conformity to rationally calculated eating and purging practices (Szekely, 1992). Just as plausible as biomedical explanations for these behaviours are those like Szekely's, which consider them expressions of over-conformity to the "art of femininity", as investment in the body adopted to the extreme.

<sup>88</sup>. For example, one woman described herself as a "sun worshipper", explaining that she uses the tanning bed in the early spring prior to direct exposure to the summer sun because, "I really like the look of a tan...it makes me look thinner and healthier". Also, it is not uncommon for female fitness instructors to be cigarette smokers, a habit they understandably don't openly indulge in around the gym setting. While physical addiction to nicotine is cited as a personal failing or moral weakness and all express the desire to "kick the habit" owing to the deleterious health consequences, smoking is acknowledged and valued as an appetite suppressant.

women, mostly by highlighting liberal values that are gender neutral. By taking responsibility for their own health, individuals are acting in a manner befitting mature, adult persons; subjects commendably illustrate their independence by assuming increasing responsibility for their own well-being. Secondly, and related to this idea, subjects acknowledge that the physical regimen has been undertaken voluntarily. As such the commitment constitutes a contract made with the self that is continually reinforced through the motivational messages of fitness discourse. As coercive or compulsory as the messages of the fitness movement might sometimes seem, participants to the last woman view their involvement as acts of pure self-volition. Lastly, incremental changes which indicate progress are 'felt' directly in the body and are positively reinforced by the comments/attitudes of others. Women report feeling a bolstered self-confidence such that they come to assertively claim public space without apology, and begin to "strut".

### 9.3 The 'True' Body

While the messages in dominant discourse are persuasive, to suggest that women swallow them whole would be far from the truth. The individual is heard and affirmed in the selective manner in which women draw from fitness imagery, sometimes internalizing it, sometimes altering it, or sometimes totally ignoring it. Findings of this study show how women differentially draw

from fitness discourse at different points in their lives depending on their social class, age, inherited body type and health status.

Susceptibility to the dominant messages of fitness discourse depends on the judgements women make on an ongoing basis about the time, money and effort expended on body work. Physical regimens must deliver on the promise of improved health/beauty and enhanced capacity to labour in other contexts. Guilt-free moments of self-absorption spent on body work are seen as such by women when they yield a discernibly good return. Because the female gender role involves devotion to the care of others, work-outs for women can constitute a way to escape responsibilities without feeling guilty. They are deserving, productive opportunities for self-care.

Women report that fitness discourse resonates with them more at some times than others, and that the decision to listen to fitness messages or to tune them out is primarily a reflection of individual choice making capacities. Foucault, in the postmodernist tradition, responds that the individual is constructed from this picking and choosing of elements, so that intuitions of a discriminating self are the mere special effects of social structural forces. For the women interviewed, however, the embodied self is one indelibly marked by nature, not discourse. It is the sexed a priori element inscribed on the body that they hold to be 'true' and potentially capable of yielding transcendent knowledge to the possessor.



This essentialist rendering coexists with the mechanistic, quantifiable perspective promoted by medicalized fitness discourse though it is one also comprised of a higher, spiritual dimension. Located in the here-and-now, the 'true' body is simultaneously a vehicle through which earthly ends can be achieved and spiritual peace may be had. Harmony or peace is attainable through spiritual transcendence of a mystical sort which unites the mind, body and spirit in "holistic" harmony. As in other forms of mysticism, the objective is to transcend the everyday-world, to reach an other-worldly state on earth through altered consciousness. In this journey toward self-actualization, the body at peace is an integral component of the realm of purity characterized by harmonious balance, an integration of mind, body and spirit.

This dissertation therefore strongly confirms the role of body work for women as one deeply embedded in the discourse of female self-actualization. Going beyond the notion of beauty as merely technical, however, findings from this study inextricably link the aesthetically pleasing body with the psychologically healthy mind and the spiritually fulfilled self-conscious subject. This constitutes a unique expression of secular humanism, expressed in the words of one woman as, "heaven's here on earth".<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>. Women's accounts reference other-worldly issues such as speculation concerning life after death, belief in reincarnation, and so on, but they overwhelmingly emphasize the spiritual status of the present tense, the idea of attaining salvation 'now'.

Earth-based spirituality and woman's privileged standpoint by virtue of the female body's association with nature were found to be very prevalent in this form of alternative imagery promoted by the women interviewed. As a consequence, the physical form within the context of the performance of body work appears to exist on two separate planes. It is an object of scrutiny outside of the subject, broken down, analyzable, and machine-like. Simultaneously, however, it is perceived as a vital, inextricably linked part of a whole, existing in dynamic relationship with the mind and spirit. Physical health status therefore impacts on psychological health and vice versa, spiritual equanimity manifests itself in physical beauty, and the capacities of the body for movement and sensory experience are conduits to transcendental moments felt in the spirit. The body therefore sometimes exerts itself as 'other', and sometimes one wilfully places self outside of the body to scrutinize it and direct its physical capacities. The body is 'home', however, when it resides in harmony with mind and spirit, when it assumes its rightful place as directed by the wilful subject.

Coexisting with this metaphysical element of female physicality is confirmation of the observation made by Glassner (1990) and Turner (1992) that as open-ended, malleable, and 'plastic' the contemporary body might be in discourse on fitness, on-the-ground assessments of bodies still strongly reference the modernist preoccupation with measurability, quantification and

containment. Women account for their bodies through an assessment process guided by discrete, measurable increments to determine their standing in the pursuit of health, beauty, and fitness. Psychic angst and emotional stress as indicators of lack of harmony are assessed through such things as the number of colds and flus suffered, daily ebbs and flows of energy, resting pulse rate, and blood pressure. Progress in the pursuit of holism is documented by the increasing numbers of exercise repetitions completed, pounds of weight moved, miles ran or skied, laps of the pool. Modernist methods are thus employed to guide and discern what is an open-ended physical and metaphysical project of self-improvement through the body.

This alternative philosophy of the body is one within which health takes on a new meaning. The embodied subject becomes the prime assessor of its status rather than the health professional, for it is the individual who takes ultimate responsibility for physical/metaphysical well-being. Self possession through the body is achieved through the knowledgeable selection and committed institution of lifestyle practices which foster health and by the rejection of practices that compromise it. Health is thus viewed as the consummate goal in the evolutionary journey toward self-actualization and it takes the form of 'holistic harmony' realized through the optimal balancing or integration of mind, body and spirit.

The accounts of women interviewed for this dissertation present a

version of 'nature' quite unlike that promoted in modernist renderings. Nature had been seen as something to tame and conquer in modern times, its adversarial quality especially pronounced in the rugged individualist ideology characterizing early North American settlement. Rosalind Coward (1990) points out that whereas early settlers had assumed a highly confrontational relationship with nature owing to the cruelties of harsh climate and the daunting task of forging the new frontier, the new health ethic promotes the idea of nature, and especially those bodily practices and products which are promoted as 'natural', as benign and innocent, reminiscent of an idyllic time before deforestation, environmental pollution and urban decay. Whereas nature had been seen previously as "red in tooth and claw", the new health ethic regards nature as untainted by the human hand and therefore the conduit to purity and balance (Coward, 1990:34).

The value attached to nature as something pure and therefore desirable is evidenced by the frequency which women talk about "wanting to achieve a natural look", "buying body hygiene products because they have only natural ingredients", and "preferring running rather than using exercise machines because it's more natural". Becoming an informed consumer of health care products and practices according to this new health ethic thus requires the continual resolution of the tension between all manner of "man-made" versus

"natural" products.<sup>90</sup>

The physically invasive technologies associated with biomedicine are consequently considered of the "man-made" sort according to new health ethic adherents, so conventional medical procedures and substances are approached with some scepticism. Implicit in the accounts offered by some women is the suggestion that the biomedical realm may, in fact, often do more harm than good when treating human bodies. Attending this is the charge that the assumed mind/body split from which the biomedical realm begins to theorize its subject matter is a faulty one. It is felt that problems of the body cannot be dealt with as strictly physical in causation, nor can psychic pain be regarded as strictly so.

Women emphasized their dissatisfaction with the strictly mechanical approach of their allopathic general practitioners and specialists, a sentiment particularly prevalent among women suffering from chronic illness. They reported that, as a consequence, they have increasingly taken on more responsibility for treating their own health problems and/or have sought help from alternative health practitioners. The prevailing feeling among the majority of women interviewed was that there is a strong reluctance to over-stress the

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<sup>90</sup>. The idea of a "natural product" is actually impossible according to this new definition of "natural" as something untouched by the human hand or altered by humans in any way. Coward (1990) points out that strictly applying this new definition of "natural" which characterizes the new health ethic, "natural product" becomes, in fact, an oxymoron.

body any further, unless it is undertaken in the name of fitness.

That beauty and body work have become bound with this health ethic expands the meaning of these concepts beyond that which is about achieving an aesthetically pleasing, surface effect accomplished through technical means. This transition in meaning is discernible, for example, through women's accounts of the experience of 'feeling beautiful'. Without exception, all women reported that at various junctures or moments in their lives they have felt beautiful. Recollections emphasize the requirement that integration among all life elements must exist to achieve beauty that is 'truly' felt from within and radiated outward. Comments describing this state include, in a variety of combinations, such things as, "feeling reduced stress", "knowing I have an exercised and well nourished body", "possessing a playfully engaged social body", "presenting a body that consumes social interaction but is not, in turn, consumed by it", "just knowing that I have all my shit together", "something that I feel from the inside - out".

Findings from this study suggest that the discursive parameters within which the contemporary North American female body is conceptualized are reflective of a beauty/health/fitness triplex (Lupton:1996) which signals the arrival of an alternative philosophy of the body. Among the female membership of New Age youth and the ageing Baby Boomer population, this new philosophy represents a decidedly female-centred epistemology, a corporeal

version of standpoint theory, in that special knowledge is felt to be inherent in the female form and further strengthened by regimens imposed upon the body.

#### 9.4 Holism

That some women would conflate the bodily knowledge gained from practices associated with the project of femininity (removing body hair, painting fingernails) with those of menstruation, childbirth, and the like, was an unexpected finding of this research study. Discursive links between beauty practices and reproductive processes emphasize the magnitude of bodily knowledge that can be considered uniquely 'female' and also reinforce the idea of woman as bodily directed. Embodied human consciousness and agency of a female character are alive and well in the accounts of women. These components of the female self find their optimal expression in 'wholeness', through the linking of mind and body, beauty and health, in a manner so uniquely female it points to nothing short of an alternative philosophy.

The female subject revealed by this research study runs counter to aspects of the Cartesian legacy posited to reside in contemporary Western renderings on the body. The social history of the body in Western culture (Chapter II) and the corresponding 'readings' of these bodies found to be implicit and explicit in social theorizing (Chapter III) postulated that particularization or itemization of body parts increasingly characterized the

'gaze' extended to the human form within highly industrialized societies. Indeed 'the body as machine' metaphor is alleged to be a creation and embellishment of the forces of rationalization, secularization, and more recently, medicalization. According to this reading of Western social history, workings of the human body and idealizations of physical beauty expressed through the female form were conceptualized as purely technical, mechanistic and, most importantly, secular by virtue of the separate spheres assigned to mind, body and spirit in the Western ordering of knowledge since the Renaissance period.

While vestiges of mechanistic thinking may form the basis for modern biomedicine and that of beauty industry spin doctors, the women interviewed did not subscribe to the neat and distinct compartments with which to separate the mind, body and spirit. Whether New Age young women or ageing Baby Boomers, the women interviewed struggled to experience and project an embodied self in wholeness, an accomplishment which requires a substantive reworking of the hegemonic discourse of biomedicine and beauty. Informed decisions about the efficacy of and commitment to health and beauty practices require a firm sense of identity to begin with because of the sheer number of offerings available through media appeals. It is clearly the foundational quality of female anatomy and physiology that presents itself in this equation as the irrevocable (because stable) element from which 'self'-constitution begins, and must be continually accountable to.



While femaleness is considered irrevocable owing to the essentialist dimension corporeality provides, female identity arises from the dynamic relationship among the identified components of the human self - mind, body and spirit. The self is perceived as the ongoing combination of these modifiable, dynamic elements and the whole is at any point, greater than the sum of the parts. In this way and drawing from Enlightenment notions of the human evolutionary journey, the women interviewed saw themselves as forward-thinking, self-reflective, and goal seeking, but as clearly 'female' in each of these respects because they are bodily female.

Women did not report that they (re)construct the self through body work, but physical regimens of fitness and beauty contribute to the phenomenological knowledge of an embodied self that is highly valued, potentially transformative, and uniquely female. As self-described, informed consumers, women picked and chose among prescriptive beauty/health/fitness offerings, not uncommonly for self-indulgent pleasure alone, and they reported doing so without apology. These practices of hedonistic consumption, especially those associated with beauty and fashion products, are understood as playful acts designed to gratify the senses and simultaneously create illusion; they are willingly undertaken as moments of escape from the drudgery of the day-to-day. Far from cultural dopes, these women lay claim to their knowledge and ownership of the embodied self, particularly as they gain more social and bodily experience with

advancing age.

Nature, in the form of sociobiological imperatives, is strongly referenced in women's understandings of the will of the body, but ultimately, the self is not ruled by it. Adolescence in particular is remembered as involving a set of bodily changes through which nature speaks in nothing less than a dictatorial fashion. Clearly setting the material stage and therefore the social-psychological agenda, biological maturation is perceived as operating separately from the wishes of the embodied subject. Its essentialist quality acts as a set of imposed conditions with which the subject must be engaged in constant dialogue. Recollections mostly grant the self primacy in this discourse, however, as having the greater power to determine social outcomes than materiality in the form of flesh (fat) and blood (menstrual). One 'manages' becoming in bodily terms a sexually mature female and in the face of the irrevocable arrival of the adult form, one manoeuvres to impose the will of the subject on it. In this account, nature is seen as being 'out there' and adversarial in the discourse of the self.

The narratives offered by women provide insight into the relationship between female physical maturation and conceptions of identity. Menstruation and the development of secondary sexual characteristics were perceived as central to women's recollections of struggle surrounding the body during adolescence. Women saw their subsequent adult relationship to their bodies as

a result of these battles, perceiving the 'female' self as directly linked to the way(s) the 'problems' of menstruation, the development of secondary sexual characteristics and the social consequences of inherited body type are internalized and resolved during adolescence. Though virtually no difference by social class emerged in the imagery women used to describe the physical sensations of menstruation and physical maturation, significant dissimilarity surrounded both the appraisal and social consequence of excessive body fat during adolescence depending on the social class setting.

While findings in this latter respect are only suggestive owing to the small number of women interviewed who had a history of obesity, they are, however, noteworthy. Those who identified their backgrounds as working class were subject to much less harsh assessments of their bodies during adolescence and tended to be less defined by their overweight body conformation. In contrast, women from middle class backgrounds describe the well managed female body in that social class, as almost compulsory, and describe how their failure to comply was considered by themselves and others as a major sign of personal deficiency. This finding suggests that successfully managing the body is seen as a duty for middle class females, as a sign of normalcy rather than as a laudable accomplishment.

Taken together, these elements comprising the discourse around gender and selfhood suggest that, for many females, body work can perform a

remedial function as an action taken to restore agency to the subject. Bodily self-control and denial are commendable personal habits and are gender neutral, secular practices not far removed from the religiously inspired bodily practices of asceticism written about by Weber (1964) [1904/1905] and Veblen (1953) [1889], and further developed by Elias (1978), Outram (1989), Synnott (1989, 1990) and Turner (1984, 1988, 1992). Setting themselves apart from others, fitness zealots embody their 'elect' status in an era and locale preoccupied with the human form. Women's participation in taming the body can therefore be understood in terms of its rational utility as a socially sanctioned practice in contemporary (post)industrial capitalism. There are tangible pay-offs for presenting the well-managed female body and most women openly acknowledge them. A calculation is made, however, concerning time invested versus return in this equation, and a diminishing rate of profit quickly translates into the implementation of other, non-bodily means to achieve desired ends.

#### 9.5 The Body in Foundational Perspective

The elements of uncertainty attending the historical period of high modernity or postmodernity, as outlined by Bryan Turner (1989, 1992) and Barry Glassner (1990), are confirmed by the personal accounts of the women who participated in this study and are described by them as giving rise to feelings of extreme anxiety. Serial monogamy, economic uncertainty in the

form of chronic unemployment or underemployment, environmental degradation, chronic disease, geographic mobility, and so on, directly and daily assault the integrated 'self' to which these women aspire, especially by tearing at the interpersonal and cultural attachments which offer the self a sense of continuity in the form of coherent personal histories.

The self described by women demands that its evolutionary quest be acknowledged and respected, for satisfaction and psychological/emotional security is gauged by the current status of the ongoing "project of one". The self alluded to is one that seeks to realize its inherent potentials and to be the determiner of outcomes. From all accounts, belief in human agency is alive and well; choices are discerned to always exist, however limited in number and unattractive they might be at times, and women insist on seeing themselves as choosing among available alternatives in a voluntaristic way.

A phenomenological account of the self as embodied is not surprising given that the body is an immediate and tangible vehicle through which one perceives and is perceived by the world. Shiller's (1993) call for a theory of the body that acknowledges the foundational qualities of corporeality is warranted, if only to occasionally remind us that bodies are finite and bounded by physical parameters before the influence of culture. New human bodies appear and others die away, and without such things as technologically enhanced senses offered through a complex material culture, human eyes themselves can only

see so far, ears hear so well, and so on. This common-sense, material realm both grounds us and offers the human imagination all manner of raw material from which to fashion causal links between nature and culture.

Investment in the body as a social/sexual enhancer, as the symbolic embodiment of the work ethic, and even as an expression of love for oneself can easily be seen as time well spent. Fitness discourse makes particular sense given the liberal, "rugged individualist" ideology of North American culture. Taking responsibility for one's own 'total' health also makes sense given that the bulging baby boomer generation is ageing in a time of reduced governmental funding to all areas of health care. The power of the well managed body, whether male or female, is fundamentally seductive in its ability to accrue to the possessor very real physical strength and vitality, a reliable buffer the individual can mobilize in the face of external conditions that are perceived as enervating it, at times threatening its very survival.

Gender must be acknowledged as playing a pivotal role very early on in this equation, however, both in shaping the character and magnitude of the social constraints which shape male and female lives, and informing the corresponding manner and degree to which the body is embraced as a logical vehicle through which to fight back. Foucault's formulation of power as that which operates to seduce and to construct as definitional to the self can be seen clearly in the accounts of women as having a gendered dimension. The

body is offered as 'the' avenue for reasserting the self for women in a culture which continues to construct gender according to the man/mind, woman/body set of dichotomies. The logic of the body as the site of the female self is a predictable extension of the cultural construction of woman as nurturing, bodily directed and constrained by physical attributes, especially those connected with sexual reproduction.

What can be discerned as a discourse of alternative health in the accounts of the women supports embodied female subjectivity and the value attached to women by turning nurturing tendencies onto the self as an expression of self-love and social responsibility. Here the rhetoric of liberal feminism, as a gendered variant of possessive individualism, reinforces the efficacy of this identification of self with responsibility shown toward the body. By providing women the unprecedented opportunity to discover the body's capacities for physical strength and movement within an ethos of self-care and body ownership, the alternative health ethic has much to offer.

From the tracing in Chapter II of the history of women and exercise, the profound ideological distinction between so-called feminine beauty seekers and competitive, unfeminine athletic women had for some time been founded on notions of the female body as pathological and passive. In her work on feminine forms of movement and occupation of space, Young (1990) powerfully describes what has been the constricted lives of many young women:

Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and...tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention (1990:146).

Findings from this study that suggest a near convergence of opinion between 'athletic' versus 'feminine' body workers concerning the physically and psychologically empowering elements inherent in working the body points to an important, positive shift in female gender construction. Since the inception of aerobics as a female dominated and 'feminine' fitness regimen, more and more women, first compelled to work out for aesthetic reasons alone came to discover and greatly value new found capacities for physical strength and endurance.

While positive for women in many respects, as a gendered constellation of liberal values, this adaptation can be seen as apolitical in that it focuses efforts exclusively on effecting change to the individual alone. As a criticism advanced by writers on the subject of alternative health philosophy such as Coward (1990) and Edgely and Brissett (1990) this vision taken to the extreme forecloses the possibility of collective action. Concern for things such as clean air does not necessarily mean clean air for all, but rather an air purification system for one's own living space, not humane working conditions as the societal standard, but upper mobility for the individual through its healthy and



beautiful working body (Coward, 1990).

As a variation on the social-historical theme that has consistently equated women with nature, the potential of this alternative health ethic as a transformative ethos is succinctly summed up by Coward (1990;176):

.....we have the emergence of a philosophy, a philosophy of nature and feminine values. While this philosophy might offer itself as political, that is, attempting to transform the status of women by unconventional means, it in fact basks in all the forms by which women have traditionally been oppressed. This new religion of the body is not part of a revolutionary consciousness, but part of a general drift into making health and the body a philosophical, moral and religious concern rather than a political one.

The new, alternative ethic of female physical prowess and "body-happiness" does pose a serious challenge to long held beliefs and practices which promote female fragility. As another version of essentialism, however, this merely turns what historically has been the vilification of the female body in Western culture into its valorization.

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Appendix 1

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: A Social Inquiry Into the Relationship Between the Pursuit of Physical Fitness and Conceptions of the Self  
Researcher: Audrey MacNevin  
Graduate Student  
Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, NF

The aim of this research is to contribute to an understanding of women's perceptions of the role of physical exercise in the (re)construction of female identity. This study intends to explore the personal and social costs/benefits of pursuing fitness to self-image and participation in social life. The information obtained from this inquiry will constitute a major part of the data required for my doctoral research.

For this purpose, I will be asking you a number of questions concerning your experience with, knowledge of and participation in fitness pursuits. You may at any point withdraw from participation in this study or refrain from conversing on any topic. The interview will be audio-taped with your permission, and, upon completion of transcription, the tape will be returned to you. While you may have agreed to be audio-taped, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time during the interview. ALL information gathered will be treated as confidential. The names of individuals will not be used in or identifiable through any reporting of findings. Transcribed interviews will be filed under a coded system such that assigned names do not directly correspond to the list of participants.

By agreeing to participate in this study, I understand that:

- the purpose of the study has been made clear to me.
- I may withdraw from participation in this study at any time.
- I may refuse to converse on any topic during the interview.
- I may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time during the interview.
- the audio-tape of the interview will be given to me once transcription has been completed.
- I will be provided with a summary of major findings once the research project is completed.

Signed by Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



4. What are the highest levels of education obtained (grade completed) by your father, mother, and yourself?

	Father	Mother	Yourself
Grade completed	_____	_____	_____

5. a) What are the occupations of:

Your father \_\_\_\_\_  
Your mother \_\_\_\_\_  
Your partner \_\_\_\_\_  
(spouse)  
Yourself \_\_\_\_\_

b) Are you a member of a union?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

c) What is your current employment status? Are you:

Employed full-time \_\_\_\_\_  
Employed part-time \_\_\_\_\_  
Unemployed and looking for work \_\_\_\_\_  
Unemployed and not looking for work \_\_\_\_\_



11. What is your height? \_\_\_\_\_ feet, \_\_\_\_\_ inches

12. What is your weight? \_\_\_\_\_ lb.

13. If you could change only one aspect of your physical appearance, which would you change?

Face \_\_\_\_\_ Which feature(s) would you change? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Height \_\_\_\_\_ What height would you like to be? \_\_\_\_\_

Weight \_\_\_\_\_ How much would you like to weigh? \_\_\_\_\_

A specific body part \_\_\_\_\_ Which one? \_\_\_\_\_ Why  
would you like to change it?

None \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 3

Body/Self Concept Interview

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Started: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Part 2: Intensive Interview Guide

1. Participation History:

Were you physically active as a young child? If so, what sort of activity and with whom? (sibling(s), female and/or male playmates(s), etc.)

Did you participate in organized sports at school? If so, which sport(s) and how long was your involvement? If you did not participate in sports, why?

What sorts of memories, feelings do you have about your body and yourself during early adolescence? Do you remember your feelings about menstruation? Did puberty affect your level of physical activity? If so, how? Do you remember any specific comments made about your body by others at this time (parents, siblings, peers - male/female, others)? How did you feel about these comments?

When did you first become interested in physical exercise and why? Were/are you influenced in any way (positively or negatively) by family members, peers, media images, etc.?

2. Diet History:

Did you ever consciously attempt to lose or gain weight as a child?

If so, how old were you at this time? What were your feelings, motives at the time?

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

Tell me about your favourite foods now. When and how often do you eat them? Do you usually eat them with others (i.e. with family members/friends at mealtimes, or alone)?

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

Are your eating habits different (i.e. sorts of foods, how often you eat, and amount you eat) when you are tired? depressed? before or during menstruation? Do you indulge in "comfort foods" at these times? If so, what are your "comfort foods" and how do you feel eating them?

### 3. Body History

Does your body weight fluctuate? If so, how much? To what do you attribute this fluctuation? Are you now heavier, lighter than you were 5 years ago? 10 years ago? Have you lost, gained weight recently? If so, how much? How does this loss/gain make you feel?

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

If you could also weigh what you wanted, what would that be? If you could weigh what you wanted at your current height, what would that be? How would weighing what you would like impact on your life?...your feelings about yourself, how others relate to you?

What do you consider your most attractive physical feature? your least attractive? Why?

How would you describe the way you dress? How long does it take for you to get ready in the morning? to go out to a party or to dinner? Do you wear make-up? every day? only on special occasions? What do clothes and make-up (if applicable) say about who you are, how you feel about yourself, how others receive you?

Have these practices changed/remained over the years? Do you wear make-up when you work out?



Do you enjoy shopping for new clothes? What are your favourite shops? Do you shop for clothes only as you need them or do you shop regularly, looking for the perfect garment(s)?

#### 4. Role of Exercise

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

How often (times per week) and for how long do you work out? Do you participate in any other form of regular exercise in addition to working out? How long have you been working out?

What do you enjoy most about working out? least? Are there any rewards, positive features you hadn't expected? What about costs and sacrifices -- are there any? If so, what are they?

Please tell me about the role of exercise in your life. Why do you do it, what does it do for you? What does it say about who you are? Is your physical appearance/condition important for the kind of paid work you do? If so, why? Does your paid work have a dress code? If so, what is it and how do you feel about it?

Do you have definite goals established for your body? (e.g. specific weight or measurement to achieve) What are these goals and how do you imagine you'll feel if you reach them? fail to reach them?

How do your family/friends/partner feel about your involvement in physical fitness pursuits? How does your involvement affect your relationships? Do they engage in regular physical exercise also? If so, what sort?

How do you feel about the relationship most women have with their bodies? Is there anything about it you would like to see change? If so, what do you think the consequences of this change would be to: their relationships with spouses/partners, with female friends, with employers, etc?

Do you feel you've been affected/unaffected by media images of idealized female beauty? What do you think about the way women are portrayed on television....movies....in fitness magazines...women's magazines? Do you subscribe to or regularly purchase any fitness magazines? If so, which magazine(s) do you read and how do you use the information contained in them?

## 5. Social Life

When you work out at the fitness club do you generally just concentrate on the exercise component or do you regularly seek out and engage other participants in conversation? When conversation does take place, what sorts of subjects do you talk about together?

How long have you been a member of this particular fitness centre? Did you join with a friend or by yourself? Have you met many/some/few fellow club members since joining? How would you describe the social interactions you have with others at the facility versus those outside the facility?

Have you socialized with any club members outside the fitness centre? If so, what kinds of events have you participated in? Have you participated in any club sponsored outside activities since joining (fun runs, public fitness talks, charity events)? What role does working out at the fitness facility play in your social life?

## 6. Conclusion

What did you think of this interview? How does it feel to talk about these issues?

May I contact you at some other time to seek out clarification on some of the issues raised or to ask a few further questions?

Appendix 4 : Details of Research Strategies and Participants<sup>91</sup>

Two methods of eliciting womens' responses to, and experiences of female embodiment were employed in this research study. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out to elicit interviewees' accounts of their bodies through their life course. Guiding the data collection process, the following domains of questioning included such areas as: personal diet and exercise history, current level of participation in body work, views on and consumption of products offered by the beauty and health industries, notions of the idealized female body, and so on (see Appendix #3).

These interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the participant and later transcribed. A total of 34 individual interviews were conducted and transcribed by myself through the course of several months. These data were collected from two research settings, one located in a small town of homogeneous ethnicity, the other in the provincial capital city. The method of recruitment in both sites relied predominantly on convenience but also purposive sampling, i.e. initially using contacts made at a fitness centre located within each setting and also by using personal contacts of interviewees. This way, attempts were made to interview a variety of women from different age groups, different levels of participation in body work and socio-economic privilege. Demographic details of the women who participated in this phase of the research were obtained by asking each respondent to complete a brief survey form following the semi-structured interview (see Table 1 and Appendix 2).

The second research strategy employed was more specifically focused on exploring group responses to controversies related to the female body, with a particular emphasis on experiences of puberty, issues surrounding heterosexuality and alternative sexuality, and the portrayal of the female body in the visual media. Two semi-structured focus group discussions were carried out with women who had been previously interviewed individually and who expressed an interest in participating. Focus group #1 was carried out in the first research setting during the summer of 1995; focus group #2 was carried out in the other setting in the winter of 1996. These discussions were also audio-taped and transcribed. Table 2 provides some demographic details of the group members. In order to facilitate participants' responses in a relaxed environment, the groups consisted largely, but not

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<sup>91</sup>. All names of participants used in this submission are pseudonyms.

exclusively, of pre-established social networks: friends, relatives or work-mates. The focus group discussions began with general questions on the relationship between women and the body and evolved into issues surrounding media construction/coverage of the female health/fitness/beauty complex and its relation to sexuality and ageing, etc.

The transcripts and group discussions were then analyzed for the discourses that participants drew on to articulate their understanding and experience of female embodiment, and subsequently synthesized with relevant conceptual/theoretical scholarship in the areas of social theory, sociology of the body, sociology of gender and the sociology of health and medicine.

Table 1 Interview participants

- 
1. fitness instructor to senior citizens (part-time), 51 years old, married, 3 grown children (2 boys, 1 girl), lives with husband and daughter, grade 11, first born of 6 children.
  2. university teacher (full-time), 35 years old, never married, no children, lives with younger sister and her 2 year old daughter, M.A. degree, 5th of 6 children.
  3. graduate student in geology (full-time), 34 years of age, divorced, no children, lives with her cat, M.A. degree, last born of 2 children.
  4. public health nurse (full-time), 41 years of age, never married, no children, lives with her 2 cats, nursing diploma, 3rd born of 4 children.
  5. university professor (full-time; medical leave), 43 years of age, common-law marriage, no children, lives with spouse, doctorate, 1st born of 4 children.
  6. university professor (full-time), 42 years of age, common-law marriage, 1 child (boy), lives with common-law spouse and son, doctorate, 1st born of 3 children.
  7. custom picture framer (full-time; self-employed), 44 years of age, divorced, no children, lives alone, B.A., 2nd born of 6 children.
  8. artisan/picture framer (part-time), 38 years of age, separated, 1 child (son), lives with son and female room-mate, grade 12, 1st born of 2 children.

9. respiratory therapist (full-time), 42 years of age, married, 2 children (daughters), lives with husband and children, diploma programme post grade 12, 1st born of 2.
10. home-maker (full-time), 30 years of age, married, 2 children (1 boy, 1 girl), lives with husband and children, grade 12, 2nd born of 4 children.
11. cashier (part-time), 29 years of age, never married, no children, lives with 4 male room-mates, B.A., only child.
12. secretary (full-time) and fitness instructor (part-time), 33 years of age, never married, no children, lives with her dog, secretarial diploma post grade 12, 1st born of 2 children.
13. graduate student (full-time), 31 years of age, never married, no children, lives with 2 female room-mates, completing M.A., last born of 4 children.
14. consultant/trainer (part-time) and fitness instructor (part-time), 32 years of age, never married, no children, lives with 2 female room-mates, M.A., 1st born of 4 children.
15. homemaker (full-time), 59 years of age, married, 4 grown children (sons), lives with husband and son, B.A., 2nd born of 4 children.
16. secretary (full-time), 37 years of age, never married, no children, lives with her 4 dogs, secretarial diploma and B.A., 1st born of 4 children.
17. library assistant (full-time), 42 years of age, married, 2 children (daughters), lives with husband and children, B.A., last born of 4 children.
18. registered nurse (full-time) and fitness instructor (part-time), 37 years of age, married, no children, lives with husband, nursing diploma, 2nd born of 3 children.
19. registered nurse (full-time) and fitness instructor (part-time), 34 years of age, married, 1 child (boy), lives with husband and child, nursing diploma and B.A.
20. sales-clerk (part-time) and substitute teacher (part-time), 29 years of age, never married, no children, lives with parents and brother, M.A., 3rd born of 4 children.

21. librarian (full-time), 29 years of age, never married, no children, lives with 1 female room-mate, M.L.S., last born of 12 children.
22. research assistant (part-time), 41 years of age, married, 2 children (daughters), lives with husband and children, M.A., last born of 4 children.
23. sales representative for pharmaceutical company (full-time), 43 years of age, married, 1 child (daughter), lives with husband and child, M.A., only child.
24. registered nurse (full-time), 42 years of age, separated, 2 children (daughters), lives with children, nursing diploma plus some university credits, last born of 4 children.
25. sales representative (full-time) and fitness instructor (part-time), 38 years of age, separated, 2 children (boys), lives with children, grade 12, 1st born of 6 children.
26. liaison officer (part-time), 34 years of age, never married, no children, lives with female room-mate and her young son, M.A., last born of 4 children.
27. university student (full-time), 22 years of age, engaged to be married, no children, lives with female room-mate, completing B.A., last born (identical twin) of 4 children.
28. journalist (part-time), 26 years of age, never married, no children, lives with parents and one brother, B.A., 2nd born of 4 children.
29. university student (full-time), 21 years of age, never married, no children, lives with mother and sister, completing B.A., last born of 2 children, born in Halifax.
30. physical education teacher (full-time), 32 years of age, never married, no children, lives with parents and brother, B.Phy.Ed., last born of 5 children.
31. educational psychologist/guidance counsellor (full-time), 42 years of age, divorced, 2 children (boy and girl), lives with children, M.A., last born of 3 children.
32. medical technology instructor (full-time), 48 years old, divorced, 2 grown sons, lives with her cat, A.R.T. (Advanced Registered Technologist) and university credits, 2nd born of 4 children.

33. secretary (full-time), 32 years of age, never married, no children, lives with her mother and brother, B.A., last born of 3 children.

34. university student (full-time), 22 years of age, engaged to be married, no children, lives with 1 female room-mate, completing B.A., 2nd born of 3 children.

Table 2 Focus group participants

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Group 1: Club Small, small town setting  
secretary, 34; secretary, 28; university  
student 22; home-maker, 30; home-maker, 40

Group 2: Club Big, medium sized city  
liason officer, 34; cashier, 29; graduate student,  
34; artisan, 44; home-maker, 42; sales  
representative, 41