

THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF BODY IMAGE:
WOMEN FEELING COMFORTABLE WITH THEIR BODIES

by

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Abstract

A qualitative phenomenological paradigm was utilized to explore the experience and meaning of body image for women feeling comfortable with their bodies. Seven women who felt comfortable with their bodies participated in this study. During individual, in-depth interviews, which were audio-taped, the women described their experience of bodily comfort past and present. The women reported that they experienced becoming comfortable with themselves and their bodies as a developmental process. Five common themes were extrapolated from the data using a thematic analysis procedure devised by Colaizzi (1978). The themes describe the women's experiences of feeling personal validation, of developing increased self worth, of integrating all aspects of themselves, of rejecting some external standards for appearance and behavior, and developing a sense of being at home in their bodies.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Body image is often considered one component of a person's sense of self (Fisher, 1986; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1985; Rosen & Ross, 1968; Ussher, 1989). In recent years research has particularly focused on women's body image. This attention may be a reflection of the degree of distress many women are experiencing with their bodies (Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1985; Jackson, Sullivan, & Rostker, 1988; Thompson, 1986). This distress is evidenced by an increase in the numbers of adolescent girls and women who express dissatisfaction or discomfort with their bodies (Feldman, Hodgson, Corber, & Quinn, 1986; Health & Welfare Canada, 1991; Storz & Greene, 1983), experience eating disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1987; McCreary Center Society, 1989), obtain cosmetic surgery to change their appearance (Greenberg, 1990; MacDonald, 1986; Schwartz, 1992; Smith, 1990; Wolf, 1991) and attend weight reduction programs ("Tough Diet", 1991).

Most researchers and theorists studying body image suggest that the concept of body image is complex and multidimensional. The general consensus is that one's body image is composed of an affective response to a visual perception of one's body, in relationship to an ideal cultural standard (Brouwers, 1990; Brown, Cash, & Lewis, 1988; Butters & Cash, 1987; Fisher, 1986; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1985). Many women may be dissatisfied with their own bodies when they compare themselves to cultural standards for an ideal woman's body. This dissatisfaction, or

discomfort, is often defined as having a negative body image (Butters & Cash, 1987; Brouwers, 1990; Rodin, 1992). Much of the information currently available about body image is in reference to the experience of negative body image.

Body image has often been studied in the context of its relationship to eating disorders (Brouwers, 1990; Brown et al., 1988; Chernin, 1986; Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Wolchik, Weiss, & Katzman, 1986; Woodman, 1982). So much of what is known about body image development is in terms of the formation of negative body image. A negative body image has been identified as one of the major risk factors in the development of eating disorders (Boskind-White & White, 1983; Butters & Cash, 1987; Fallon & Rozin, 1985), which is most prevalent among adolescent girls.

There are a number of factors that influence body image development; sociocultural (Bartky, 1990; Chernin, 1986; Fisher, 1986; Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Orbach, 1979; Ussher, 1989), interpersonal (Fisher, 1986; Kegan, 1982; Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979), and intrapsychic (Fisher, 1986; Kegan, 1982; Ussher, 1989). Gender differences have been implicated in the way these influences affect body image formation (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Jackson et al., 1988; Mintz & Betz, 1986). Jackson et al. (1988) examined the results of several studies of the relationship between gender role and body image and found that,

Compared to men, women evaluate their bodies less favorably, express more dissatisfaction with their bodies (particularly their weight), view physical appearance as more important, perceive a greater discrepancy between body image and body ideal, and are more likely to suffer from eating disorders associated with a negative or distorted body image (p. 430).

Although discomfort among women about their bodies appears to be a pervasive phenomenon, there is evidence that body image development is a process and that a person's body image is not static and can be changed. Some literature suggests that change of body image is a process that takes time (Bergner, Remer, & Whetsell, 1985; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1985; Katzman, Weiss, & Wolchik, 1986). Hutchinson (1985) describes the process of improving body image in these words,

The task of coming to a place of union within yourself involves a life long process of listening to your body, of respecting and trusting its messages...It is a process not of changing your body but of changing your outlook (p.16).

The link between physicality and personal perceptions is emphasized.

In order to address the discomfort some women experience with their bodies, many therapeutic techniques have been developed to improve body image, or to provide treatment for eating disorders (Bergner et al., 1985; Butters & Cash, 1987; Greenspan, 1983; Hutchinson, 1985; Katzman et al., 1986). Short term evidence from outcome studies indicates that body image can be improved (Hutchinson, 1982; McNamara, 1989; Wolchik et al., 1986), but little evidence of long term persistence of

these changes is available. There is not yet a consensus about an overall effective approach to improving women's comfort with their bodies.

Most research examining change in body image has been with women who have experienced eating disorders. The visible symptoms of an eating disorder provide some evidence of the consequences of negative body image for these women (e.g., amenorrhea, malnutrition). It is known that women other than those with eating disorders may also have negative body images, however the consequences of a negative body image for these women are not clearly understood. Some research has been done with therapeutic interventions designed to improve the body images of "normal weight" women who have a negative body image, but do not have an eating disorder (Bergner et al., 1985; Dworkin & Kerr, 1987; Hutchinson, 1985; McNamara, 1989). However, empirical data showing long term results of positive change to body image through these therapeutic interventions for women without eating disorders, is lacking. In women with eating disorders, visible changes in behavior and bodily symptoms can be measured before and after therapy and may be used as indicators that positive change in body image has occurred through therapeutic intervention. There may be difficulty in measuring outcomes of treatment for women without eating disorders who have a negative body image because it is not clear what the indicators of positive body image are for these women. There may also be difficulty in measuring outcomes of any treatment designed to improve body image because of the number of factors influencing a person's body image at any given time, the subjective/affective component of body image, and the lack of clear understanding of what the components of a positive body image are.

There is an absence of literature describing the experience of body image development for women who are comfortable with their bodies, and the factors which might contribute to the development of bodily comfort. Most of the information available describes negative body image development, primarily in women (Fisher, 1986; Martin, 1987; Ussher, 1989; Wolf, 1991). The purpose of this study is therefore to begin to describe the experience of body image for women who are comfortable with their bodies. Given the pervasiveness of dissatisfaction and discomfort expressed by many women about their bodies and the lack of understanding about how women might develop a more positive attitude towards their bodies, more information is needed about how women meaningfully construct a positive body image and how this relates to their experience of self and others.

Definitions

The terms body image, and negative body image are defined in several ways in the literature on body image development. The term "positive body image" is not mentioned, leaving the reader to assume that positive body image might mean the absence of a negative body image, or in other words, might mean a general sense of feeling comfortable with one's body (Brouwers, 1990; Brown et al., 1988; Butters & Cash, 1987; Fisher, 1986; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985; Katzman et al., 1986; Rodin, 1992). Although some researchers attend to the person's cognitive perception of their physical characteristics to define body image (Brown et al., 1988; Fisher, 1986; Frey & Carlock, 1989), others include the affective component associated with the perception of one's body and believe this affective element to be

critical in definitions of body image (Brouwers, 1990; Butters & Cash, 1987; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985; Katzman et al., 1986; Rodin, 1992). Most agree that the concept of body image and body image development are multidimensional and are influenced by a number of factors; interpersonal, intrapsychic, and sociocultural.

The feelings, attitudes and beliefs a person has about their body are referred to by Hutchinson (1985) as their body image. This includes a mental picture or representation of the person's body at any moment (Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1982). Hutchinson has developed this definition of body image through leading group therapy sessions for women who identified themselves as having a negative body image. Her group participants were 30 normal weight, psychologically healthy women, ages 24 to 40, who attended her seven, weekly, two-hour sessions focused on "Transforming Body Image". Hutchinson (1982) suggests that,

Body image is not the same as the body, but is rather what the mind does to the body in translating the experience of embodiment into its mental representation. This translation from body to body image and from there to body-cathexis [value laden aspect of body image] is a complex and emotionally charged process (p.59).

The term negative body image, sometimes called a poor body image, is not clearly nor universally defined in the literature, although the use of this term is common in describing a person's sense of dissatisfaction with their body. Brouwers (1990) used the term body image dissatisfaction to describe an emotional reaction towards the body that is negative. Butters and Cash (1987) reviewed eight studies that described men and

women who have a negative body image. The individuals in these studies were from clinical and non-clinical samples. These people were described as "perceiving themselves as unattractive" and reported "negative or dysphoric attitudes toward their physical appearance" (p.889). Butters and Cash reported that the individuals who perceive their bodies negatively "typically have been found to have poor self-esteem, social anxieties and inhibitions, sexual difficulties, and a vulnerability to depression" (p.889).

In her definition of a negative body image, Rodin (1992) includes such behaviors as a person avoiding looking in the mirror, distorting their perception of their body size, being preoccupied with their body, and feeling flawed or lacking in the appropriate body appearance. These characteristics found in a person with a negative body image are described in the literature (Brouwers, 1990; Butters & Cash, 1987), but characteristics of a person with a positive body image are not generally described.

Body image may rarely be static but may be experienced on a continuum, depending on sociocultural, interpersonal or intrapsychic factors. A positive or negative body image may represent two extreme states of being, with a person's body image generally falling somewhere between these states. Hutchinson (1982) mentions the notion of negative body image being on a continuum "from complete dissociation or denial of the body to open warfare with the whole or parts of the body" (p.59). In the literature it is suggested that although body image may fluctuate somewhat from day to day, overall an individual's perceptions of their body remain relatively consistent (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Several authors believe that for women there is some

fluctuation in body image, specifically related to the menstrual cycle and other important life events such as pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause (Bartky, 1990; Martin, 1987; Rich, 1976; Rubin, 1979; Sanford & Donovan, 1984; Ussher, 1989).

Most definitions of body image include a number of dimensions; an internal visual representation of the body, an affective response to the body, and behaviors associated with the affective response to the body (Butters & Cash, 1987; Fisher, 1986; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985; Katzman et al., 1986). The research provides some examples of how a person may portray a negative body image; they may distort their internal visual representation of the body, they may have a number of negative feelings such as shame and inadequacy, or they may display behaviors that indicate dissatisfaction with the body such as an eating disorder. Other than assuming that an absence of these negative qualities would indicate a positive body image, it is unclear how a person might experience a positive body image.

Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study was to describe how women meaningfully construct the experience of having a positive body image. In order to avoid imposing a value or standard on the women's experience, the phrase "feeling comfortable with your body" was used, rather than positive body image, when asking women to explore their experience of body image. In staying true to the model of phenomenological research used in this study, it was important for the women to feel free to define their own meaning of bodily comfort.

Given the current focus in the literature on women's experience of having a

negative body image and the apparent high incidence of women experiencing dissatisfaction or discomfort with their bodies, one of the goals of this study was to contribute to the limited body of knowledge that exists regarding the experience of body image for women who are comfortable with their bodies. It was hoped that results of this study might be useful in both providing information that might lead to further research in the area of positive body image, or body comfort, and in assisting counsellors and other professionals in working more effectively with women struggling with body image issues. The research question asked was: **"What is the experience and meaning of body image for women feeling comfortable with their bodies?"**

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Evidence of Women's Discomfort with their Bodies

Statistics reported for the incidence of eating disorders, the increase in cosmetic surgery and the prevalence of diet programs and products, primarily among women, provide evidence that women are uncomfortable and dissatisfied with their bodies.

Estimates of the incidence of eating disorders among women vary due to the secretive nature of the problem, however the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1987)(DSM-III-R) estimates the prevalence of anorexia nervosa in 1% of 12 to 18 year old girls and bulimia in 4.5% of female college freshman. Ninety-five percent of eating disorders occur in females. The McCreary Center Society's Provincial Task Force Eating Disorder Report (1989) supports these statistics, estimating that approximately 5% of adolescent and young adult women suffer from anorexia or bulimia. The Canadian Medical Association estimated in 1989 (cited in Report of the Task Force on the Treatment of Obesity, 1991) that milder forms of these disorders occur in 10% of women, and appear to be increasing in women over the age of 25 and in males. This does not take into account those women suffering from compulsive eating and obesity. In a 1990 survey by Health and Welfare Canada (cited in Report of the Task Force on the Treatment of Obesity, 1991), 65% of women surveyed reported wishing to lose weight. Sixty-four percent of these women were either underweight or of healthy weight. Among women who were already underweight, 12% wanted to reduce their weight.

Storz and Greene (1983) studied high school girls, ages 14 to 18, in home

economics classes in rural and suburban areas near Philadelphia to find out how they viewed their bodies. Of 203 adolescent girls surveyed, 83% desired to lose weight, even though 62% fell within the normal weight range for their height and sex. Ninety-five percent of the girls selected a drawing of a figure that was below average weight as their ideal figure goal.

A Canadian study by Feldman et al. (1986) of adolescents in the Ottawa area, ages 12 to 20, revealed that 36% of the girls, and only 14% of boys responding, were concerned about being overweight. The researchers in both studies expressed concern over the degree of body dissatisfaction experienced by girls in this age group. Stortz and Greene also expressed concern about the unrealistic ideal body images of the adolescents in their study.

Carol Gilligan (1991) shares the concerns of the above mentioned researchers. In examining the issues critical to the development of adolescent girls, she observed that a drop in self worth, a poor body image and eating disorders are significant problems for adolescent girls. Based on this literature it would appear that eating disorders are clearly a problem for many adolescent girls, as well as for adult women. Women with eating disorders do not feel positive about their bodies either, nor about themselves as persons (Boskind-White & White, 1983).

Not all women unhappy with their appearance develop eating disorders. Many women use cosmetic products to change their appearance. It is estimated that there is a \$20 billion cosmetics industry in the U.S. (Wolf, 1991). Other women dissatisfied with their bodies may find that cosmetics do not meet their needs in more radically

altering their appearance so they choose to make permanent changes through surgery. Cosmetic surgery is now being used as a method to change appearance by more women than ever before. Greenberg (1990) reports that the caseload of aesthetic surgery by board certified plastic surgeons in the U.S. rose from "380,000 in 1981 to 620,000 in 1988" (p. 1178). Canadian statistics regarding cosmetic surgery are difficult to obtain, but Smith (1990) reports that "in 1988, more than 40,000 such operations [cosmetic surgery] were performed in Canada" (p. A1, A13). Four years later Schwartz (1992) reports that "there are an estimated 25,000 cosmetic procedures done in Quebec each year" (p.B5). Canadian costs for cosmetic procedures are high and generally not covered by medical insurance. For example, facelifts range in cost from \$2,500 (Walker, 1991) to \$10,000 (Sullivan, 1990). Both Canadian and American sources confirm that, of those choosing surgery, 87 to 90% are women, and that the numbers are increasing (MacDonald, 1986; Schwartz, 1992; Wolf, 1991), therefore indicating considerable body image dissatisfaction.

Weight loss, often through the use of commercial diet products or programs, is another way in which many women change their appearance. Statistics on the diet industry in the U.S. reported in Business Week (1992) showed that \$8.4 billion in revenues were earned in 1991, an eight percent increase from 1989. Commercial diet centers, hospital based programs, low calorie foods, diet pills and liquids, and diet books were included in the Marketdata survey of the diet industry. In an article calling for tighter safety controls on weight loss programs, it was reported that "the number of franchised diet clinics operating in Canada has increased to about 500, a three-fold

increase since 1987" ("Tough Diet", p. 37, 1991), and that 90% of those signing up for weight reduction programs are women. Fitness, weight loss, and cosmetic products are often sold based on their purported value to health, but the choice of these products is often based on women's desire to change their appearance (Millman, 1980; Wolf, 1991). Clearly, many women are not happy with their bodies and some are going to quite drastic lengths to meet cultural standards; standards that may be unattainable for most women (Feldman et al., 1986; Garner et al., 1980; Health & Welfare Canada, 1991; Hutchinson, 1985).

Body Image Development

The sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic factors influencing body image development are interrelated and complex. There is some degree of understanding among theorists and researchers regarding the negative impact these factors have on body image development, but it is not clear what role these factors play in the development of women's comfort with their bodies.

Sociocultural influences. One of the factors determining a person's body image is the influence of the culture and society they live in, however the extent of this influence is only beginning to be understood (Dolan, 1991; Fisher, 1986). Martin (1987) believes that "what women say about their bodies forces us to look beyond the family to features of the social and cultural organization of experience that can also affect the body image..." (p.76). Media is a significant cultural organization that contributes to the development of body image, with portrayals of ideal female bodies having a very specific shape and being increasingly thinner over the years (Garner et

al., 1980). The prevalence of negative body images among women today would suggest that many women feel they are not meeting these ideal bodily standards. Bartky (1990) states that there is nothing new about women being preoccupied with youth and beauty, but that "what is new is the growing power of the image in a society increasingly oriented toward the visual media" (p.80). Kitzinger (1985) notes that the powerful message the media sends to women is, "you are deceiving yourself if you think that what you are is good enough. You are more inadequate than you realize" (p. 184).

Several feminist researchers and theorists (Bartky, 1990; Greenspan, 1983; Jaggar & Bordo, 1989; Martin, 1987; Orbach, 1979; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989) are exploring the roles that women play in North American culture in order to understand the effect of these roles on the development of women's body images. Bartky (1990) expresses the negative feelings many women have about their bodies as "shame". She describes this sense of shame as more than just a feeling some women have about their bodies, but as "a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy that, like the shame of embodiment, is profoundly disempowering" (p.85). She attributes this sense of shame, and its accompanying sense of powerlessness, to the status of women's roles in a patriarchal world. According to Bartky, failure to conform to the appropriate body image can be costly to a woman,

She faces a very severe sanction indeed in a world dominated by men: the refusal of male patronage. For the heterosexual woman this may mean the loss of badly needed intimacy; for both heterosexual women and lesbians, it may well mean the refusal of decent livelihood" (p.76).

It is not clear how much stereotypical roles are changing, or how these changes may be affecting the development of women's body images today. In spite of changes in women's roles, the external evaluation of women's bodies still appears to be a very significant factor in the formation of body image for many women. One way for women to conform to role expectations may involve changing their body to whatever the current acceptable body appearance might be. Miriam Greenspan (1983), through her experience counselling women, concludes that a, "woman in contemporary patriarchal society is fundamentally identified with her body. Her body is her power" (p.164). The irony in this is that "if a woman's body is her only real asset, it is thus also her greatest liability" (Greenspan, 1983, p.165). A woman's struggle to develop a sense of identity, including a positive body image, based on valuing herself, seems nearly impossible if a woman's survival is based on meeting with the approval of the external world; approval that is contingent upon meeting unrealistic and unattainable standards of appearance.

It is during the adolescent struggle for identity, when the body undergoes a great deal of change, that the onset of eating disorders is most significant for women. Steiner-Adair (1986), in working with eating disordered adolescents, concluded that the eating disorder was "a symbol of a culture that does not support female development and symbolically outcasts that which is central to female identity and mature adulthood" (p. 253), such as women's reproductive capacity, mothering, and the importance of connection and interdependence in relationships. Steiner-Adair believes that the rounded woman's body, symbolic of interdependence and the important experience of self in connection with others, is generally despised and is in direct opposition to the

patriarchal values of independence, autonomy, self-assertion, aggressiveness, and absence of dependency or need, symbolized by a thin female body. The eating disordered adolescent girl may be striving for the thin female body with which these patriarchal values are associated.

At a time when the adolescent girl is beginning to form an identity, she may be experiencing negative cultural messages about the changes occurring in her body and confusion about what is expected of her as an adult woman (Martin, 1987). Ussher (1989) suggests that,

It is during adolescence that the young woman first experiences a split between her body and herself: between her own experience and the archetype she is expected to emulate (p.18).

illustrating the significant impact of changing cultural expectations for young women during the transition from childhood to adulthood.

This split, or fragmentation of body from self, at times when women may be developing their identities, was expressed in several ways by women interviewed in Martin's (1987) work. Martin, an anthropologist, conducted extensive interviews with 165 women from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, at three life stages, in many different communities in the United States. The women related their experiences with, and the meaning associated with, biological and medical processes, such as menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. A theme common to the women's experiences was a sense of loss of control over their bodies. Such perceptions were reflected in the words of one woman who spoke of how, "your self is separate from your body" (p.77). Many of the

women in the study felt as if,

Menstruation, menopause, labor, birthing and their component stages are states you go through or things that happen to you (not actions you do) (p.77).

A few of the women interviewed by Martin conveyed a comfort or "wholeness between themselves and menstruation, using active verbs or imagery of integration" (Martin, 1987, p.87), suggesting that they felt more positive about their bodies than the other women in the study. It was not clear how these women were able to maintain this sense of unity and to maintain a more accepting attitude towards menstruation. If a woman feels that experiences are happening to her without her feeling any control or sense of choice about these experiences, it is possible that she may feel resentful, frightened, or non-accepting of these experiences. This may contribute to her discomfort with her body.

Women's reactions to their bodily processes and expectations of women's roles may also be influenced by ethnicity and race, however the effect of these factors in body image development is rarely mentioned in research. Dolan (1991) reviewed the literature to determine the crosscultural aspects of eating disorders. She found it "noteworthy that this 'epidemic' [eating disorders] has been recognized only in the white female population"(p.67). Assumptions have been made about the experience and development of body image, especially a negative body image, based on a culturally limited population. Little is known about how a woman's race or ethnic background influences the meaningful construction of her body image, particularly a positive body image.

Although research on body image needs to be expanded to more diverse populations, the evidence available shows that sociocultural factors appear to have a significant effect on body image development. Many women feel pressured to conform to an ideal body image and believe that, in order to be accepted in their societal context, they have limited choices in how they may appear (Bartky, 1990; Greenspan, 1983; Millman, 1980; Wolf, 1991). In failing to achieve these cultural standards for female beauty, many women develop a negative body image. What is not known is how some women develop a sense of satisfaction with their bodies, irrespective of a match or fit between their bodies and in spite of the pressure to conform to an ideal cultural standard of beauty.

Interpersonal influences. Some theorists believe that body image develops in response to an individual's interaction with the people in their environment (Fisher, 1986; Kegan, 1982). Messages about how her body looks, how it performs, and how it is accepted and valued by the external world, are taken in and become part of a woman's self concept. The relationships women have with significant others in their lives are especially influential in body image development (Fisher, 1986; Friedlander & Siegel, 1990; Hutchinson, 1982; Pike & Rodin, 1991).

The relationship a child has with family members is generally assumed by theorists to play a significant role in the development of body image, although the family influence is complex and not easily determined (Fisher, 1986). Familial influence has been given much consideration in the treatment of eating disorders. Pike and Rodin (1991) administered the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy,

1983) to 77 mother-daughter pairs, 39 with eating disordered daughters and 38 with daughters who were not eating disordered. They found that the mothers of eating disordered daughters had more disordered eating than the mothers of daughters who were not eating disordered. It is not clear if this is an example of modeling a negative body image, or of modeling a coping mechanism commonly utilized within the particular family.

Although body image develops and changes from birth (Fisher, 1986; Ussher, 1989), there appear to be certain developmental transition stages that are particularly vulnerable times in the formation of body image for women. An individual's body image seems to evolve over time and to be affected by her physiological changes and the reactions of those around her to these bodily changes (Fisher, 1986; Ussher, 1989). Specific physical changes such those occurring at puberty or during pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause have been cited as having powerful effects on body image for women (Bartky, 1990; Fisher, 1986; Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989). The reactions that significant others have to the woman's bodily changes may also reflect their cultural expectations and attitudes towards female body development. However, it is clear that the relationships that the woman has in her life will be important influences in the development of her body image.

Intrapsychic influences. Some developmental theorists believe that young children begin to develop a body image through their sensory-motor experiences in the world and that as children mature their body feelings become less influential and cognitive factors more powerful in the development of body image (Fisher, 1986). In

studying the development of body image in adult women it is difficult to separate the affect a woman's interpersonal interactions has on her body image from the affect of her internal responses to her bodily experiences. These intrapsychic responses are also believed to affect her body image development (Fisher, 1986; Sanford & Donovan, 1984; Thompson & Thompson, 1986; Ussher, 1989).

The way in which a woman develops a negative or positive feeling towards a specific part of her body may occur through an interpersonal interaction or through a sociocultural message. The intrapsychic component of body image results from her perceptions and interpretations of either of these factors. An example of an interpersonal interaction that may have an intrapsychic impact on a woman's body image is the trauma of child or adolescent sexual abuse. This trauma has been suggested as a possible factor in the development of a negative body image, particularly in women with eating disorders (Kearney-Cooke, 1986; Root & Fallon, 1989).

Adolescence, when a young woman's body experiences great change, seems to be a particularly vulnerable time for body image development (Brown et al., 1988; Gilligan, Rogers & Tolman, 1991; Hutchinson, 1982; Ussher, 1989). Kegan (1982) characterizes early adolescence as a time of "construction of role" and the "emergence of self-concept" (p.89). Whether a young woman continues to have a positive or negative body image as part of her self concept and identity depends partially on her internal interpretations and responses to the changes in her body.

Identity may also be changing for many women during midlife, especially if their roles are changing (Rich, 1976; Rubin, 1979; Stevens-Long & Commons, 1992;

Ussher, 1989). There is more variance now in midlife roles and experiences of individual women, however, all women of this age experience the physiological changes of aging and menopause. Body image appears to be a part of every woman's identity, and there is evidence that women's feelings about their bodies change during midlife, in both negative and positive ways in response to the meanings the women place on their roles and on their appearance at this stage of life, meanings which are garnered from their culture and shaped by significant others (Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Vann Rackley, Warren, & Bird, 1988).

Part of a person's identity is their feeling of self worth. There is some evidence that body image relates to an individual's self esteem or self worth. (Baird & Sights, 1986; Sanford et al., 1984; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988; Thompson, 1986; Thompson et al., 1986). Some women express difficulty in liking themselves as a person when they dislike a part of their body (Sanford et al., 1984). There is evidence to suggest that more women than men overestimate the size of their bodies, even when they are close to normal weight, and the more a woman distorts her body image, the lower her self esteem seems to be (Thompson, 1986; Thompson & Thompson, 1986).

Davis (1990) suggested that some women who exercise regularly derive both a sense of satisfaction with their bodies and a sense of self worth through this regimen. Other researchers reported specific exercises and body movement activities that some women engage in to improve their appearance may also contribute to physical fitness, body satisfaction and a sense of self worth (Davis & Cowles, 1991; Hutchinson, 1985;

Silbertstein et al., 1988; Skrinar et al., 1986; Tucker, 1985). Tucker (1985) reported in his study of 160 college females that factors related to physical fitness, such as muscle tone, endurance, coordination, health and energy level were identified by the women as important to their body image. For some women it may be that physical activity contributes to a sense of comfort with their bodies and a sense of self worth, however Davis (1990) cautioned that "there is also a possibility that commitment to a regular exercise regimen can inspire an exaggerated focus on one's body" (p. 20).

At every stage of life, a woman is interacting with her environment. She responds to and makes meaning of the changes in her body and the reactions she receives from the environment about these changes. She also has influence on that environment. This meaning, with positive or negative feelings attached, is incorporated into the woman's body image that is an important part of her identity. The meaning she makes of her body image may significantly affect her feelings of self worth and her psychological well being.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Design

The phenomenon of positive body image in women is not clearly understood. Describing the meaning women attach to the perceptions of their bodies, particularly when the women feel comfortable with their bodies, may help begin to understand this experience. Scientific research often involves the verification of a theory but "before one can test the adequacy of a theory in explaining a phenomenon, one needs a reliable and detailed description of the phenomenon" (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992, p.195). In a phenomenological study the researcher focuses on the descriptions of what people experience and how they interpret these experiences. This research method was appropriate for this study because the researcher proposed to describe the meaning and experience of body image for women feeling comfortable with their bodies. The dimension that differentiates phenomenological study from other qualitative research methods is that the phenomenologist makes the assumption that there is a commonality in the way a particular phenomenon is experienced, and through rigorous analysis attempts to identify the essence or core meanings of the shared experiences of the participants of the study (Patton, 1990). A phenomenological approach to this research allowed for exploration of the experience of a positive body image, that is, how women meaningfully construct a sense of comfort with their bodies. These data may then be used to facilitate hypothesis testing in further research. The aim of phenomenological research, as explained by Osborne (1990), is "to understand a phenomenon by allowing the data to

speak for themselves, and by attempting to put aside one's preconceptions as best one can" (p.81). In utilizing this method, the researcher examined how the participants experienced the phenomenon, and how they made meaning of it. By examining the women's stories, the researcher was able to obtain a broad and detailed view of how the women meaningfully construct the experience of feeling comfortable with their bodies.

Bracketing

An important element of a phenomenological approach to research is the acknowledgement of the researcher's effect on all aspects of the research. As Osborne (1990) states, "existential-phenomenology recognizes the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of what are the data, and their interpretation" (p. 81). Unlike other forms of qualitative inquiry, where the researcher includes their own experience of the phenomenon, the phenomenologist carefully delineates personal prejudices, viewpoints, and preconceptions about the phenomenon in an attempt to suspend judgment and be able to investigate the phenomenon without imposing meaning (Patton, 1990). By being exposed to the researchers assumptions and pre-conceived notions regarding the phenomenon, the reader is able to take into account the influence of these biases on the researcher's interpretation of the data.

My formulation of the research question was influenced by a number of factors. As a secondary school teacher and counsellor, I have had many interactions with adolescent girls who are dissatisfied with their bodies, some of whom are suffering from eating disorders. I have been moved by the disabling effect these feelings have on the

girls' ability to develop healthy relationships and by the way their feelings about their bodies limit their visions of what they can choose to do in their lives. The experience of struggling with my own body image and witnessing similar struggles in students, women friends, women colleagues, and the female members of my family, motivated my search for a better understanding of how we as women might become more comfortable with our bodies.

Also in reading literature about body image I was struck by the many references to sociocultural influences on body image development. Feminist interpretations of these influences (Bartky, 1990; Gilligan et al., 1991; Greenspan, 1983; Martin, 1987; Wolf, 1991; Ussher, 1989) resonated with my own personal experience of feeling judged as a woman primarily by my appearance and how I was, or wasn't, living up to a stereotypical image of an ideal woman. While reading for assignments on eating disorders and group approaches to treating negative body image, I was further intrigued by the absence of information on positive body image development, and with the primary focus in this literature on women's body image as a 'problem' to be treated.

My white, middle class, North American experience appears to be shared by many of those authors of body image literature and the participants of their research studies. It is not clear from this literature how socioeconomic or ethnic factors influence body image (Dolan, 1990), so, I posed this research question with a gap in my knowledge of how body image may be experienced differently by women in a culture other than my own.

Choosing phenomenology as a research method requires that the participants be

articulate, comfortable enough to volunteer, and have the time to participate, hence the selection of participants is limited by the nature of the research method.

As a counselling psychology student I am motivated to discover ways of facilitating and supporting the development of clients' comfort with their bodies, and to model that process through my own personal growth. Through this study I hoped to discover some themes common to the experiences of women feeling comfortable with their bodies, with the intent to apply this knowledge to my work as a counsellor.

Participants

In qualitative research methods, such as phenomenology, the selection of participants is purposeful, in that criteria are specified to determine that respondents have experienced the phenomenon to be studied. The participants selected must have experienced the phenomenon and be articulate enough to illuminate it (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). In this study the participants identified themselves as having a positive body image, that is, expressed that generally they felt quite comfortable with and in their bodies, felt that their body was adequate and did not wish to change it. The respondents were able to verbally express their experiences.

For a phenomenological study the desirable participants need to have experienced the phenomenon for a sufficient amount of time and be able to reflect upon their experience clearly (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). As there is not an optimum length of time specified for this reflection, for the purposes of this study the participants indicated that they had felt this positive attitude towards their bodies for a minimum of two years. It has been suggested in some studies that generally maintaining

a change in appearance for two years or more is an indicator that a woman's body image has somewhat stabilized and she is able to reflect on her experience of bodily comfort (Millman, 1980; Mitchell et al., 1988; Stunkard & Penick, 1979). Before some women undergo a weight loss program or make other changes to their appearance, they may have expectations of how their life will change when their body is changed. After their appearance changes, it may take some time for women to adjust to the real impact this change has had on their lives. For some women, it may take two or more years before arriving at an acceptance of this change, particularly in the case of weight loss (Millman, 1980). Relapse into eating disorders or gaining back lost weight often occurs within two years after initial recovery from an eating disorder or after significant weight loss (Mitchell et al., 1988; Stunkard & Penick, 1979), suggesting that the woman's body image is still undergoing change. In order to select women meeting this criteria, those women who were actively attempting to alter their present body image were not selected. The initial phone contact included questions to clarify this (see Appendix B).

Phenomenological research focusses in depth on information-rich cases, therefore a relatively small sample of participants was selected for the study. The researcher interviewed seven participants, a number that proved adequate to provide enough data to exhaust common themes, to elaborate on the phenomenon, and for themes not to occur by chance. Although common themes were apparent to the researcher by the fifth interview, two more participants were included in the study to ensure that no new themes were evident that had not been apparent in the experiences of the other 5 women.

Procedure

Participants were recruited primarily through the placement of an article in a local newspaper, in which the researcher described the purpose of the study and the selection criteria (see Appendix A), and by word of mouth. A newspaper article was chosen as a recruitment method in order to present the selection criteria as clearly as possible, with the intent of attracting participants who best represented the phenomenon.

Women interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher by phone. At that time, the potential participant was given more information about the study and the researcher (i.e., the purpose of the study, the procedure, and the Counselling Psychology program). The researcher determined if the respondent met the selection criteria. The respondents were screened and selected in the order that they contacted the researcher. Sixteen women responded to the article. Two other women heard of the study through word of mouth. The first seven women to meet the selection criteria and who volunteered to participate in the study were recruited. Two women who called chose not to participate once they had discussed the study with the researcher. One of these women decided the time frame of the study was not convenient for her and the other did not give a specific reason for declining. A mutually agreeable time and location was established for an in depth, tape-recorded interview with each respondent.

The interview in phenomenological research, as described by Colaizzi (1978), requires that the researcher "be present to her subject(s) in a special way" (p.64). Establishment of good rapport and a climate of trust and collaboration, is essential to the

interview process. Heppner et al. (1992) compare phenomenological research to a counselling interview in that, "the researcher tries to gain an empathic understanding of the subject's frame of reference" (p.198). The researcher in this study listened and responded to the women with empathic reflection and open-ended questions, in a non-judgmental, non-directive way, in order to understand as closely as possible each woman's experience of bodily comfort and to facilitate a non-threatening atmosphere.

The interviews took place in a private setting comfortable for both the researcher and participant (the participant's home, the researcher's home or an office in the Counselling Psychology building). Open-ended, minimally structured interviews were used to collect the data because they are most conducive to in depth description of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990). This style of interviewing accesses the perspective of the person being interviewed and allows salient issues to emerge without imposing the interviewers preconceived notions of the phenomenon.

The researcher prepared an orienting statement to establish the focus of the interview (see Appendix B). Any prompts were open ended, and used to encourage further exploration. The researcher needed to probe for significant details in order to understand the meaning of each woman's story to her, and for clarification. Silence was used to allow the participant to process and clarify her own thoughts. The researcher kept the interview focussed and returned to any aspects of the phenomenon that were brought up by the participant and that required further elaboration.

The transcription of the first participant's initial interview was reviewed by an external person trained in phenomenological methods to ensure that the researcher was

not leading or imposing her own values during the interview. Because the first participant talked more in collective terms about women's experiences than about her own personal experience, the researcher invited the other participants to use a lifeline diagram as a visual tool in focussing on their own experiences of comfort with their bodies. The women in the study used the lifeline to varying degrees, some finding it very useful to mark down the events and feelings they perceived as important to their body image development. Other women, feeling more confident and comfortable with mainly verbal expression of their experiences, made less use of the lifeline. In addition to the lifelines and transcribed interviews, the researcher kept process notes to record important aspects of the interaction that were not apparent on tape, such as body and facial expressions.

The length of the initial interview was approximately two hours, which proved to be enough time for each woman to share her experience of feeling comfortable with her body. One interview was sufficient for most of the women to share their experience, however, each woman was invited to give another interview, or to call the researcher following the first interview, if she wished to further illuminate her experience. One woman requested a second interview to more fully describe her experience. The women were also encouraged to provide other material such as, journals, poetry, artwork or photographs they felt might further express their experience.

After the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed by the researcher, and a synopsis of the themes common to all the women had been completed, each participant was given her own biographical synopsis and a synopsis of the common themes, as

written in Chapter Four of this thesis, to review. The researcher then conducted a validation interview with each participant at which time each of the women was invited to respond to these results, and offer any further information about the phenomenon that may have been omitted. This validation process is one way to minimize gaps in the data, or to address aspects of the phenomenon that a respondent may have overlooked (Osborne, 1990). It is important to have as complete a description of each woman's experience as possible in order to further refine the themes and more accurately reflect the essence of the experience of meaning making for the women in the study.

The women in this study all said the themes represented their experiences of comfort with their bodies and suggested only minor changes to the synopsis of the results. One participant brought "regular women's magazines" from Holland to her validation interview to illustrate the cultural attitude towards body appearance she had grown up with. Another women showed the researcher photographs of a time she remembered "feeling very happy and content" with herself and her appearance. Two of the participants required further clarification of the purpose of their demographic information in the synopsis. The changes suggested by the women were made, and additional information given during the validation interviews was added to each woman's synopsis as applicable.

Data Analysis

After each interview the tape was transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the researcher. The process described by Colaizzi (1978) was followed for analysis of the data. The transcription were read and reread. Significant statements relating to the

phenomenon were extracted. The researcher then began the interpretive aspect of this research method, by ascribing a general meaning to each statement, a step referred to as the identification of salient themes. Each transcription underwent this interpretive process, and then themes were organized into clusters. Continually referring back to the original transcript is considered important in order to validate this process of interpretation.

The validation interviews discussed previously enabled the researcher to represent the women's experience fully and accurately, without having imposed her own assumptions and presuppositions on the data. The researcher incorporated any new information from the validation interview into the final written analysis. The results were then "integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic" (Colaizzi, 1978, p.61) and a statement of its fundamental structure was identified as clearly as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter will include a brief synopsis of the women's stories, a listing of common themes found in their experiences of feeling comfortable with their bodies, and a detailed discussion of the themes. Each woman experienced a process that enabled them to become comfortable with their bodies. For each of them the context of culture, family, relationships, and career affected this process. A discussion of the context, the process and their apparent relationship to each other will also be included.

The Women's Stories

Seven women volunteered to participate in this study. Each of the women chose their own pseudonym. Following is a description of each of the participants:

Liz. Liz, age 23, is the middle child of five children. She has an older brother and sister and younger brother and sister. She is 5 feet 5 and a half inches tall and weighs about 142 pounds. She has been maintaining approximately this weight for 4 to 5 years, slightly less in the summers when she is more active. Her father, a doctor and her mother, a university professor, divorced when Liz was 14 or 15 years old. At the time of the divorce she wished to live with her Dad but "her Mom wouldn't let her." Liz's relationship with her mother is still strained, particularly around the issue of Liz not being in school. Liz came on her own to Canada from Holland when she was 18, living first in Montreal and then most recently in Vancouver. Currently she is single and a live in nanny for a 3 year old girl. In Holland Liz attended university for one year studying geography, and since coming to Vancouver, has taken Interior Design courses at BCIT.

She also works part time in a clothing store as a sales person. She speaks six languages.

She recalled feeling overweight as a child, from about age 6, and was teased by other family members about "being fat." One painful incident she remembered was being taken to Weight Watchers by her mother when she was 8, having been told she was going to get a Brownie outfit. Although she felt like "the biggest and the ugliest in the family", at the same time she felt strong because of her muscle development, having been a competitive gymnast for 13 to 14 years. The whole family was active. They were involved with gymnastics, had a pool in their yard and frequently went biking and hiking. Liz also played field hockey. In gymnastics Liz won medals but she said that "compared to the rest of my family I wasn't very good at it because I was overweight."

Around age 12 or 13 Liz lost weight and started to "think about myself more positively." However her older sister has always been thinner and Liz still compares herself to her sister. Liz feels healthier than her sister, but "a little bit overweight" in comparison, although she "would never complain about a certain part because I think my body is very in balance", in other words proportioned. Her sister has gained weight so Liz is relieved now that she is no longer the heaviest woman in the family and will no longer feel pressure from the family about her weight.

Liz's menarche was at 11 years of age and she did not recall this event as influential in her body image development. During the time she was 14 to 16 years old Liz remembered being particularly aware of her body, when she became "interested in guys." It seemed to her that at this time when her body was changing "you get a lot of attention from a lot of people andyou're kind of forced to pay attention to your body,

but mainly because everybody else is doing it." She recalled a 6 month period during her teens when "once after I broke up with a guy I lost like 40 pounds" as a result of being depressed and upset. She also travelled in Egypt at that time and attributes some of the weight loss to the lack of food there. She felt uncomfortable being "skinny." After that she gained weight and has maintained it at around 142.

Liz made several references to cultural differences in the way she has experienced her body. Liz grew up experiencing topless sunbathing as an acceptable public activity and was surprised when this was not so in Canada. Her experience in Europe, and in her family, is that people are more comfortable with nudity in general and are less inhibited about exposing their bodies. She also noticed that more people here are doing fitness "workouts" on a regular basis and "paying more attention to their bodies" through structured activities. In Holland Liz felt "very average" in appearance, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, but she found here that many people complemented her on being "very pretty." She acknowledged that part of feeling positive about her body is "I guess thinking that other people think you have a nice body", particularly her friends. She is aware that her choices of dress are somewhat determined by who she is going to be seen by, as evidenced by her comment, "Like if I go to Safeway to get some whatever...I would just wear anything, doesn't matter how I look like, but if I would go over to a friend's house to even go for coffee I would dress a little bit different just to, because I know the friend... ." She included "being happy with yourself and being happy with what you are doing" as important contributing factors to feeling comfortable with her body.

In her late teens Liz enjoyed challenging people's judgments of her by "being radical" or "being different" in both her dress and behavior. More recently, at 20 or 21 she recalls consciously thinking "I don't have to play this game anymore" and began feeling that "it's more important what's in your brains and in your head and just your personality than your body." Liz expressed surprise and frustration at the negative feelings so many of the women at her workplace and in her social life have towards their bodies.

Robyn. Robyn, age 29, is the third of four girls. She is single and living with her boyfriend. Her weight is about 133 pounds, a weight that she has maintained for the last few years. From age 18 to her early twenties she was about 120 pounds and then gained and leveled off at 133 pounds. She is 5 feet, 5 inches tall. Presently she is working in the computer technology field, after obtaining a diploma in Computer Systems Technology. She continues to be a part time university student working towards a degree in Business Administration.

Robyn's parents divorced when she was 20. Her father, a high school teacher, has remarried. Robyn always admired her father and sought to gain his approval through excelling in sports and academics at school. She recalled thinking that her mother didn't have "any emotions for us at all." Robyn related several ways in which her father had influenced her feelings about herself.

Menarche occurred at 15, which she perceived as late, and was somewhat anxious about. Robyn recalled having a "boyish" figure when the other girls were becoming curvy. She was self conscious about being "flat" and feels that this was the time that she

felt the worst about her body. During this time she recalled being emotionally upset too, feeling torn between two groups of her peers and wanting to be "friends with everybody." Although she was anxious to become "curvy", when she began to develop hips she became worried about getting fat. She was always active in sports at school and in her adult years continues with regularly running, cycling or working out at the "Y". At her current weight Robyn feels good about her muscle tone and low body fat content, even though she perceives her weight to be heavy for her height. She attributed a big part of her comfort with her body to her involvement in sports. Not only does she feel physically good, but when she is participating in sports she feels strong, confident and proud of her ability. As well as enjoying competition in sports, she has always felt a sense of competition and "fighting to be better than her two older sisters."

She likes to appear "natural", with little or no makeup or perfume, and in sporty clothes. This is the way most of her boyfriends have liked her to be, although she did make reference to how her manner of dress may vary depending on the occasion, how she is feeling and who she is with. She has had feedback from her boyfriends that "they have always liked my body." Since high school she has had at least four long term, committed relationships where she felt respected and like "we're kind of more like partners than like one over the other." She values her relationships with men but in relating her experiences she expresses some embarrassment, "It's terrible. A lot of my adult life, I measure it by the boyfriends I've had... ." She values her female friends for their loyalty, their different interests, and the level of intimacy that she has with them.

She associated the times when she felt "ugly" and less comfortable with her

appearance with emotional turmoil. These were times such as when she had broken up with a boyfriend, when she confronted her Dad about his alcoholism, when she was unhappy with her work, and when she didn't have time to exercise as much. Her times of greatest comfort with her appearance are when she was feeling good in a relationship with a boyfriend, particularly her current one, when she was feeling satisfied with work, and at peace with her family, and was able to exercise.

Angela. Angela, age 43, is the fourth child of 5 children. The two oldest are girls, the third and fifth are boys. She is 5 feet, 10 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds. She describes her background as "rural working class." She lives with her male partner of 10 years and has a son who was born when she was 21 and single. She has a bachelor's degree and works as an editor and technical writer.

Menarche occurred for Angela when she was 16 and she recalled this time, around 15 to 16, as the time she felt the least comfortable with her body. A recollection of her father and older brother "harrassing" her about her lack of development stood out for her as a particularly embarrassing and humiliating "crucial event." She was relieved when her body finally began to mature. At puberty she began to gain weight until she was about 19 or 20, when she describes herself as "quite plump." Her highest weight was about 160. During this time of weight gain, after the initial relief of menarche and until her pregnancy, she recalled some fluctuation in her weight and also a number of changes in her attitude towards her body and her weight. For example, at one time in order to lose weight she "lived on Fresca for two weeks." At another time "for awhile I dressed like a boy because I wanted to, I didn't want to be seen as sexual."

During high school the female ideal that Angela wished for was a "Twiggy or Jean Shrimpton" look...thin. She recalled dressing and cutting her hair according to what fashion magazines and her girlfriends thought were attractive. She began to notice that what boys were attracted to and what girls thought were attractive weren't necessarily the same thing.

Once at university, at 17, Angela began a time of exploration of relationships. She discovered that "men have a much broader range of appreciation of the female body than women give them credit for." She described herself as having wide hips, a big bottom and narrow shoulders, which did not match her previous ideal of female beauty, but she acquired an "accumulation of evidence that men are attracted to me" and that these men were also interesting, enjoyable to be with, and "normal." By her early 20s she felt that "her body was in the range of normal." At the same time she recognized that she was sexually attractive to men, she became aware that "there were all sorts of people that were interested in you for your intellect, your sense of humour, your ambitions... ." Male professors, "father figures", valued her intellect and ability. She began to view her father and brother's attitudes towards women as "peculiar."

Before and after the birth of her son, she considered herself "slightly overweight" but felt wonderful about herself. Her male friends "kept letting her know how wonderful she looked." Since the birth of her son, Angela has felt very comfortable with her body and her weight has stayed around 140. She is comfortable with and enjoys her sexuality and has received feedback from her sexual partners that they appreciate this quality in her. Her partner now is especially accepting and appreciative of her in

all aspects, including her character and her body.

Clara. Clara, age 38, is the second eldest of five children. She has an older and younger brother and two younger sisters. Her family, including her mother and father live in Colombia in South America. Clara came on her own to Canada to go to university when she was 18. She lives with her husband of 13 years, her daughter and her son. Her daughter has just finished grade one and her son is a toddler. Clara has a university degree and works as a biologist in a lab.

Clara is 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs 120 pounds. She recalled only three times during her adult years when she gained any weight, twice with her pregnancies and once during one year when she lived in Winnipeg. She gained about 30 pounds with her pregnancies, which she felt was reasonable and average, and about 20 pounds in Winnipeg which she lost when she went back to Columbia for a visit. Her diet in Winnipeg was quite different than at home, including many bakery products. Otherwise she has always been thin, in fact as she was growing up she was considered too skinny by Colombian standards. Her skin is dark, and she reports that lighter skin is seen as more attractive in her culture. She remembered feeling self conscious in school about her skinniness and not being as "curvy and mature" as the other girls.

Her menarche occurred at age 14, which she felt was late. She was thrilled when she came to Canada and her appearance was considered by others to be "exotic." She feels lucky that she doesn't gain weight. Her sense is that obesity is not common in Colombia and in general people in Colombia are not as concerned about their bodies as they are in North America. The notion of dieting or diet food did not exist for her when she was

living there. She feels that aging for women is more acceptable and respected in Colombia than here.

Clara views her father and mother as quite tolerant of differences and "liberal" in their politics, even though they are Catholic in a very Catholic country. She feels that all of the children in the family have been loved unconditionally and supported. It was always expected that she would "be a something, an architect I suppose, or somebody." However, even when the children did not live up to family expectations, like her sister who has been divorced twice, the children are still supported and accepted. Clara reports that her mother was somewhat "radical and different" than other Colombian mothers in that she didn't pay much attention to looking fashionable. Clara described her father as a quiet intellectual who was not very involved with his children.

Clara attended an all girls' school and does not recall appearance being a concern for her at all. She was a quiet student until her last two years of school when she was active in sports, student politics, volunteer work, and "fairly radical stuff." One particular teacher, a Canadian man whom she now knows is gay, exposed her and her fellow students to the politics of her country, the oppression of the poor and enabled her to see the realities of what was going on around her. She saw this relationship as significant in influencing her politics and teaching her that she could have an impact on the world. She felt that he was responsible for a huge change in the way she saw herself; "...that is a big change but that had nothing to do with my body though,...just myself, you know, in general, my self image, my perception of myself, what was important in my life, what became, what has always been from that time... ."

Another important influence reported by Clara in her development was her exposure to feminist politics and her involvement at a women's center at the university. She admired a woman who introduced her to the book "Our Bodies, Ourselves", a woman she considered interesting and smart. Through this literature and attendance at workshops on women's sexuality and health, Clara learned a lot about herself and her body and sexual stereotyping. This was quite a contrast to her traditional sheltered life at home and school. She now speaks up critically and questions advertising and literature, and is conscious about raising her children in a non-sexist way. She has a network of friends who are feminists.

Relationships with boys and men were of no interest to her prior to coming to Canada and she considers herself a "late bloomer." She then discovered that men were attracted to her. When her husband was attracted to her she was "surprised that somebody that good-looking could be attracted to her." The fact that "he thinks that she is the most beautiful woman in the world" and that they have had such a solid relationship over the years, contributes to her self confidence.

Although she feels comfortable with her appearance, she is surprised that in recent years she has paid more attention to things like shaving her legs, which she didn't do when she first met her husband. She also wishes she was more fit and had more energy like when she felt her best at age 25. She is concerned about her children, especially her daughter, growing up in a culture with so much pressure to conform to rigid standards.

Moy Moy. Moy Moy, age 58, is the middle child of three children. She has two brothers, the eldest being 5 years older than her, the other is two years younger. When her older brother left home Moy Moy enjoyed feeling like she "was in charge." She reports being close to her younger brother. Both her mother and father are no longer alive. Moy Moy is divorced and has a grown daughter and son. She lives in her own home with her son. She is Australian, born to a Chinese mother and Polish father. She is 5 feet, 4 1/2 inches tall and weighs about 125 pounds. She has maintained this weight for most of her adult life.

As a child she worked physically hard for her father helping him in construction and walked a lot because her father didn't drive. She still is very active and says that "she never sits still." Growing up in the depression, in her family, taught her to value hard work, to be frugal with money and to be resourceful. Character and spiritual development were emphasized more than appearance and body. In discussing how she prefers to wear clothes that are not revealing, she recalled that her father was strict and taught her that "Your spirit and your soul and your character and all that is more important than your physical body."

Moy Moy graduated from high school and continued her education through business classes at night school. She left Australia when she was 21 to travel and pursue a career in singing and/or acting in England. After giving this a try and doing some modelling work, she revised her plans and began working in offices. She currently works as a secretary in business. She returned to Australia at age 24, after travelling in Europe, the U.S., and Canada. She stayed for 5 years, but after "tasting a bit of life"

through travelling, felt that this was too narrow a place to live. She then emigrated to Vancouver. Through this process of gaining more education and being exposed to more people of mixed ethnic background, she began to feel more comfortable with her appearance and more confident in her abilities. Through modelling, acting and various work experiences she realized that others found her attractive and she no longer felt inferior or self conscious. Her experience in the performing arts field also confirmed for her that she did not want such an "unstable" and "immoral" work environment. She reports that men find her attractive, although she did have some experiences of racism because of her mixed ethnic appearance.

The time she recalls as feeling the least comfortable with her appearance was at 18. She did not recall puberty or menarche at 14 to have been a concern. Throughout her childhood she had been subjected to teasing and rejection because of her Asian background, and at 18 she also felt unsettled about her future and pressured to make a decision. She feels she "ate a lot of food to escape the decision-making process." She said she really wasn't fat but looked fatter in photographs. By age 21 she had learned to "cut out foods and things like that" to control her weight. She then was "really slim and I was quite happy with my figure." She had gradually decided on some goals too. At age 30 Moy Moy felt she "probably looked better than I ever did." She felt "mature mentally and physically." Motherhood was "one of her main goals" so when she became pregnant at 34 she was very excited. She had a healthy pregnancy and "walked a lot and did all the things I was supposed to do...I wasn't worried about fatness." Motherhood feels like a "good accomplishment" to her.

Moy Moy values her health and attributes her comfort with her body partly to the fact that she has been relatively healthy. Although menopause was not as smooth as she would have liked and she now has difficulty getting enough sleep, she is still content with her body. She did not recall any other events that affected how she felt about her appearance.

Anne. Anne, age 49, is an only child. She is 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs 120 pounds. Her mother died when Anne was 14 and she was raised by her father until she left home at 18. She married at age 20 and had her daughter when she was 35. Anne is divorced and lives with her male partner of 5 years and her daughter. She grew up in Germany after the war in a "very strict Catholic environment." She attended all girls' schools and a boarding school for awhile in her early teens. As an adult she continued her education while she worked, pursuing a career in purchasing management. She works in this field today.

Anne admired her mother who was a career woman. Shortly after her mother's death a relative said to Anne, "You didn't cry enough." Up to that point Anne had taken pride in "being brave" in coping with her grief. After that relative's comment Anne recalled saying to herself, "You can't please everybody." This was her first recollection of wanting to rebel against other people's expectations of her.

Anne recalled her childhood being focussed on achieving in school and being career oriented. The main emphasis on appearance was following the behavioral and dress codes of Catholicism, which Anne views as "restricted and repressive." At boarding school "they were very fussy that girls didn't show themselves and didn't touch

their bodies and didn't show their bodies... ." Fashion was not important. Women were expected to enter the work world because they were needed. Anne recalled value being placed on career success and income. She attributed the post war economic needs of Germany to the non-sexist career environment. Food was scarce so dieting was unheard of. She feels that "what I experienced in the way of dress restrictions and repressiveness I think they have in eating now", referring to dieting among adolescent girls. Overall she recalled her childhood as the time when she was the least comfortable with her body.

Her first introduction to makeup and fashion was on a student exchange to England when she was 16. It was also at 16 that she first menstruated, which she did not recall as particularly problematic. During her late teens there were many men stationed near her town. This meant that at local dances the girls were in demand, so Anne recalls there always being an abundance of dates and men interested in her. She recalled this time as being fun and interesting. Even though she went through some self consciousness about having glasses and braces she still felt accepted and attractive.

Anne rebelled against the repressiveness of her Catholic upbringing first by getting herself removed from the boarding school and then by moving to England when she was 18. She recalled "getting more relaxed" about her body once she was out of the school and said that "the boys coaxed you out of it." Her comfort with her body gradually increased up to the time she married at 20. At this time she was at her heaviest, 140, but was not concerned about this weight. Shortly after this she lost weight and was about 130. In comparison to how comfortable she feels about her body now, she realizes that

during her marriage she didn't feel too terrific. Not being able to become pregnant was a contributing factor in her discomfort at that time. Sex became an "automated process" and she also sensed that her husband "had the feeling that I wasn't as o.k. as I might have been."

When she became pregnant, after having given up the possibility, she was ecstatic. She recalled feeling wonderful about her body. Her sense of herself changed also. She had become used to functioning in an all male business world, becoming known as "the dragon lady" by some of her coworkers. At home she was usually very "no-nonsense and self sufficient." In order to feel accepted she "always made an effort to be perceived as neutral." While pregnant she enjoyed and allowed herself to be pampered by her husband for the first time. During her pregnancy she felt like a pioneer in her field regarding maternity leave and daycare as these options were not as common then. Gradually, however, her relationship with her husband deteriorated. She sadly referred to their marriage as "a marriage of convenience." They were compatible in their career goals and shared interests. When she compared the feeling she has with her present partner to how she felt in her marriage, she recognized what was missing in that relationship. She described the relationship she has now as "really falling in love" and "connecting on an emotional level."

At 42 Anne took a serious look at how she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Her mother and grandmother had both died at 42, so Anne felt like she had a gift living past this time. She wanted a change and was open to whatever form it might take. At the same time her career dreams were shattered when she was passed over for an important

job promotion and ultimately fired.

When Anne met the man she is with today, the way she felt about her body, her self and life in general changed drastically. Up until this new relationship she described her life as "controlled" and "lacking exuberance" and "falling in with expectations" and being "self-sufficient." Now she describes herself as "sensual, having more depth, feeling desired and desirous, feminine, more uninhibited, mushy and sentimental." Life is less "black and white" and she lives more from "day to day."

She is concerned because her own daughter is very aware of her weight and is preoccupied with dieting and fitness. Three of Anne's friends have daughters that suffer from anorexia so this has heightened her concern about her daughter's body image. She is grateful for growing up "in a freedom that they don't experience here."

Tillie. Tillie, age 46, is the fourth child of seven children. She has an older sister and five brothers, two of whom were children her mother conceived in relationships outside her marriage. Both her father, an international consultant, and her mother were away from home a lot and Tillie "assumed tremendous adult responsibilities at a very young age." She admires her father and describes her difficult relationship with her mother as "tender." She is currently "on strike from her mother" and has been working on setting limits in their relationship.

Tillie came to the west coast from Quebec as a child, speaking only French. She recalls this as a very difficult adjustment. In spite of this she did well in school, until she had so many responsibilities at home during high school that her grades suffered. After high school Tillie travelled and worked in a variety of jobs, was trained in Early

Childhood Education and then worked in the child care field. When child care became too stressful she left this field and has been working as a transit operator for almost four years. She is divorced and has lived with her male partner for the last four years. She does not have children of her own, but has cared for her partner's children. She is 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weighs 156 pounds.

Tillie did not have many memories of her childhood and did not readily recall how she felt about her body then. She had some recollection of menarche occurring at 12, feeling "pretty tubby as a 13 year old", and getting into eating desserts with her friends after school. She remembered feeling ashamed of having to wear her sister's hand-me-downs because they didn't fit, and said her mother didn't seem to realize this until too late. She also remembered rules in her Catholic faith about how long you could kiss, and that there was a lot of shame associated with sexual development. She had positive memories of being in love with her boyfriend then, who is now her partner.

Her weight has fluctuated over her adult years from 125 to 170 pounds. She felt her body seems to settle at around 135 to 140 for most of the time. In spite of her weight fluctuations, she has always felt that she has an "average proportioned shape" and feels "lucky" that she can always fit into standard sizes of clothing. When she left Vancouver for Montreal at 18 and went travelling she was just under 140 and continued to be that weight until her mid-twenties when she was working in Tunisia. During her year there she went up to 170 pounds and recalled "being out of her comfort zone" culturally. The Arab men sexually harassed her and she felt that gaining weight would discourage this attention. Apparently it did not work. She travelled in Europe for

several months then returned to London, England. There she went to a doctor for injections to lose weight and went down to 125 pounds. She described needing all her coping skills in England to make friends and find work. She felt that she needed to not be fat in order to be accepted by friends and employers. "I shrunk again because I had to in order to cope." She recalled living on oranges and chicken and said, "I had no sense of mortality or connecting to myself... ." She has had sexual relationships with many men over the years and described herself as "promiscuous and a product of the 60's." There was a time when she realized that she could not get pregnant and then "thought of myself as being a sexual being after awhile....my body felt like it was designed to be a sexual object." She knows she was fertile at one time because she was pregnant and had an abortion. She went through a stage of wondering if her infertility was a result of her sexual activity over the years.

When she returned to Canada she went back up to around 140 pounds and stabilized there for "a long time." This was the time she got into the child care field. She recalled over the years a number of times when weight was a concern for her. To please one boyfriend she dieted through Weight Watchers. In her younger years she used laxatives in an attempt to feel slimmer. After gaining weight when she quit smoking, she contemplated going back to smoking for weight control. During the next few years Tillie experienced a spiralling down in her emotional well being, getting married and divorced, leaving her job and moving to the Okanagan in the hopes of "making a lifestyle change". She remembered going down to 130 once when a friend committed suicide, at a time when Tillie was living with an abusive man. She felt that her emotional upsets kept her from

eating very much and kept her weight down. She recalled thinking to herself at that time, "... I'm glad I'm emotionally disturbed now because this keeps me thin", and is now dismayed at that "bizarre" thought. Although she remembered some "good help" from the Women's section of the Employment office, she still found being unemployed a crisis in her life. She reported getting into a pattern of "self abusive behavior" and eventually was charged with shoplifting. This was a turning point in her life as she got some help again and began a personal journey of self discovery through a therapy group and through reading. She credited her exposure to feminist ideology as important to her change in attitude towards herself and her body.

After a brief stint working with young offenders she realized this kind of work was too emotionally exhausting for her. Her partner dared her to apply to drive a bus and when she did she got the job. She found that "all of a sudden she was making twice the wages" and "nobody could beat me up anymore." She was developing a closer relationship with her current partner and was feeling better about herself. She has quit smoking in the last few years and has made the choice to be honest in her relationships and more responsible in her decisions. This has meant discontinuing a long term affair with a married man, and making a commitment to be faithful to and open with her partner about her past. She feels a great deal of acceptance, commitment and love from her partner. She described her feeling of comfort with herself and her body, "I guess I get to be me now...I get to relax", and acknowledged this is a process, that "the transition is still being made to the good." At her present weight of 156 she feels comfortable and is surprised because she remembers being 20 pounds lighter and she wasn't any happier.

While living with her partner, she cared for his dying mother in their home. This experience made her question how she thought about her body. She now wants to live each day to the fullest and does not want to put her life on hold waiting to look a certain way. She also feels as if she "has earned the right to be comfortable."

She feels both sad for other women who are unhappy with their bodies and frustrated when they put their lives on hold until they change their bodies. She is concerned about her stepdaughter who is a ballerina and is showing signs of being anorexic.

Common Themes

The process of data analysis yielded five common themes which were extracted from the women's in-depth interviews. Each of the themes mirrors the experience of all the women. The quotations used in explicating the themes were chosen because they most accurately represent the essence of the women's experiences of feeling comfortable with their bodies. The following themes are not presented in any particular order or sequence and are not suggestive of relative importance or frequency in the women's attempts to meaningfully construct a sense of comfort with their bodies:

1. Sense of Validation.
2. Sense of Self Worth.
3. Experience of Rejecting External Standards.
4. Sense of Integration.
5. Sense of Being at Home in Their Bodies.

The Context and Process

All of the five themes occurred within a context of each woman's experience of family dynamics, relationships, and cultural expectations for women. Each of these contexts appeared to either facilitate or impede the women's development of a sense of comfort with their bodies and themselves. In articulating their stories the women appeared to identify their experience of comfort with their bodies as a process. In the process of developing greater self acceptance the women became increasingly more comfortable with their bodies. This developmental process seems to have involved defining self within the above contexts, integrating masculine and feminine characteristics and moving towards self acceptance. Each woman appeared to have challenged or tested to some degree, the limits of ideals for female beauty, her own sexuality, "rules" regarding stereotypical roles, her spiritual or religious beliefs, and her own capabilities, as part of the process of achieving self acceptance and comfort with her body. Each overcame some sense of shame associated with being a female and related to their sexuality and their body shape, size, and appearance. For all the women the process of becoming comfortable with their bodies appeared to involve rejecting previously held negative views of themselves and their bodies and integrating new, more affirming views.

The comfort level that each woman is currently experiencing with her body seems to represent a stage in an ongoing process towards increased comfort and is subject to some fluctuation from day to day, depending on how comfortable each woman is feeling about herself as a woman. The discussion of each theme will relate how the

women have experienced comfort with their bodies so far in their process, and what meaning the women have made of their experiences within the contexts of family, relationships and culture.

Discussion of the Themes

Sense of Validation. Each of the women in the study expressed that a sense of validation from significant people in their lives was a prerequisite for their self acceptance and sense of comfort with their bodies. The women reported the importance of feeling valued for their intellect, abilities and character, as well as for their appearance. As the women began to feel valued for all aspects of themselves, and consequently adequate as women they seemed to feel more free to focus on developing and enjoying other aspects of themselves, and were less concerned about their bodies and/or any potential physical inadequacies.

The first context in which the women experienced validation, or lack of validation was in their families. It was in this arena that the women first learned what role their bodies played in how they were valued as females. For example, Angela recalled feeling "humiliated" and valued mainly for her sexual attributes when her father and older brother teased her about her lack of physical development as a young teen. She remembered "the one rational thought that saved me" when she said to herself, "this is not my responsibility and I have no control over this", realizing that her body developed at it's own pace and the perceptions and beliefs of her father and brother were out of her control. In recalling how she came to value herself, she remembers being motivated to seek out more validating and affirming relationships with men like her other younger

brother because "He saw all of me and he would listen to me...".

Other women recalled comparing their bodies and themselves to other family members in order to gain a sense of validation, not always successfully. For example, Liz recalled being teased about "being fat" and comparing herself to her siblings as a child and always feeling like "the heaviest one in her family." She also recalled feeling humiliated when her mother took her to Weight Watchers when she was eight years old, further contributing to her sense of inadequacy. As she grew up, Liz looked to other contexts for validation.

In contrast, Anne, Clara, and Moy Moy attributed some of their comfort with their bodies as children to the fact that their families placed little emphasis on what their bodies were like, and they recalled feeling valued for who they were and what they could achieve or learn, not for how they looked. For example, Moy Moy recalled her father telling her that "your spirit and your soul and your character...is more important than your physical body", leaving her free to develop and focus on other aspects of herself. As the women grew up and experienced relationships outside the family, particularly from puberty onward, their definition of themselves as females and their feelings about their bodies seemed to be either confirmed or reshaped by the feedback they received in new relationships.

All of the women in the study were heterosexual and expressed that feeling attractive both sexually and as a person to men, particularly those in their intimate relationships, was a contributing factor to their sense of feeling validated as women, and in feeling comfortable with their bodies and their femininity. Angela summarized the

feeling of total validation she has in her relationship with her present partner: "Living with someone who responds to my body as my body... that part of the reason that he likes it is because it's mine, 'cause it belongs to me, rather than the other way around, but it's part of the package and he likes the package... " contributes to her sense of being prized, validated and comfortable with her body the way it is.

The women also expressed that feeling validated as "an equal" or as "a partner" by a significant partner in their lives and feeling "safe" to express the whole range of their character increased their sense of comfort with their bodies. Anne described this "freedom of expression" with her current partner. With him, she feels "a big change" in her comfort with her body that she didn't realize was possible, and she attributes this feeling that she calls "feminine or human validation", to "the experience of feeling yourself loved and loving and having it reciprocated."

When they did not feel the sense of acceptance they needed and desired, the women sought validation in relationships in other contexts. Both Robyn and Tillie experienced therapeutic relationships with professionals that enabled them to feel validated as women. For example, Tillie described the validation she received in a therapy group as the experience of getting "understood in a very serious way" and "getting the right kind of help." Both women saw this therapy as being important in facilitating their movement towards self acceptance, which contributed to an increased sense of comfort with their bodies.

There were a number of other ways in which the women acquired a sense of validation and comfort with themselves and their bodies such as; their formal or

informal education, the experience of their ethnicity in the cultural setting they lived in, and the historical context in which they grew up. For example, at university, Angela felt for the first time that "her intellect, her sense of humour, her ambitions" were being valued, especially by significant men such as her professors and men who were attracted to her, so she was able to begin overcoming her previously held belief that her body was the most important part of being a woman. She sensed that there was a broader range of what men considered "normal" in women's shapes than she had previously thought, and that she fit within this range.

At one time some of the women had felt inadequate and unattractive for their skin color or their body shape and size, but in Canada, where cultural standards for female beauty were different, they found that the physical features representative of their ethnic background were considered more attractive and acceptable than they had been in their countries of origin. For example, Liz was called "pretty" and Clara "exotic" by Canadians. Clara no longer felt "too skinny" in Canada. They felt validated as attractive women and felt more comfortable with their bodies than they had as children in the culture in which they were raised.

On the other hand, Liz, Clara, Anne, and Moy Moy all recalled less rigid standards for female beauty in the cultures that they grew up in, when they observe what women in Canada experience now. They reported that their experience of growing up in a culture with a wider range of prescribed standards for women's beauty enabled them to feel a greater sense that their bodies were within a generally acceptable range than many Canadian women do.

The ages of the women ranged from 23 to 58 so their experiences of cultural expectations for women, and of political and social climate varied, and therefore each woman's experience of validation occurred in a different historical context. For example, Anne was raised just after WW II in Germany and in comparing her experience to young women today she said, "we were far more career-oriented" because "the women there [in Germany] had to stay in the workforce because they were needed." She felt valued for her scholastic achievements and recalled that "it wasn't important how we looked to anybody else." Both she and Moy Moy experienced living during a depression where "we had to learn to do things ourselves." They both recalled a strong emphasis at that time on economic survival with women being valued equally for their efforts in this role, and not for what they looked like, resulting in validation for other aspects of themselves.

Sense of Self Worth. The women reported that they felt most comfortable with their bodies when they were feeling proud of their accomplished goals and satisfied with the way they related to others. The experiences that each woman reported deriving a sense of self worth from varied: travels, careers, athletics, education, and roles such as mother, friend or lover. All of the women perceived that their sense of self worth had increased over time. For example, Moy Moy felt that for her, one of the first steps towards a positive sense of self worth and comfort with her body was being successful at modelling and acting. As she said, "I found out through that course I guess that I was as good as anybody else...I didn't feel inferior."

In feeling worthy and valuing themselves, the women reported that they depended

less on the approval of others and consequently less pressured to meet external standards of beauty. They seemed to have a sense of feeling "good enough", and this included their bodies. They didn't seem to feel the need to "try harder" to be a better person or to change their bodies in order to be perceived by others as a valuable person.

When the women reached a point where they felt self sufficient and independent they seemed to experience an increase in their sense of self worth, and feel that they did not have to change their bodies or rely on their appearance to ensure financial or emotional support. Anne described how she felt about herself after she filed for her divorce, "...despite the fact that I've had a lot of turbulence in the last few years, I feel physically terrific. I feel probably more capable. I just have this feeling that I can handle things." She reported having "far less financial security" than before, but was not worried about this, in fact now feels "more emotionally comfortable."

The women experienced that they could get what they wanted out of life without changing their bodies, so were comfortable with their bodies as they were. They seemed to have a sense that this feeling of being worthy was not a result of their appearance but of their skills, abilities, and hard work. They felt that options were open to them and did not feel limited by their bodies, or feelings of discomfort with their bodies. They were aware of and valued their own role in achieving their present comfort, and as Tillie put it, "I've earned the right to be comfortable."

In taking on the responsibility for making their own choices, of being proactive instead of reactive, the women seemed confident and able to relax about their bodies and also trust that they would cope with whatever came their way. For example, Liz

expressed how her choice to come to Canada, and to fend for herself, enhanced her sense of self worth: "Everything that I have done I've done it completely by myself. That gives you confidence too." As each of the women's sense of self worth developed, their comfort with their bodies increased. Some of the women felt this growth in self worth and body comfort quite dramatically, whereas others experienced the growth as more gradual and less profound.

In recalling their childhood and youth, the women remembered the way in which they experienced their families and their school setting as having the most significant influences on their sense of self worth and how they felt about their bodies. Although none of the women recalled their youth as a time when they felt especially good about their bodies, they did recall some instances where they felt a positive sense of self worth. For example, Angela described growing up between two brothers and experiencing the "slopover effect" of hearing the messages they were getting: "I wanted to earn my own money and I wanted to be independent and I wanted to be in control of my own life", like she heard her brothers were supposed to be. Tillie also felt that being raised with boys contributed to her strength and independence. This sense that they had the power to determine how they experienced the world motivated these women to find a way to feel comfortable with their bodies and themselves.

Although Anne and Clara rejected many of the standards expected of them during their education at all girls' schools, they both expressed appreciation for the lack of emphasis on appearance in this sheltered, all girls setting. They felt this environment enabled them to feel free to experience other aspects of themselves without emphasis on

having to be attractive or fashionable. They felt that their sense of worth derived more from their achievements in academics, sports, or other school activities. Neither of the women recalled thinking much about what they looked like at all. As Anne said, "I never felt that I had to be any different" when she recalled how she felt about her appearance while in girls' school.

All the women had post secondary education and derived a sense of self worth from learning, even if they felt they were not particularly academically inclined in school. The women cited the acquisition of knowledge through educational training or work experience as contributing to their understanding of themselves and self acceptance. As Moy Moy said, "I feel that I know a lot more about a lot of things than some people, so it sort of gives you a bit of extra confidence. I'm quite assertive now." Robyn expressed that her desire to achieve in school was partly because, "I wanted to be somebody...that mattered." When the women felt that they were "someone who mattered" for more than their bodies or their appearance, they seemed to feel more comfortable with their bodies. This desire to matter, or make a difference, was expressed to some degree by all the women, and was an important component in increasing their feelings of self worth.

Some of the women reported gaining a sense of worth from starting their own families. For those women who were mothers, parenting was experienced as a source of their sense of worth. For Moy Moy, Clara, Anne, and Angela pregnancy was a time when they felt very comfortable with their bodies, and motherhood provided a sense of accomplishment and worth for them. Anne expressed that she felt some discomfort with her body during the time she could not conceive: "So body image, yeah, it sank a lot

during that time." She felt as though her body had failed her and she was disappointed that she could not be a mother as she had always assumed she would be. Consequently she felt relieved and very good about her body when she finally did become pregnant. As Anne said when describing how her pregnancy affected her body image: "That boosted me tremendously."

Feeling a sense of self worth enabled the women to set limits and be assertive about their needs in relationships, including how and when they would let others into their physical space. For example, Tillie and Angela both chose "to be the seducers or aggressors" in selecting partners and in ending relationships. Their sense of confidence and pride in themselves enabled them to take control of their own experiences and their own bodies, and consequently feel greater comfort with their bodies. In experiencing a positive sense of worth, Tillie was able to set limits in her relationships so that she didn't feel emotionally or physically abused. In her words: "I'm starting to be very tight about what I'll allow myself to tolerate anymore... ." This enabled her to feel better about herself and consequently better about her body.

All of the women were employed outside the home, including those with small children. Their experience in the workplace played a role in their sense of identity and in their sense of feeling capable and worthy. Each of the women expressed that a sense of feeling independent and autonomous, achieved partly through their various occupational pursuits, contributed to their sense of self worth. Tillie reported that she felt a sense of worth in identifying with other successful working women. When she saw women who looked confident and successful getting on the bus she was driving, she felt that, "we're

sort of a lot alike in many ways." She saw that they had body shapes not much different than hers and she felt that this helped her feel comfortable with her own body. Tillie also expressed the value of an adequate income and being respected at work in contributing to her sense of self worth: "All of a sudden I was making twice the wages and nobody can beat me up anymore... !" Feeling worthy in the workplace seemed to be important to these women in feeling worthy as women and consequently feeling comfortable with their bodies.

Experience of Rejecting External Standards. The theme of rejecting external standards emerged in conjunction with the countertheme of conforming to external standards. The women struggled throughout the process of becoming comfortable with their bodies to find a balance between these two experiences. All of the women in the study expressed various ways in which they had rejected expectations for women's appearance, roles, and behaviour throughout the process of becoming comfortable with their bodies and themselves. The women seemed to experience the rejection of external standards to some degree as a prerequisite to becoming comfortable with their bodies. They also accepted and fit within these standards which allowed them some latitude to reject other standards. Their desire for independence from cultural stereotypes for women and assertion of their own way of being was a theme that was important in the stories of all the women. Each of the women experienced some sense of struggling to find a way to fit in physically and socially while redefining their roles.

The ways in which the women rejected stereotypes varied depending on the expectations made of them to meet stereotypical standards of appearance and behavior

within their families, relationships, religious communities, and the culture at large. The women seemed to find rejection of external standards easier if they felt supported by their families and valued for aspects other than appearance, or if their mothers had rejected external standards. For example, Clara recalled that she always felt supported by her mother, who was "radical" and "unconcerned about appearance," in whatever she chose to do and she knew that her parents expected her to "be somebody." When the women did not feel a sense of validation or self worth in attempting to meet external expectations, they rejected these expectations and sought other ways of being that enabled them to feel more comfortable with themselves and their bodies. They seemed to gradually internalize their own criteria for determining comfort with their bodies and themselves.

Some of the ways that the women first expressed their rejection of feminine stereotypes included; moving away from home and travelling, experimenting with unconventional ways of dressing, entering non-traditional career paths, postponing or rejecting traditional marriage and motherhood, joining "radical" causes, developing their athletic skills, and perhaps becoming competitive and generally behaving in ways unconventional for their cohorts and their sex. As the women became more comfortable rejecting these traditional standards of female behavior they reportedly did not seem to need to be as rebellious in expressing their rejection, and they tended to be more comfortable with their bodies. For example, Liz went through a stage of dressing and behaving in what she perceived as very "radical" ways and discovered that "by having that kind of attitude people thought I was kind of cool. Like my body weight didn't really

matter... ." As she sensed that she could reject standards that did not fit for her and she would still be accepted as a person, she began to feel more comfortable with her body as it was. Liz then did not feel the need to push the limits for behavior or dress anymore, or as she said, "I don't have to play this game anymore." She felt less of a need to appear "radical."

Each of the women recalled a specific point in their lives when they began to adopt internal standards as the criteria for making important life decisions. When they did not feel comfortable with themselves or their bodies, they looked for a way to improve their comfort level, and to reject an external standard that they perceived was preventing them from being comfortable. For Tillie, watching her mother-in-law die prompted her to say to herself, "if I'm really a 'bon vivant' then I've got to stop punishing myself for whatever it is I think my hip is doing or thigh is doing or something... ." At age 42, Anne recalled feeling "a big gap" and wondered, "what do I want to do with the next 40 years....something has got to give?" In evaluating how they wanted to spend the rest of their lives, the women assessed how important the appearance of their body was to them, rejected the external message that beauty was supposed to be most important, and consequently now feel much greater comfort with their bodies. For example, Moy Moy spoke of aging and how she is more concerned about maintaining her health, and not living in poverty when she is older, than worrying about what she looks like.

Each of the women expressed in some way that separation from the family, in emotional and physical terms, was very important to their sense of being able to reject

external standards and develop a sense of self worth. They identified this as a time when they began to grow towards greater comfort with their bodies and themselves. For several of the women this meant leaving their countries and their homes. Liz described this as "escaping" and Anne said she removed herself "very consciously out of that atmosphere." For other women separation from their families was facilitated by resolving conflicts and difficult relationships with parents. For example, Robyn recalled that when she stopped idolizing her father who she had "put on a pedestal" and realized that he "was not the man" that she had thought he was, she did not feel the need to meet with his approval anymore. She described the sense of freedom she felt when she stopped blaming herself for his alcoholism and violence: "slowly after that I think I began to get a little better...I knew at that point that I was stronger... I knew it was him, not us... ." This allowed her to reject his standards and accept herself more fully, leaving her feeling in control of her own life, and her body.

The women actually sought and found contexts and relationships where they did not feel compelled to accept external standards for female beauty and behavior in order to be accepted. This enabled them to feel comfortable with themselves and their bodies. For example, Angela recalled her decision to choose relationships: "I was 17 when I went to university. I had decided that I would be the selector...I just didn't want to be sitting back quietly waiting for someone to chose me based on their impressions of my physical appearance....I guess I wanted to be the one that said, 'This is what I've got to offer'." The women expressed that their continued ability to question and choose to reject some of these external standards for women enables them to continue the process of becoming

comfortable with their bodies.

Some of the women experienced a sense of being given permission to reject external standards when they were exposed to feminist ideology or feminist role models. For example, through "reading feminist writings, listening to people talk about what it means to be a feminist, what it means to be liberated...as a human being", Tillie came to see "feminism and the right that we claim to be comfortable with our bodies" to be an important influence in her present sense of comfort with her body. She expressed that "feminism has allowed me to be the real me...and to be feminine at the same time." In hearing the voices of women who spoke what she had felt about her body and being female in the world, she no longer felt isolated. The women in the study felt that their own experiences and feelings as a women were validated and they were then more able to reject stereotypes for women's appearance and behavior that they did not feel comfortable with and that did not fit with their own experiences or body images.

Although some rejection of external standards occurred at various times and in varying degrees for the women, the essence of their experience was similar. At the time of the study they all fit within parameters of acceptable cultural standards for female appearance and behavior, but felt as though they had chosen to meet only those external criteria that they felt comfortable living with. As Angela expressed it: "Sooner or later you had to satisfy yourself", or as Moy Moy said it, "You can't please everybody." Liz said that at 16 or 17 she, "just all of a sudden realized you have to make a stand for yourself...I decided I didn't want to have to try to be somebody that I wasn't really gonna ever be... ." As the women's sense of validation and self worth increased they became less

concerned with meeting external standards and yet at the same time had a sense of being able to control and maintain the standards that they felt comfortable with. The women reported experiencing less worry about what they looked like as they became more able to reject some external standards of female beauty and behavior. They also felt more freedom to focus on other aspects of how they lived their lives within the context of meeting and generally fulfilling many standards.

Sense of Integration. The women's experience of rejecting external standards appeared to be interconnected with their sense of integration of the characteristics within themselves traditionally labelled masculine and feminine. Through their experience of testing how gender related stereotypes of appearance and behavior fit for them, the women were able to integrate their masculine and feminine characteristics and accept themselves as the women they were, which included the bodies that they had. This sense of integration was experienced by all the women.

The women in this study expressed pride and comfort with their character traits that they described as "assertive", "aggressive", "competitive", "strong", "independent", and "self-sufficient." Each woman had at some time in her life experienced that these traits, whether being expressed through her body or her personality, were contrary to external expectations for women, and had struggled to find a way to feel comfortable with these traits. Anne expressed her mixed feelings about the strength she had in her workplace: "I never saw myself in terms of femininity. I've always seen myself in terms of achievement and capability...I used to have the reputation [at work] as a bit of a dragon lady." All the women had experienced to varying degrees

that these characteristics were valued in men but not in women. Although they valued these characteristics in themselves, they seemed to need to find a way to express these parts of themselves in ways that felt comfortable to them and that fit with their experience of themselves in their bodies. Experiencing contexts in which their traditionally defined masculine qualities were valued was important in the women's integration of these parts of themselves. When they were valued as strong women, particularly it seems by significant men in their lives, they could accept themselves as women and that included accepting their own femininity and female bodies. Anne feels more comfortable expressing her "softer" and more "mellow" side now in her relationship with her new partner, and she believes as a result of this, at work too. When the women could integrate these qualities, they experienced a sense of wholeness and integration with the characteristics of their bodies, such as softness and sensuality. For each of the women it had been a struggle to learn to live with both of these sides of themselves and accept them. When they experienced a sense of "wholeness", they felt comfortable expressing both sides of their character and were able to be more comfortable with their bodies.

All of the women had once struggled to clearly define their roles as women through their behavior and the appearance of their bodies according to external standards, whereas they now felt more relaxed and comfortable in their unique expression of their femaleness according to a definition that fit for them. For example, Anne said, "All these things don't matter anymore (role definitions)....and maybe the things that traditionally I perceived as female, things I would have absolutely resented

and not done simply on principle...they've just evaporated." Angela summed up her experience of integration like this: "I guess what it comes down to is that for me, wide hips are part of being female and I was bucking being female in various ways, and now I've stopped, stopped fighting it and said, 'Yes I'm female. This is my body.' and put it in it's proper place."

The women felt that the cultural and historical contexts in which they grew up influenced the way they were able to integrate all of their characteristics, and the way they felt about their bodies. Angela, Tillie and Clara all spoke of the influence of the culture of the 60s and early 70s on their exposure to new ways of looking at the world and themselves and at women's roles and worth. Sexual and intellectual freedom allowed them to discover and experiment with who they were and provided them with access to information about sexuality, politics, and women's roles. Through this experimentation they had an opportunity to find a way to express themselves as women in a way that felt comfortable for them. For example, Tillie rode a Harley-Davidson motorcycle for awhile. Angela recalled a time when she "dressed like a boy" to make the statement, "let's establish person to person relationships here first before we tumble into bed together." When she felt "respected" for herself as a person she did not feel the need to hide her sexuality anymore by dressing like a male and "eventually decided that was a bit extreme." She was able to integrate the masculine aspects of herself and the feminine and feel comfortable with both. In terms of her appearance, she described herself as now being "at that point where I dress to feel comfortable. I'm not locked in. I've got flexibility to communicate my mood."

Some of the women acknowledged the contribution of feminism to their acceptance of themselves and their bodies. Exposure to feminist ideology introduced the women to the possibility of being able to integrate both their masculine and feminine sides and to find a way to express themselves as women and experience their bodies in ways that were comfortable for them. For example, Clara felt that her feminist politics had the greatest influence on her present comfort with her body because of "the fact that I'm aware of...how this [stereotypical expectations for women] can be used to sort of keep people down and...how it's all tied into commercial things and tied into financial things." Angela and Tillie recalled however, that in spite of the opportunities that the 60s provided for women to redefine how they could comfortably be in their bodies, they also experienced that the emphasis on thinness in fashion influenced their desire to be thinner as adolescents and young adults.

Some of the women expressed that the workplace was often a testing ground for discovering how sexual stereotypes fit for them. Finding a way to integrate their masculine and feminine characteristics into their definition of themselves was both challenged and facilitated in various work settings. Anne recalled being very conscious of her behavior and dress at work because it was important to her "to be perceived as [gender] neutral... ." She had experienced that minimizing her femaleness through her dress was necessary in order to be accepted and to not feel her strength and capabilities devalued by comments about her sexuality. For other women, work was a place where they felt valued for their contributions and not for what they looked like. Liz worked in one job where she said she was "hired partly for her looks" and she spoke of this with

discomfort. It seemed important for her to know that she was valued for other contributions, such as her artistic and sales ability, in order to feel comfortable with her body in that setting. A sense of not having to negate any part of themselves, masculine or feminine, appeared to enable the women to experience a sense of integration or wholeness which was essential for them to feel comfortable in and with their bodies.

Sense of Being at Home in their Bodies. All of the women expressed that they liked how their bodies feel, that they enjoy feeling "healthy" and "alive." At the time of the interviews the women were at a place where they could honestly say they were generally pleased with their shapes, their sizes and their appearance. The women all had come to enjoy the sensations and pleasures that they were able to experience through their bodies. They expressed appreciation for the physical attributes that they had been given, in the form of a proportioned body or good health. The women who had children felt physically and emotionally "wonderful" during their pregnancies and were excited and fascinated with the changes that their bodies went through. Anne expressed this sense of comfort in her body as feeling more "connected to the outside world", more "capable and emotionally comfortable." As she said, " I just have this feeling that I can handle things." Robyn felt a sense of strength from hard-earned success in sports and from the physical sensation her body had while she was participating in sports and running. She felt "like a powerful animal." For the women this comfort in their bodies seemed to reflect their comfort with, and optimism about what they were doing in their lives.

Each of the women believed that they fit within a "normal" physical range of

culturally acceptable standards for women's beauty. They did not want to change. Each reported that they anticipated continuing to feel comfortable with their bodies as long as they stayed within this "normal" range. Liz felt her body was "very in balance." Angela felt her body was "within the range of normalcy." As Clara said, "I'm really lucky 'cause I just don't gain any weight. You know basically I've always been the same weight except when I was pregnant." Tillie felt that her "shape was quite kind" to her. Also the fact that she could fit into standard retail clothing sizes at various weights contributed to Tillie's comfort with her body shape. The women felt that as long as they fell within a range for body weight and appearance that they perceived as acceptable, they were able to relax and feel comfortable with their bodies.

Each of the women discussed a weight range within which they felt comfortable. The degree of fluctuation within each woman's range varied from woman to woman and varied at different times and stages in their lives. The times when they were experiencing the greatest emotional discomfort, were also the times when they disliked their bodies. For example, Robyn felt "ugly" when she was going through breakups with her boyfriends. Some of the women gained weight or lost weight at times of emotional distress, to a point where they felt uncomfortable with their bodies. Tillie gained about 40 pounds when she felt sexually harassed and "out of her comfort zone culturally" in Tunisia. Liz lost "about 40 pounds" when she broke up with a boyfriend. The women reported that emotional upheaval often triggered a change in their eating and/or exercise patterns; they either experienced a sense of wanting to eat for comfort, or a loss of appetite that kept them from eating much at all, or gave up on regular exercising habits

when they were particularly distressed. The women seemed to feel the most comfortable in their bodies when they were the most comfortable with themselves and their relationships emotionally.

Feeling safe in relationships with men, feeling that their partners were trustworthy and committed and that their partners accepted them unconditionally, were important factors in their sense of comfort with their bodies. For example, Tillie said with relief, "Nobody is afraid of anybody...FINALLY"! For her, safety meant feeling free to be honest without the fear of being rejected or physically beaten. For the women with partners part of this safety meant feeling free to enjoy and express their sexuality which was also expressed through their bodies.

The attitude held by the women regarding the role of physical fitness in their comfort with their bodies seemed to reflect the historical era that they grew up in. Liz and Robyn, the youngest of the women, were both physically active and expressed the value of being physically fit in their sense of comfort with their bodies. The women who grew up during the culture of the 60s and 70s felt that experimentation with aspects of themselves other than physical fitness enabled them to find ways to be comfortable in their bodies. Exercise was not particularly important to their sense of bodily comfort. Moy Moy, who is 58, considers herself "very active" in that she "never sits still", so obtains her exercise mainly through her daily routines of living rather than through specific sports or fitness activities. This sense of being active helps her to feel comfortable with her body. Each of the women expressed in some way that they enjoyed the physical experience and sensations of being in the body that they have now.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the women in the study experienced the development of their sense of comfort with their bodies as a process. They attributed experiences within the context of their families, their intimate relationships, their relationships with friends and colleagues and their culture as being influential in shaping the way they felt and now feel about themselves and their bodies. The process of growth towards self acceptance seemed to parallel the women's experience of becoming comfortable with their bodies. Each of the women acknowledged their awareness that this is a continuing lifelong process.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

It was the purpose of this study to explore the phenomenon of women feeling comfortable with their bodies. The research question asked was "What is the experience and meaning of body image for women feeling comfortable with their bodies"? In this chapter a narrative will be presented representing a synopsis of the women's experience. The common themes emerging from the participant's accounts will then be discussed as they relate to the literature on body image development. Finally the implications for future research and counselling will be considered.

Narrative of the Women's Experience of Comfort with their Bodies

The seven women in the study represented a range of ages from 23 to 58, and reflected a diverse mix of cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds. The compositions of their families of origin varied, as did their present family structure. The women feel that they now fit within parameters that they perceive as "normal" or "average" for women's appearance in their present cultural environment, and consequently do not feel the need to change their bodies. All the women experienced acceptance of and comfort with their bodies as a developmental process occurring concurrently with their increasing sense of self worth.

The process began as the women defined themselves as female within the context of their families, receiving messages from parents, siblings, and extended family members that either facilitated or impeded the women's sense of comfort with themselves and their bodies. As they interacted with others in their community, such as

peers, teachers, clergy, and the society at large, they further refined their perceptions of themselves as women. In attempting to conform to external standards for female appearance and behavior in these contexts, they found some cultural expectations that they felt uncomfortable with. All of the women had experiences that left them feeling that they, including their bodies, were somehow inadequate. And yet at the same time there were some aspects of their bodies and themselves that they had always felt comfortable with, some of which they sensed met cultural standards.

At puberty the women experienced a heightened awareness of how they did or did not measure up to cultural standards for female beauty and behavior, resulting in a sense of self consciousness about their sexual development. As the women grew into adulthood and their bodies matured, they experienced an increase in comfort with their bodies. The women's level of body comfort varied, increasing as they felt validated for all aspects of themselves and felt a greater sense of self worth. Each woman's sense of adequacy evolved in a slightly different context depending on her family dynamics, ethnic background, the cultural setting and historical era she grew up in, her education, her occupational pursuits, and her relationships. Although the degree to which each woman's comfort level had changed since childhood varied, each of the participants had experienced times when they did not feel comfortable with their bodies. At times when the women had struggled with finding a way to fit socially and physically in their environment, they also had struggled with meeting external standards for female beauty and behavior, and recalled not being as comfortable with their bodies.

The women needed external validation during the beginning of their development

of female identity. As the women gained knowledge of themselves and the expectations for women in their social context, they experimented with pushing the limits for stereotypical women's roles and external standards for female beauty. As the women found themselves in contexts and relationships where they felt free to reject external standards, their sense of validation and self worth increased. When they were more able to let go of external standards and internally define criteria for being a woman that fit for them, they were more able to accept and be comfortable with their bodies. As they began to integrate all parts of themselves, especially those characteristics traditionally labelled masculine or feminine, they did not feel as great a need to change to meet external standards, and therefore became more comfortable with themselves and their bodies.

Throughout their process the women experienced contexts, some of which they actively sought out, in which they felt a sense of validation for all aspects of themselves. It was important to their sense of comfort with themselves and their bodies to find contexts and relationships that supported their definition of themselves as women. The women all recalled that times when they were the most satisfied with their relationships and themselves were the times when they felt most comfortable with their bodies, and vice versa.

Through their experiences the women gained a sense of self worth that meant they were not as dependent on others to approve of them and their bodies in order to feel a positive sense of self worth. In not trying to meet with others' approval the women were then able to relax and be comfortable with the bodies they had. At the time of the study

the women had developed to a point where they generally liked their bodies for the way they looked, the way they felt, and for functioning in a comfortable way. The women had accomplishments and achievements that they were proud of and felt that they deserved to feel comfortable with themselves and their bodies. With this sense of being able to accomplish and achieve what they needed in life the women felt less dependent on others in order to meet their needs, so they were not as concerned about meeting external standards for women's appearance and behavior.

Discussion of the Findings

Five central themes were identified as common to each of the women participating in this research; a sense of validation, a sense of self worth, the experience of rejecting external standards, a sense of integration, and a sense of being at home in their bodies. The content of these themes will be discussed in relationship to the literature available on body image development and on factors influencing body image development; sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic.

Body Image Development. In the literature the developmental nature of body image as a process is alluded to, with reference to the experience of the physical changes of puberty, pregnancy, and aging for women being particularly critical to a woman's sense of comfort or discomfort with her body (Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989). The women in the study experienced these bodily changes as being influential in their sense of comfort with their bodies, especially at adolescence. These authors agree that self worth is critical to the development of body image and, in particular, identify times of physical change as being socially loaded and as such, having the potential to

make these changes negative rather than positive. Five of the women in the study reached puberty relatively late, at ages 14 to 16. They expressed some relief in finally developing physically but did not identify menarche as an emotionally upsetting experience. The significance of the late onset of menarche in the body image development of these women is not clear but perhaps indicates a distinct body type of developmental maturity that resulted in puberty being experienced as less difficult or distressing (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Garner et al., 1980; Silberstein et al., 1988).

An important part of the women's process of becoming comfortable with their bodies involved breaking away from the need for external validation and eventually rejecting some of the external constraints that are traditionally used to define women. Although theorists who describe body image development for women suggest that cultural expectations have a significant impact on women's body images, they do not provide evidence that testing the limits of stereotypical expectations for women is a necessary part of becoming comfortable with one's body (Fisher, 1986; Greenspan, 1983; Jagger & Bordo, 1989). A focus on the physical components of body image in the research literature may be due to the fact that body image research is often undertaken with women experiencing eating disorders, when one of the main goals of treatment is to improve the woman's physical health and reduce the physical symptoms of the disorder.

The women in the study recalled at various times feeling ashamed of their bodies and of being female. They overcame many of these feelings as part of the process of becoming comfortable with themselves and their bodies. As the women felt a sense of validation for other aspects of themselves, particularly from their sexual partners,

they reportedly became more comfortable with their sexuality. They were then able to begin to reject familial, cultural, or religious values that had made them feel ashamed of their bodies or of being female. The need for women to overcome their shame in order to feel adequate and worthy is supported by several feminist researchers and theorists (Bartky, 1990; Martin, 1987; Ussher, 1989)

The women in the study experienced fluctuations in their comfort with their bodies as their feelings of self worth fluctuated. When they were feeling particularly comfortable with themselves as women they reported feeling comfortable with their bodies. Some researchers report the occurrence of this fluctuation in body image (Martin, 1987; Sanford & Donovan, 1984) and others have observed a relationship between feelings of self worth and positive body image (Baird & Sights, 1986; Rodin, 1992; Rosen & Ross, 1968). The findings of this study suggest that fluctuations in self worth may contribute to fluctuations in bodily comfort. The women in this study were asked to describe how they were experiencing their lives at the times when they felt most comfortable with their bodies, and to indicate how this experience might have been different than when they weren't feeling good about their bodies. The women then discussed the factors they felt were relevant to their sense of feeling comfortable with their bodies. This focus on the women's total experience, rather than on just her experience of her body, revealed data that indicated the importance of self worth and personal validation to body image development.

The women's sense of self worth appeared to also have some impact on their relationship to food. Much of the research on body image has been done in the context of

studying eating disordered women who have negative body images and a relatively low sense of self worth (Baird & Sights, 1986; Bouwers, 1990; Brown et al., 1988; Wolchik, Weiss & Katzman, 1986). Although the women in this study did not report that they were concerned about their relationship to food at this time, they did report changes in their eating habits and their relationship with food and/or exercise during times when they were not feeling positive about themselves. The reasons given by the women for their change in eating or exercise behaviors varied and included; eating for emotional comfort, eating or not exercising to punish themselves, losing their appetite as a result of an emotional upset, gaining weight to hide their sexuality when they felt unsafe, changing their shape to fit in socially with friends or to seek employment, and weight fluctuations when they were adjusting to a new environment or culture. Their behavior changes resulted in a change in the appearance of their bodies but the motivation behind the body changes appeared to be related to a desire to change their feelings about their inner selves. This finding is consistent with the belief held by some theorists and researchers that many women respond to their emotional distress, or loss of a sense of worth, by changing eating habits (Chernin, 1986; Katzman et al., 1986; Orbach, 1979; Wolf, 1991; Woodman, 1982). At the time of the study the women seemed to have developed an accurate sense of what food and exercise their bodies needed for their mental and physical health, and they were comfortable following this sense.

Three of the women indicated that being physically active was important to their sense of comfort with their bodies and themselves. The way in which they derived their exercise varied and their motivation for exercising ranged from wanting to be healthy,

to enjoying nature, to feeling powerful. This evidence suggests that physical fitness may indeed contribute to women's sense of self worth and comfort with their bodies and is consistent with findings of researchers studying the body images of women who exercise (Davis, 1990; Silbertstein et al., 1988; Skrinar et al., 1986).

The experience of body image for the women in the study was complex and multidimensional, as described in the literature (Butters & Cash, 1987; Fisher, 1986; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985). The women identified a number of factors that they believed influenced their feelings about their bodies. Consistent with Bartky (1990), Fisher (1986), Garner et al. (1980), and Rubin (1979), the participants described the pressures from their families, peers and the culture at large to meet stereotypical standards for women. They stressed the influence of their interpersonal relationships on their sense of comfort with themselves. The experiences of the women in this study confirmed that body image development involves more than just women's experiences of their bodies, but also the women's responses to their relationships and their cultural context.

The desire to improve their quality of life in terms of their comfort with themselves and their bodies was a common experience recalled by the women in the study. In the beginning of the process of becoming comfortable with their bodies the women were mainly aware of how their feelings about their body's appearance affected their comfort with themselves. Eventually they changed their focus for personal growth towards their internal experience as women. There is abundant evidence in the literature supporting the prevalence of women attempting to change their bodies in

order to become more comfortable with themselves, with such attempts often not meeting with success and perhaps leading to eating disorders (Greenberg, 1990; Health and Welfare Canada, 1991; MacDonald, 1986; Mitchell et al., 1988; Schwartz, 1992; Stunkard & Penick, 1979; Wolf, 1991). This inner focus, as opposed to a focus on changing one's body through cosmetics, dieting, exercise, or surgery, appeared to be a different approach than many women have taken in responding to discomfort with their bodies and themselves, and may have accounted for the success these women have had in coming to a place where they feel comfortable with both themselves and their bodies. The women expressed that they felt as though they were still experiencing the process of change in their comfort with themselves and their bodies. According to the perceptions of the women in this study comfort with their bodies seemed to be connected to an increased sense of self worth and personal validation. This finding lends support to interventions focussed on improving women's self esteem and changing their internal perceptions of themselves as a means to improve body image (Baird & Sights, 1990; Bergner et al., 1985; Butters & Cash, 1987; Frey & Carlock, 1989; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985; McNamara, 1989)

The women experienced that their concern about their bodies and the importance they placed on the appearance of their bodies diminished as they got older. The women attributed this increased bodily comfort to a number of possible changes they had experienced including having time for their own interests or career, having an overall sense of achievement and control in their lives, letting go of external expectations, and experiencing an increased sense of self worth. This finding was consistent with the

experience of some midlife women in other studies (Rubin, 1979; Vann Rackley et al., 1988), and provides evidence that becoming comfortable with one's body is a developmental process.

Sociocultural Factors. Many theorists and researchers described women with negative body images as feeling that they do not measure up to external standards (Bartky, 1990; Brouwers, 1990; Greenspan, 1983; Hutchinson, 1982, 1985; Millman, 1980; Rodin, 1992; Wolf, 1991). Some theorists and researchers have focussed mainly on the influence of cultural expectations of physical beauty on women's body image development (Cash et al., 1986; Fisher, 1986; Garner et al., 1980). Recently however, more researchers and theorists, particularly those studying female sexuality, are emphasizing the role of cultural definitions of both female beauty and behavioral roles in women's development of comfort with themselves and their bodies (Bartky, 1990; Greenspan, 1983; Jagger & Bordo, 1989; Martin, 1987; Ussher, 1989). Consistent with the perspectives of Bartky, Ussher, and Greenspan, the women in this study perceived that their sense of comfort with their bodies was somewhat dependent on feeling as though they fit within cultural expectations for both female beauty and behavioral roles. For example, in describing how they felt about their physical appearance the women used the terms "normal" or "average." However, when there were some external standards that they did not feel comfortable with, part of their process of becoming comfortable with their bodies was to reject some of those standards. One way of feeling able to reject some external standards for the women was to experience contexts and relationships where they were validated for all aspects of

themselves and therefore did not feel the need to change themselves or their bodies. They were then able to redefine to a certain extent a version of female identity that was more comfortable for them than perhaps the ideal they had once thought they needed to meet.

Bartky (1990) and Greenspan (1983) both describe how women's sense of adequacy, power and control in their lives is often dependent on meeting these culturally prescribed criteria for appearance and behavior, and emphasized the dilemma this poses for women given the narrowness of these cultural definitions. The women in the study appeared to have resolved this dilemma of valuing themselves and their bodies and still fitting in socially. Through the process of experiencing relationships and contexts where they felt validated and worthy, and where they were able to reject some external standards and still feel accepted, the women were eventually able to define themselves in a way that left them feeling comfortable with their bodies. Rubin (1979) observed this process of defining self in some midlife women. She concluded that the process of incorporating a new definition of self, of internalizing "a new self image, to claim it as one's own" (p.61), takes perhaps years for women to accomplish.

One of themes common to all the women was a sense of being at home in their bodies and enjoying the physical sensations of their bodies. The women with children reported that during pregnancy they felt "wonderful" about their bodies. According to the literature this is an atypical response for many women, since many women report feeling alienated from their bodies during pregnancy (Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989). Motherhood is a valued and expected role for women, and was a choice for the women in this study. Motherhood and pregnancy appeared to be an important part

of their identity and was therefore a welcome experience. All the women experienced good health and had no complications during their pregnancy so their physical experience was positive also. They all recalled receiving support and validation from significant people in their lives while they were pregnant. Their sense of meeting with external standards for women's roles and being in control of their experience may have contributed to a sense of validation and self worth which may have been important to their sense of comfort with their bodies. This finding is similar to that of Martin (1987) who observed that some of the women in her study, although a minority, were comfortable with bodily processes such as pregnancy, and she suggested that this may contribute to their comfort with their bodies and themselves. Ussher (1989) suggests two other possible explanations for a sense of bodily comfort during pregnancy, freedom from being seen as a sexual object and permission to gain weight. Experiencing freedom to not meet cultural standards for female beauty at this time may enable women to relax and feel more comfortable with their bodies.

Cultural standards for female beauty also appear to differ according to ethnicity. There is evidence in this study that ethnicity and cultural background did play a role in the women's sense of comfort with their bodies. Dolan (1991) reported that there is little reference to the role of ethnicity in the literature on eating disorders. Although she cites some evidence of bodily discomfort among black and Asian women in eating disorder studies, non-white women are notably absent in studies of eating disorders and body image. The women in this study perceived that different standards for female beauty exist in the different cultural and ethnic settings that they had lived in. For

example, Clara's dark skin was considered "too dark" in Colombia, but "exotic" here.

The women experienced that the meaning of skin color, body shape, facial features, and appropriate expression of sexuality were all defined differently in the different cultural contexts within which they lived. When the women felt that their physical features and behavior were considered acceptable within the cultural setting that they were experiencing at a given time, they were more comfortable with their bodies and themselves. The implication from this study is that cross-cultural factors are important to women's body image development and that our knowledge of how these factors affect women's comfort with their bodies needs to be expanded.

Interpersonal Factors. The experience of the women in the study supports the theory that body image develops in response to interactions with other people (Fisher, 1986; Kegan, 1982). A sense of validation for all aspects of self was an important theme for all the women in the process of developing comfort with themselves and their bodies. The women reported that significant others, such as family members and partners in intimate relationships, were particularly influential in the development their sense of total validation. The women sought validation first in their families then, as they separated from family, found validation in other significant relationships. When the women felt validated in their significant adult relationships they seemed to be less concerned about gaining the approval of the culture at large. The influence of significant others in the formation of body image has been identified by several theorists (Fisher, 1986; Gilligan et al., 1991; Hutchinson, 1982; Pike & Rodin, 1991). For the heterosexual women in this study, it was important to feel valued both for sexual

attractiveness and all other aspects of self by significant men in their lives, especially their intimate partners. This seemed to be a necessary prerequisite to their development of self acceptance.

Fisher (1986) suggests that the influence of family members on body image is significant but also complex and not easily determined. Researchers in the field of eating disorders have also found that addressing family dynamics is important in the improvement of body image of women with eating disorders (Boskind-White & White, 1983; Brouwers, 1990; Root & Fallon, 1989). Evidence in this study supports theories that family relationships are important and provides some insight into the ways in which the family might influence women's comfort with themselves and their bodies. One of the roles that family members appeared to play in the formation of body image for the women in this study was to provide the first set of external criteria against which the women evaluated themselves as a women, and that included their bodies. The way in which the women evaluated themselves in their family context seemed to set the stage for how they were to move through the process of becoming comfortable with themselves and their bodies, and how and if they would be able to reject unrealistic or restrictive external standards. The women looked for contexts and relationships that confirmed the positive feelings they had about themselves and their bodies in their families, or that would enable them to change negative feelings about themselves and their bodies that had developed in their family of origin. The importance of parental perceptions in the development of body image for women, especially women's relationships with their mothers, is reported in the literature (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983; Lasorsa & Fodor,

1990; Pike & Rodin, 1991; Woodman, 1982). Those women who felt a relative sense of comfort about themselves and their bodies in their families, seemed to have an easier time of maintaining this sense of comfort as adults.

The women in the study reported that their experiences of separating from their families and finding their own comfortable definition of being a woman were important to the development of their sense of comfort with themselves and their bodies.

Separation emotionally and physically from family seemed to also be important for them to let go of some external standards and to not feel the need to meet with approval of family members in order to feel comfortable with their bodies. Developmental literature refers to the difficulty women experience in differentiating, or separating from family, and stresses the importance of this task in women forming their own identity (LaSorsa & Fodor, 1990; Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984; Woodman, 1982). Rubin (1979) observed that separation from family felt very threatening to many women in her study and was for them a lifelong struggle for independence. The need to break away from external validation in order to become comfortable with their bodies, seemed to first be acted out for the women in this study in this break from family expectations. This finding also concurs with literature that reports the need for healthy separation from family members and values as important in the resolution of eating disorders, and the improvement of body image in women with eating disorders (Baird & Sights, 1986; Boskind-White et al., 1983; Friedlander & Seigel, 1990).

The women in this study reported that feeling safe with and trusting in their intimate partners allowed them to feel free to express all aspects of themselves, hence

leaving them free to experience many pleasures related to their bodies and feeling comfortable with themselves. The literature does not specifically identify a sense of safety and trust in relationships as being a necessary prerequisite to the development of a positive body image. However, the experience of being sexually abused, an extreme breach of trust, reportedly can contribute to a negative body image (Kearney-Cooke, 1986; Root & Fallon, 1989). When the women were able to set limits and be assertive in their relationships they also had a sense of control over their bodies, which increased their physical comfort. In describing women's development and identity, LaSorsa and Fodor (1990), Miller (1984), and Surrey (1984) emphasized the importance for women to establish clear boundaries in their relationships in order to maintain a separate sense of self.

Intrapsychic Factors. The women's internal interpretations of their interpersonal and cultural interactions appeared to influence their feelings about themselves and their bodies, as did the women's responses to their bodily experiences. The meaning women construct of their experiences is believed by several theorists to affect body image development (Fisher, 1986; Sanford & Donovan, 1984; Thompson & Thompson, 1986; Ussher, 1989). A sense of feeling at home in their bodies often appeared to be the women's response to enjoying the sensations experienced by their bodies during various activities and in feeling healthy. Times that the women recalled not feeling comfortable with their bodies were often times that they were feeling emotional trauma in response to relationships in their environment. They experienced comfort with themselves and their bodies when they were satisfied with their

relationships.

Kegan (1982) identifies the tasks of "construction of role" and "emergence of self concept" as being significant during adolescence as women form their identity. The response of the women in the study to role expectations appeared to be very important in their development of comfort with their bodies. The women's need to experiment with and test roles is consistent with Kegan's theory. The women recalled adolescence as a time when this process of defining their female identity became particularly salient. They also reported feeling the sociocultural expectations for women acutely during adolescence. Negotiating the split that women begin to feel in adolescence between their own experience and what they sense is expected of them culturally is reportedly one of the difficult tasks of this developmental stage (Martin, 1887; Ussher, 1989). The women in this study experienced this struggle and seemed to be reaching a stage of integration. Through the process of experimenting with stereotypical expectations and rejecting those that they were uncomfortable with, the women finally found a way to negotiate a fit that was congruent with their experience of themselves and their bodies and yet still fell within socially acceptable standards.

There is some evidence to indicate that self worth plays a role in body image development (Rodin, 1992; Rosen & Ross, 1968; Sanford et al., 1984; Thompson, 1986; Thompson et al., 1986; Vann Rackley et al., 1988). Gilligan (1991) observed a drop in self-worth for girls during adolescence. This experience was also reported by the women in this study. The women identified adolescence as a time when they were significantly less comfortable with both their bodies and themselves than they

were at the time of this study. They recalled adolescence as a time when they were very aware of cultural expectations for female sexuality and often felt inadequate. However, as they felt a greater sense of self worth, the women in the study experienced greater comfort with their bodies. Their sense of self worth did not appear to be only a result of meeting external standards for attractiveness but also as a result of experiencing personal validation. Feeling worthy also appeared to result from the women's experience of feeling self sufficient and independent while choosing to meet only those external standards for female appearance and behavior that they were comfortable with. As the women's self worth increased, their sense of control over their bodies and consequently their comfort increased.

Limitations of the Study

A phenomenological methodology was utilized, because the goal of this study was to describe the experiences of feeling comfortable with their bodies for seven adult women, and to articulate the meanings they made of these experiences. In this study the experience of women feeling comfortable with their bodies was explored within the limitations of a 2 hour interview with each participant. Additional interviews, with a greater number of participants, could provide a more complete exploration of this phenomenon. There is an assumption in phenomenological research that through the careful bracketing of the researcher's biases, the purposeful selection of information-rich cases, and the interpretation of themes common to the participants' experiences, the final analysis of themes will have "empathic generalizability" (Osborne, 1990, p. 86) to those readers who have experienced the phenomenon. The above mentioned

research process outlined by Osborne was followed by the researcher in this study. It is hoped that other women feeling comfortable with their bodies will be able to "empathize" with the experiences of the women in this study.

This research relied on the participants' self reports, which were dependent on the recollections of the participants and on their levels of self awareness. As the goal of this phenomenological research was to describe the experiences that women identify as most salient to the development of comfort with their bodies, self reporting was an appropriate method of data collection. However, during both the initial and validation interviews, the need for social approval may have played a role in how the participants responded (Borg & Gall, 1989). Although there was a risk that social desirability might affect the participants' responses to the results, the validation interviews in this study served several purposes. The researcher was able to address the ethical responsibility of closure in her relationship with the participants. Also, the opportunity to contribute to and respond to the results seemed to be important to the participants. They expressed a sense of inclusion and empowerment during the validation interviews, and ownership of the final analysis. The interviews also provided a means of determining the accuracy of the researcher's analysis.

Because the number of participants was limited to seven, to enable a rich and in depth description of the phenomenon, this research was not exhaustive. Colaizzi (1978) acknowledges that such a study is never "complete or final" (p.70). The intent of the research was not to provide a definitive description of the phenomenon, but to explicate themes that were common to the participants' experience of feeling comfortable with

their bodies. In accordance with Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology, the findings from this research were meant to stimulate further exploration of this phenomenon, women feeling comfortable with their bodies, in order to challenge and further refine the themes extracted from this data.

Implications for Future Research

A review of research on women who have a positive body image illustrates that knowledge of this experience for women is significantly limited. This study represents only a beginning exploration of this phenomenon, so it is hoped that the findings will stimulate further research into the experience of women with positive body images, or as defined for this study, women who feel comfortable with their bodies.

Existing research has often studied women who have negative body images. It was the intention in this study to approach women's body image development from a positive perspective in order to begin to understand the factors that facilitate this experience for women. Given that the sample size was limited to seven, more research utilizing a greater number of women is needed to further explore the experience of positive body image for women and to further refine the themes. The criteria established for participant selection in this study was not restricted to specific age or cultural groups in order to allow the emergence of these factors as they were relevant to the themes. Cultural, historical, and ethnic factors all appeared to be salient in the women's body image development. For example, five of the women in this study grew up in cultures other than English speaking Canada. Researchers might select to use purposeful sampling based on age, sexual orientation, race, and cultural contexts in future studies

to clarify the role these factors play in body image development for women.

The weight and height statistics for the women in this study indicate that they all were physically quite consistent with "average" standards of bodily acceptability for women in North America. They also all perceived that they fell within acceptable standards for female beauty and behavior in the cultural context of Greater Vancouver. This evidence implies that further research is needed to determine if women who are physically outside "average" standards, and/or who perceive themselves as falling outside these standards, develop a sense of comfort with their bodies, and if so, whether the themes emerging from this study are consistent with their experiences.

The women participating in this study reported a sense of being at home in their bodies. They did not have any visible physical disabilities or report any physical restrictions that interfered with their comfort with themselves or their bodies. There is a need to research how the experience of being disabled affects women's body images, and how disabled women begin to feel comfortable with their bodies. The experiences of this population of women might expand the understanding of the impact of cultural standards on women's body image development, and clarify the role of women's bodily sensations and movements in their sense of comfort with their bodies.

The findings of this study indicate that the women's interpersonal relationships, particularly those with family members, were important influences on the development of a sense of validation and self worth which was a necessary prerequisite for their comfort with themselves and their bodies. Relationships with family members were also significant in shaping the women's perceptions of external standards for females and in

determining the women's ability to form a separate adult identity, both important factors in the development of positive body image. Future research might clarify family dynamics and parenting approaches which facilitate the women's development of internal criteria for validation and their process of separation-individuation.

Adolescence was identified by the women as a time when they were especially sensitive to external expectations of them as females. Their discomfort with their bodies at this time coincided with their feelings of relatively low self worth. This finding supports that of Gilligan (1991), but further research is required to explore the perceptions adolescent women have of external expectations and messages not just about their appearance, but about their gender related roles and behavior also, and how these are related to their body image. The contexts that young women are experiencing in their adolescence that facilitate positive body image development need to be identified.

Pregnancy and motherhood were positive influences on body image for the women who were mothers in this study. The women felt validated in these roles and comfortable with their bodily changes. Both Ussher (1989) and Rubin (1979) suggest that pregnancy may also be a time when women feel relieved of the pressure to conform to cultural standards of sexual attractiveness, and therefore are able to relax and be comfortable with their bodies. However, further research is needed to clarify how the experience of pregnancy contributed to these women feeling comfortable with their bodies, as pregnancy and motherhood have not always been reported to be validating or comfortable experiences for women (Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989).

The findings of this research are consistent with those of theorists and

researchers who hold a feminist perspective in the area of body image development. The role of stereotypical external standards for female beauty and behavior appeared to be critical in the development of body image for the women in this study. The women's eventual rejection of some external standards enabled them to become more comfortable with their bodies. Research aimed at expanding our knowledge of the contexts and factors that support the rejection of such unrealistic standards is needed. The shift that the women were able to make from external to internal validation was important for their movement to greater comfort with their bodies. The factors and circumstances facilitating this shift need to be identified. Although the women developed some sense of internal validation, they still maintained an adherence to some external standards for female beauty and behavior in order to fit in socially. The women each experienced a "range" of weight and bodily characteristics within which they felt comfortable. Further exploration of the meaning and development of these limitations is needed in order to more clearly define positive body image.

Further research is needed to expand our understanding of the experience of women feeling comfortable with their bodies. From this we may derive a clearer definition of positive body image and further refine theory regarding body image development in women. Research aimed at expanding current knowledge of the role of family and culture in women's development of comfort with their bodies is needed in order to understand how the process of becoming comfortable with one's body may be facilitated for all women, beginning at birth.

Implications for Counselling

In hearing the voices of women who feel comfortable with their bodies, counsellors may become aware of relationships and circumstances that might foster the development of a positive body image for women. With this awareness, counsellors may provide and encourage opportunities for women to experience a sense of validation for all aspects of themselves and a sense of competency and self-worth. In knowing that becoming comfortable with one's body may be a developmental process for women, counsellors can assist women through the process of self definition to self acceptance. The client-counsellor relationship may provide women clients with the experience of feeling validated, a prerequisite for becoming comfortable with their bodies. Counsellors may assist clients in finding other contexts where they may feel this sense of validation. Counsellors may facilitate women becoming aware of their strengths and capabilities, and finding other relationships and contexts where they may continue to develop an increased sense of self worth.

The women in the study felt comfortable with both their inner selves and their physical selves. By providing a balanced focus in counselling between women's inner experience of self worth and their physical experience, and interrelating these two aspects of self, the counsellor will facilitate women's integration of all aspects of themselves, and may better serve their movement to greater comfort with their bodies.

The findings of this study support interventions for women with negative body images that address the relationship between societal expectations for women and how they feel about themselves and their bodies (Bergner et al., 1985; Frey & Carlock,

1989; Hutchinson, 1985; Katzman et al., 1985). The women in the study were aware of how cultural expectations limited their sense of freedom to be themselves. Partly through this awareness, they were able to reject external standards and be comfortable with themselves and their bodies. The implication of this finding is that counsellors may need to facilitate women's awareness of how cultural expectations impede the development of comfort with themselves and their bodies. In addressing with clients the societal contexts of being women and what this means to them in terms of their physical characteristics and behavioral roles, the counsellor may provide an avenue for clients to question and either accept or reject external standards, hence gaining a sense of control over their own experience. This may be accomplished through individual and/or group counselling, possibly supplemented with bibliotherapy. Group settings may also reduce women's sense of isolation and provide additional support for them to try new ways of being and relating as they negotiate the transition from a negative to a more positive body image.

In this study, the women identified adolescence as a time when they became acutely aware of changing external expectations for their appearance and behavior. This created a sense of discomfort and confusion about themselves and their bodies. Part of the process of becoming comfortable with themselves and their bodies was to reject external standards that did not fit for them. Several theorists and researchers refer to a split, or a sense of disassociation or fragmentation that women feel between their internal experience of themselves and their bodies and the external stereotypical standards expected of them, particularly during adolescence (Gilligan et al., 1991;

Martin, 1987; Rubin, 1979; Ussher, 1989). Counsellors can provide interventions that facilitate the resolution of this split and the integration of all aspects of the women's self. In exploring with clients what "positive body image", or "comfort with their bodies" means to them, the counsellor may provide an opportunity for women to evaluate external standards and how realistic they are for women in general, and for themselves specifically. Through this evaluation process women clients may begin to adopt their own more congruent internal criteria for their appearance and behavior that will allow them to feel comfortable with themselves and their bodies without feeling the need to change.

For the women in this study, understanding their families' dynamics and learning new ways of relating in relationships were important parts of the process of developing comfort with themselves and their bodies. Individual counselling may offer women a safe place to understand the family and relational dynamics that have both facilitated and impeded their sense of comfort with their bodies and themselves. Counsellors need to be aware of separation-individuation difficulties that women might be experiencing that interfere with their development of their own identity and self acceptance. Women may experience a sense of fear, confusion and loss as they redefine who they are as women. Counsellors are able to provide a therapeutic environment where women clients may express and understand their feelings.

In this study, the women did not disclose experiences of childhood traumas, such as physical and/or sexual abuse, however some recalled a sense of "shame" about their sexual development as young women. For these women, becoming comfortable with their

bodies involved overcoming this sense of shame, through the experience of validating relationships and contexts later in their lives and the rejection of some external expectations. Although not all women experiencing discomfort with their bodies were abused as children, counsellors need to be aware of this possibility and be open to and prepared to either address these issues with clients or refer to a colleague who is able to best counsel a client (Kearney-Cooke, 1986; Root & Fallon, 1989).

As the women in the study experienced an increase in their sense of self worth and personal validation, they became more able to assert themselves in their relationships. This enhanced their sense of control over their lives and their bodies. As clients become more clear about how they wish to comfortably express themselves as women, they may need assistance in acting on their desire to reject some external standards. They may also need skills which will allow them to extricate themselves from non-validating contexts. The counsellor may need to provide instruction and opportunity for women to practice assertiveness and communication skills. Role playing, Gestalt two chair technique and group counselling are all interventions that offer rehearsal of new ways of relating. Counsellors may need to provide non-judgmental support until their women clients find the courage and strength to make changes in their lives that will enable them to seek out relationships and contexts that are validating and that increase their self worth. Women clients may also need assistance in developing other aspects of self (e.g., career, creativity) which will increase their self worth and thereby increase their comfort with their bodies.

The women in this study were in touch with and liked the physical sensations of

being in their bodies. Counsellors may need to provide a safe environment for women to explore the issue of how they experience their body physically. Encouragement of nonthreatening contexts where women may safely discover how their bodies move, feel, and function will also facilitate a resolution of any split the women are experiencing between themselves and their bodies, and enable them to feel comfortable in their bodies. Participation in body awareness activities and movement exercises may facilitate this process for women clients.

In summary, in order to provide the most effective service for their women clients in the development of a positive body image, counsellors need to facilitate the experience of a sense of validation and a sense of self worth for women, inside and outside the counselling relationship. Counsellors may need to assist women in exploring and questioning external cultural standards for women and support them in the development of their own internal standards for validation. In working with women clients to resolve the split between their internal experience of themselves and their bodies and external expectations, counsellors will facilitate women's integration of all aspects of themselves, enabling them to accept themselves and their bodies. In supporting and encouraging women to explore the physical experience of being in their bodies, counsellors will further enable the women to resolve the split between themselves and their bodies. Applications of the findings of this study may also be made to the development of psychoeducational workshops for transforming body image. It is hoped that the findings of this study will stimulate further exploration of counselling interventions to facilitate the development of women's comfort with their bodies.

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APPENDIX A

Some women like their shape

■ Counselling psychology student looks at body image

By HARRIET FANCOTT

When master's student Maureen Tempest told friends she was looking for women who were comfortable with their bodies to talk to her about that experience,

they told her she'd never find any.

Contrary to what one might think, said Tempest, who is working on her master's degree in counselling psychology, most women have a negative body image.

"It's more the norm than not," she added.

Through casual contact with colleagues and friends, and as a teacher of teenage mothers, she often heard women say they weren't happy with their bodies.

"I worked as a teacher in

the high school system . . . I saw women didn't feel good about their bodies and that disturbed me," Tempest said.

Women with poor body image often have trouble achieving what they want.

"When they don't feel good about what they look like, they hesitate to go after careers, relationships . . . and getting the most out of life."

She wants to begin to understand how women develop a sense of comfort and contentment with their bodies. "This is the missing chunk that needs to be explored."

The bulk of research done on women's body image focuses on women with negative body images or eating disorders. Tempest wants to explore the causes as opposed to the treatment.

She wants to interview women who not only identify themselves as comfortable with their bodies, but also want to keep their bodies the way they are. Those to be interviewed must have had no significant weight change or cosmetic surgery in the last two years, and must not be dieting.

Although Tempest knows what she wants, she has no idea who the study might attract. "It's part of the excitement to see who will respond," she said.

But she did say it's possible that women in mid-life, who are comfortable with not adhering to cultural stereotypes, or pregnant women, might be interested.

The study, one of the first of its kind, is intended to open doors for more in-

depth research.

Tempest's ultimate goal is to "help counsellors better counsel women about body image."

Those interested should call her at 228-8295. There will be two interviews of approximately 1-1/2 hours, discussing thoughts and feelings about the experience of having a positive body image.



Maureen Tempest is looking for women who are happy with their body image. Steve McKinley photo

APPENDIX B

Research and Interview Questions

General research question:

What is the experience and meaning of body image for women feeling comfortable with their bodies?

Screening Questions:

1. What prompted you to respond to the article?
2. Are you comfortable with your body at this time?
3. How long have you felt comfortable with your body?
4. Have you had a significant weight change, cosmetic surgery or dieted in the last two years?
5. Are you available for two interviews of approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours in length?

Orienting Statement:

The following statement will be read by the researcher to all participants at the beginning of the first interview.

Before we begin this interview I would like to give you some background to the research study so that you will understand how it evolved and why I am interested in this information.

There has been a great deal of research attention given to eating disorders and problems that women have with their body image. Not much, if any, research has been done on how women develop a positive body image, or on what it means to women to feel

comfortable with their bodies. I am interested in learning what having a positive body image means to you and how you perceive that has developed in your life. The main question that I would like to ask you is how you have experienced your body image over the course of your life so far. When you answer please feel free to talk for as long as you like in order to describe your experiences to your satisfaction. As we go through the interview I may ask you to clarify what you mean or ask for a little more information so that I may be clear that I understand your experience. It may be helpful for you to talk about the development of your body image through your life as if you were telling me a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Does that feel comfortable to you? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Additional interview questions:

1. What does having a positive body image mean to you ?
2. I'm wondering if there are there any specific times that stand out to you as times when you remember a shift or change in your body image, either positive or negative? What was that like for you?
3. Tell me about how your body image has changed over the years, if it has? How did the changes feel?
4. What sorts of things do you think precipitated these changes?
5. Tell me about any events or people that you believe may have affected the way you have felt about your body.

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APPENDIX C

Consent Form

**A Masters Thesis research study on
The Experience and Meaning of Body Image for Women
Feeling Comfortable with Their Bodies**

Description of the Research:

The researcher will meet with you on two separate occasions for a total of approximately three hours, for the purpose of hearing and documenting what your experience is of feeling comfortable with your body, and the meaning of that experience for you in your life.

The first interview will be audio-taped and the results transcribed. All identifying information will be deleted from the study, and your name changed as a means of ensuring absolute confidentiality. You may wish to offer a pseudonym for your own name to be used in any oral or written accounts of the material. Later, you will be asked to read the transcript of the interview and the researcher's synopsis of significant themes, and to indicate, if upon reflection, this material accurately portrays your perceptions of your experience of your body image. Any concerns or disagreements you have regarding the material will be heard and the description altered to more accurately reflect your experiences and meanings. All audio tapes will be erased following

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transcription and at no time will any identifying information be made available to anyone other than the researcher and her research supervisor. At any time during the research, if you indicate that you wish to have counselling, a referral will be provided by the researcher.

You may refuse to participate in the study or withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. You may also refuse to answer any questions.

If any aspect of the outlined procedures remains unclear, you are encouraged to contact me at 228-8295, or to call my supervisor in the Department of Counselling Psychology at UBC, Dr. Judith Daniluk at 822-5768. If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study your right to do so will be respected.

I, _____, agree to participate in the study and acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form.

Pseudonym requested _____

Date _____

Signature

Researcher:

Maureen Tempest

Department of Counselling Psychology

Faculty of Education U.B.C.

228-8295