

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**FEMININITY AND THE FEMALE BODY:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF YOUNG WOMEN'S TALK**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University, Palmerston North
New Zealand

Natasha Anne Eagle
2000

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much appreciation and thanks to my supervisor Mandy Morgan, who in the times when I was worried about the progress and worth of my work, always encouraged me with the words “we’re not panicking yet”. This thesis would not have been possible without our weekly meetings, which were times not only for guidance, but also support.

Special acknowledgement and thanks to all the women who participated in this study. It was such a pleasure to listen and learn from all of your life experiences and the wisdom that you have gained through them. I am grateful to know you all, and your participating not only contributed to this study, but also to my sense of respect for and pride in being a woman.

Thanks also to Peter who unwittingly became my technical supervisor every time I had a computer emergency, due to my struggle to become computer literate in this age of technology. Final acknowledgement to everyone I discussed my work with who was so supportive and interested, making this year of work seem all the more worthwhile.

ABSTRACT

This research looks at how 11 women aged 18-25 talk about femininity and the feminine body. The analysis is based on interview data collected in 2000, in Palmerston North and Napier, New Zealand. A discursive approach was used in analyzing the texts. The main assumption was that the meanings the women give to events and people when talking about femininity are likely to be related to their constructions of their bodies. Four main areas were looked at: the first was how the women talk of their bodies in relation to their evaluative sense of self; the second was how the women talk about the standards of beauty that are presented to them in the media; the third being how the women talk about themselves as consumers of fashion and beauty products; and the last was how the women talked about their understanding of femininity. Women generally constructed their physical appearance as relating closely to their sense of self, particularly their self-esteem. Beauty standards, especially those portrayed in the media were constructed as standards of physical attractiveness that are impossible to live up to. As a result of this, the women talked about depression and anxiety. In order to attempt to live up to these standards of beauty, women also talked of the ways they altered their appearance, particularly in regards to weight-loss, as well as the use of fashion and cosmetics. The concept of femininity was difficult for the women to talk about, as many had never given the idea much thought. Stereotypic notions of femininity as passive and self sacrificing were usually used, along side new ways of thinking about the concept, which often involved adopting valued masculine traits, such as independence and describing them as now relating to being a woman.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
List of Figures	iii
Chapter 1: Literature review/Personal statement	1
Chapter 2: Feminism, discourse and poststructuralism	24
Chapter 3: Methodology	38
Chapter 4: How women account for the importance of beauty	44
Chapter 5: How women resist established ways of constructing the female body	67
Chapter 6: How women talk about women and the media	77
Chapter 7: How women talk about fashion, cosmetics and consumerism	90
Chapter 8: How women talk about femininity and being a woman	104
Chapter 9: Summary	122
References	132
Appendix A: Questions	140
Appendix B: Consent form and information sheet	142