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

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## **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.

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## Chapter 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*"A woman's body and its gestures report on the defining characteristics of a decade. Postures of anxiety, insecurity and sexual uncertainty coexist with fashions more traditional celebration..... universal feelings of desire, desperation, extreme love and bitter sweet melancholia come through in the photographs"*  
(Black & White Magazine, May 1997).

Historical and feminist studies have shown that the styles of the female figure and what it means to be 'feminine' change over time. The current western ideal of the feminine figure is that of a thin woman, with smooth hairless skin, no signs of wrinkles or aging and a style of dress that displays her (hetero)sexuality. However there is a major problem with this model because many, in fact most, women do not look like this and therefore they never reach the ideal notion of 'femininity', feeling a "pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" (Bartky, 1988, p.9). Patriarchal standards of femininity have become an essential part of a woman's identity: "to feel feminine is crucial to the sense of a woman as female and a sexually desirable being" (Bartky, 1988, p.17). Most women cannot achieve this ideal of femininity, yet failure to meet the set standards often threatens a woman's very sense of self. The growing liberation of women in all areas of life now allows women to move beyond the domestic sphere, no longer restricting them to childbearing and the expectation of chastity. In the past women have defined their femininity in the role they take as wife, mother and homemaker. However some feminists argue that when restrictions are eased on one aspect of women's behavior (for example, relative sexual freedom), aspects of women's appearance are restricted accordingly (Rothblum, 1992). Women are no longer assumed to take the traditional positions, therefore the definition of femininity is now becoming more and more focused on a woman's body and its sexuality, not its function.

Since the Women's Liberation Movement, which began in the late 1960s, there has been a considerable amount of research and theory that has focused on femininity and the female body. Feminist poststructuralists construct a woman's conception of herself as deriving from the categorizing of her sexuality and gender. In other words, a woman's

sense of identity is usually dominated by her appearance, her body and her sexuality (Du Plessis & Hire, 1998; Hollows, 2000). What it means to be a woman has been tied historically to women's bodies. The fastening of women's bodies to women's psyches constructs many of women's psychological problems as embedded in their bodies (Bayer & Malone, 1996). Because the definition of 'woman' has been characterized by her body, looks are a defining feature for a woman – in how others respond to her and in how she perceives herself. Therefore in order to form subjectivity women have had to take up their body as a thing, an object (Tseelon, 1995). Young (1990) writes that because women construct their identity on the basis of their appearance and because society places women as the 'object', a mere body, they live their bodies as the object as well as the subject. The gaze is masculine and the object of the gaze is feminine. Therefore if a woman wishes to gain subjectivity she does this through taking the masculine position, and appreciates the objectification of women. Young discusses this as the construction of woman as 'other'. This notion places women's oppression as dependent on women living in a patriarchal society that defines 'woman' as being the opposite of 'man'. Young draws on the theorist Irigaray, who suggests that women act as the mirror for masculine subjectivity and pleasure. Patriarchy does this by creating women's desire to be identified with his – women find satisfaction in being the object of his pleasure. Female sexuality and desire are therefore not autonomous, but depend on approval from the male gaze.

Because what it means to be 'feminine' has been linked so strongly to women's physical appearance, feminists construct the ideal 'feminine' as oppressing women - women's sexuality has become the eroticization of female subordination (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999). Women are trained to meet the male gaze but in doing so they are condemned for being superficial and sentimental (Young, 1990). Many women feel ashamed to admit that such trivial matters as ones body, face, hair and clothes, matter so much. Feminists claim that as women have gained more legal and material freedom, the images of female beauty have become more strict (Wolf, 1990). This has led to women who would more often than not rather lose weight than achieve any other goal. There is a common belief that the concept of feminine beauty is based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics or

religion. However feminists argue that it is about politics, finance and sexual repression. "It is not about women, but about men and power" (Wolf, 1990, p.4). The qualities that a certain time period considers beautiful have been connected to the type of female behavior that is deemed desirable at the time. For example, the old fashioned value of virginity and the ever-present value of youth both represent experiential and sexual ignorance. Ageing is not considered attractive because with it comes wisdom and power, which are both inconsistent with female subordination. In today's western society where women are becoming stronger economically and materially, they can be best subordinated and weakened psychologically. It is here where the demand to be beautiful takes its toll. The beauty myth is slowly devastating women, both psychologically and physically.

Because the impossible expectation to be beautiful is potentially dangerous to a woman's wellbeing it has been said that 'beauty norms are obstacles to women's liberation' (Callaghan, 1994, p.1). Feminists argue that not only 'femininity' but also patriarchal images of women's beauty and women's oppression are intricately connected. Beauty norms sustain the most basic assumption of identity, the self, body and intersubjectivity. However the desire for beauty is not an end in itself. Along with the desire to be attractive is the need for acceptance, which implies that to be beautiful is synonymous to gaining a person's approval. Very rarely is beauty desired in the wish for self-actualization and achievement. The work of French historian Foucault has been used to describe how modern social control of women's bodies is not maintained through force, but through 'symbolic manipulation' and the impression of free will (Barkty, 1988). Foucault contributes to our understanding of the problem in relation to the wider social context. He talks of the 'discipline against the body' that arose with the development of modern institutions. Foucault gives various examples of how modern society disciplines and controls the body; the child who is taught to sit upright at his/her school desk, and the prisoner confined to a cell. However this control can not be effective unless there is surveillance. Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's model of the Panopticon prison to describe the underlying concept of the 'disciplinary society'.

“A circular structure, at the center, a tower with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring. The structure on the periphery is divided into cells each with two windows, one facing the windows of the tower, the other facing the outside allowing an effect of backlighting to make any figure visible within the cell”  
(Bartky, 1988, p. 205).

This design allows the inmates to be visible to the watchman while they remain isolated, creating in them a continuous consciousness of their visibility. As a result the inmate becomes his own watchman – keeping himself under surveillance. The disciplinary power is now not only controlling the body but also the mind. Foucault takes the panopticon to be a metaphor for contemporary, western society. Foucault’s theory is based on the idea that our bodies are formed by the prevailing historical form of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity (Bartky, 1988; Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000; Fillingham, 1993).

Even though he did not intend this model for feminist purposes, the panopticon has been used to explain the disciplinary power’s effect on women’s bodies. Foucault simply wished to explain how modern society has produced a discipline that controls one’s body. In fact many feminists have criticized Foucault for making no distinction between the differing experiences that men and women have of this disciplinary power. Bartky points out that to ignore the fact that women are subject to far more disciplinary power is to ignore, and even reproduce in theory, the sexism in today’s culture. The feminist perspective believes that the feminine body is currently being used to generate sexism in western society. Bartky says “in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women; they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other” (Bartky, 1988, p. 214). This is therefore a major problem, but a very difficult one to deal with. The disciplinary power that inscribes the definition of the feminine body is not controlled by any one person or group of people – it is anonymous. Bordo (1993) uses Foucault when she states that the disciplinary practices not only transform, but normalize the subject. One example given is the Caucasian/Pakeha standard of beauty that dominates the media. Bordo believes that the Foucauldian model of power, where all people are positioned differentially within networks of power relations, is a useful model for the analysis of the subordination of

women. That which has been reproduced as 'voluntary', for instance the daily beauty routine, is now seen as the normal and appropriate habits of masculinity and femininity.

Foucault as well as others such as Pierre Bourdieu, believe that a woman's body is a 'locus of social control' (Jagger & Bordo, 1989, p.13). Bartky (1988) takes a postmodern approach when she states that the female figure, and what it means to be beautiful has changed dramatically over time. This can be seen by looking at the way that women have been portrayed in the media over the last 100 years. In the renaissance period the voluptuous figure was considered attractive, in the Victorian era the hourglass figure, in the 1920's moving on to the 'flapper' look – flat chested with no curves. Finally the extremely thin figure came in with the 'Twiggy' look, with slender bodies reigning supreme ever since - the waif look is now a popular sight in beauty and fashion magazines, showing younger models that are less physically developed (Macdonald, 1995). Bartky (1998, p.2) describes femininity as "an artefact, an achievement, a mode of enacting and re-enacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh". Bartky notes three factors involved in femininity – shape and size of the body, gestures and movements, as well as using the body as an ornamented surface. The main focus in this study will be on the shape and ornamentation of the female body.

The current Western emphasis on freedom and individuality makes any form of control appear 'neutral' and not coercive. This way the individual is blamed for their own oppression because they always have the choice to pick another option. Beauty choices such as hair removal or the use of cosmetics appear as either natural or free choice, and not an outcome of gendered power relations. Control now appears in the form of social imagery and language. According to poststructuralism, beauty alone is not oppressive because it does not exist outside of the cultural discourses that constitute it.

Poststructuralism views beauty as a social construction, therefore the concept of 'beauty' does not exist until meaning has been given to it. Because what it means to be 'beautiful' changes over time, any existing beauty norm is subject to interpretation. With this realization different and competing images of beauty can arise. By connecting both the current construction of 'beauty' with women's oppression, and the realization that what it

means to be 'beautiful' can change, feminists can then move beyond associating woman with the physical and create multiple of definitions of 'beauty' and 'femininity' (Bayer & Malone, 1996).

If a woman is not 'naturally' beautiful and therefore does not feel that she will meet the approval of the male gaze, she may often go to lengths to alter her appearance, and this is seen by some as being damaging to ones sense of self. Thompson and Haytko (1997) studied the concept of the natural look and how it is important in fashion today. However the 'natural' look is a paradox because even though it symbolizes freedom from fashion pressures, achieving this seemingly effortless look requires significant time, money and labor (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999). Tseelon (1995) writes, "beauty for the woman is an identity claim, except that it is a conditionally spoiled identity. It is only through hard work that the woman can avoid being shown up as ugly" (p.78). Many feminists agree with this view and see the current beauty routine as a type of self-loathing. Therefore a new image of beauty that celebrates the existing female body is needed. Callaghan (1994) uses the term 'democratizing beauty' to describe how the definition of feminine and what it means to be attractive must not lie in the hands of a few. Femininity should be created, not degraded, by beauty images that portray a freely constructed discourse that rejects hierarchical, repressive gender relations. Of course for those who try to act against the current beauty norms, a price is paid, in the way that people who conform are seen as reasonable, controlled, and objective individuals. But those who refuse to conform are excluded on the basis that they are either wrong or rebellious.

The pressure to be beautiful becomes even greater when a woman realizes that an attractive woman has many advantages unavailable to the unattractive woman. For example studies have found that attractive women have an advantage when job qualifications are assessed and in hiring decisions (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985, cited by Drogosz & Levy, 1996). This is most likely due to attractive women being perceived as more friendly, likable and socially desirable (Goldman & Lewis, 1977, cited by Tseelon, 1995). This belief can be traced back to the Victorian idea that physical beauty reflects spiritual beauty and beauty of character (Tseelon, 1995). Heilman and Saruwatar (1979,

cited by Drogosz & Levy, 1996) found that attractive women are also believed to possess more traditionally feminine qualities. This is why attractive women are often seen as suiting female typed jobs only. Unattractive women on the other hand are seen as having characteristics typical of a male typed job.

Empirical studies have shown how women's body image is related to their psychological and physical health (Graham & Jouhar, 1983, cited by Tseelan, 1995). A study has been done which involved women's journal entries about the desire, attempts and failures to live up to society's expectation of what a woman should look like. It was found that many women wrote of becoming depressed and some even physically ill, as consequences of constantly trying and failing to become the perfect 'feminine'. Feelings such as guilt, shame, anxiety, and self-loathing were reported by the girls and women in the study as the result of the constant pressure to be beautiful. These feelings were experienced despite the fact that the majority of the participants in the study recognized that self worth should not be aligned with outer appearance (Callaghan, 1994). Thompson and Hirschman (1995) note that often a slim body is not an end in itself. Rather it symbolizes personal worth, ones position in social relationships, the merit of ones lifestyle and the degree of control in ones life. This returns to the idea that a woman's identity is closely bound to her appearance.

Studies have found that many women have extremely low body satisfaction, much lower than men (Jackson, 1992, cited by Tseelon, 1995; Cok, 1990; Smith, Handley, & Eldredge, 1998). Because of this some women have become mentally and physically ill. Muth and Cash (1997) found that women experienced more negative body-image evaluations and put greater investment into their appearance than men did. Smith, Handley and Eldredge, (1998) investigated the sex differences in exercise motivation and found that not all women exercised to lose weight, but women who experienced body dissatisfaction did. It was also found that women experienced higher situational body dissatisfaction and exercised for appearance related reasons more than men did. Feingold and Mazzella's (1998) study showed a rapid increase in the number of women who have a poor body image. This includes a poor self-judgement of physical attractiveness.

Empirically, body image has been defined as “a mental construction embedded in a larger mental construction, often termed the self-schema, that can deviate substantially from a person’s objective physical characteristics” (Myers & Biocca, 1992, cited by Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, p. 150). Koff and Benavage (1998) noted that breast size is sometimes an important part of a woman’s body image. In their study women with either large or small breasts experienced breast size dissatisfaction, which resulted in low self-esteem. Higher public self-consciousness, social anxiety and appearance preoccupation, were also associated with a mismatch in ideal and personal perceived breast size. Young (1990) supports this view suggesting that breasts signify womanliness. Because of this, small breasts are often the cause of embarrassment and a sense of inadequacy. The desire to be slim is so strong that even pregnant women may feel ugly. A study that involved interviewing pregnant women found that the majority reported feeling unattractive and ugly during their pregnancy due to their changing body shape and gaining weight. Many of the pregnant women withdrew from public places altogether in the later stages of pregnancy and wore clothing that helped hide their pregnancy. Despite the fact that it is obvious that pregnant women have been sexually active, more than not people interviewed thought of them as being non-sexual and ugly (Du Plessis & Hire, 1998).

However a relationship has been found between body satisfaction and feminist attitudes. Previous studies have found that feminist attitudes correlated highly with autonomy and self-acceptance (Dempewolf & Weitz, 1982, cited by Zone, 1998; Snyder & Hasbrouck, 1996; Qhyrrae, 1997; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999). Zone investigated whether feminists were less likely to suffer from eating disorders or body image dissatisfaction. The results of the study confirmed that feminists were indeed more likely to be accepting of their bodies, supporting the hypothesis that feminists are less likely to experience body dissatisfaction, which can lead to eating disorder symptomatology. Therefore feminism may be able to be used as a way of preventing body dissatisfaction and in the treatment of eating disorders. Tiggemann and Stevens (1999) studied the relationship between weight concern and feminist identity. Among the age group of 30-49 year old women, a strong feminist orientation was correlated with less anxiety about weight. However the findings of Dionne, Davis, Fox and Gurevich (1996) suggested that feminist attitudes regarding

physical attractiveness related to body satisfaction, but an overall feminist identification did not. Therefore by positioning oneself in a specifically feminist discourse when constructing body image a woman could expect to feel better about her physical appearance.

The majority of the research on body image has been concerned with the connection between eating disorders and the western world's desire for women to be thin. In order to try and live up to society's expectations of what is 'beauty', women have had to place a great deal of discipline on their bodies. Bordo writes 'the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation and death' (Jagger & Bordo, 1989, p.14). Because the construction of what is 'feminine' involves the acceptance of current beauty standards, this argument points to the way that poor body image can sometimes result in behaviors that are debilitating, such as eating disorders. Exercising and dieting for some women has almost become a type of self-punishment for not living up to the expected ideal. Many people have started looking at the media for reasons why young women experience body dissatisfaction. A study by Thompson (1986, cited by Rothblum, 1992) found that 95% of women over-estimated their weight. As a result of this the women tended to feel bad about themselves. If a woman compares herself to models as the standard of beauty, she is expected to feel 16% overweight by comparison. A similar study found 95% of media women to be of average weight or less (Rothblum, 1992). Media advertising has been criticized as being 'a pervasive cultural institution that represents women in a problematic and unacceptable way' (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999, p.34). This is because of the belief that advertising is sustaining male domination. The power of multinational corporations and the desire to make money constitutes more powerful interests than that of the consumer and women's self worth. Of course this is not to claim that advertisements set out to purposely oppress women, but that they are unconsciously based in dominant discourses that do (Kates & Shaw-Glarlock, 1999). Discursive fields such as the mass media and medical science are viewed as contributing to the idea of normalization, conveying what is not normal as being a problem. Anorexia and bulimia are argued to be extreme forms of normalization (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) due to the way that young women who experience body dissatisfaction while

comparing themselves to media women restrict their eating to become what is considered 'normal' on screen and in mass publications.

While femininity is more difficult to define than anorexia, there may be a trait in anorexia that explains why it is more prevalent in females than in males (Lavanchy, 1998). The adoption of the traditional feminine gender role has been one explanation given by Martz, Handley and Eisler (1995) for why some women develop eating disorders when others do not. Fulfilling the traditional feminine role would involve careful attention to physical attractiveness and gaining approval from others. However commitment to fulfilling these demands creates stresses, which may display themselves in the form of an eating disorder. Clinicians who treat young women with eating disorders describe their patients as being extremely feminine in the traditional sense. A low number of stereotypical feminine behaviors have been seen to correlate with low scores on the Bulimia Cognitive Distortions Scale. This implies that there is an association between 'feminine' characteristics and bulimic cognitions (Brazelton, Greene, Gynther & O'Mell, 1998). The main factor in the Behavioral Self-report of Femininity, social connectedness, was found to be a highly significant factor in the predictability of bulimia scores. Brazelton, Greene and Gynther (1996) also found a positive correlation between femininity and depression. Researchers such as Ludwig and Brownell (1999), and Silverstein, Perdue, Wolf and Pizzolo (1998, cited by Martz, Handley & Eisler, 1995) also found a correlation between 'femininity', body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. However others have found no such correlation, perhaps due to the different measures used. Studies have shown that a young woman's self esteem is enhanced with the exploring and consolidating of what it means to be a female. Knowledge of what it means to be a woman is also correlated with a positive attitude towards being female. Adherence to the traditional feminine sex role is damaging to a woman if it results in stress. Attributes that are traditionally feminine such as placing a lot of attention on physical attractiveness and the desire to please others have been noted to correlate highly with stress (Michaelieu, 1997).

A postmodern view of eating disorders seeks to move beyond the concept of anorexia and bulimia as individual pathologies towards an understanding of how they are discursively constituted in a late capitalist culture. Viewing eating disorders in this way takes the focus away from the individual and places it in discursive practices and gender power-relations (Malson, 1999). In understanding the negative implications of society's constructions of 'beauty' and the disciplines placed on women's bodies to meet current beauty standards, we may start to treat eating disorders at the societal rather than the personal level.

However changing current constructions of 'beauty' is a difficult task because the value of being physically attractive is fuelled both by advertising and the mass media. The majority of psychological research on physical attractiveness has focused on the fixed attributes of individuals. This ignores the way that people can control their looks in varying their grooming, for example their cosmetics, hairstyles and clothes. Television makes millions of dollars every year in advertising products that women use to achieve the style of flesh that is 'femininity'. Exercise machines, weight loss programs, hair removal systems and cosmetics are just some of the products that the media relies on to gain enough revenue to continue broadcasting. So obviously the media is reluctant to help change the problem (Rothblum, 1992). Women's concern with appearance is making money. According to Jagger and Bordo (1989) women are now spending more time than ever before in the management of their bodies. The disciplines of make-up, diet and dress are often an organizing principle of time and space in a woman's day. A study by Cash (1987, 1988, cited by Cash, Dawson, Davis, Bowen & Galumbeck, 1989) found that cosmetics influence the social impression that a person gives and the self-image that they possess. Cox and Glick (1986, cited by Cash et al, 1989) found that women wearing cosmetics were considered more feminine and sexy than women who did not wear cosmetics. Cash and Horton (1983, cited by Cash et al, 1989) found that the main reason why women use cosmetics is to improve their self-image. Cash et al showed that women who wore cosmetics were indeed considered more physically attractive by others. Because women's self esteem is so intricately linked with their appearance it is not surprising that those women who wore cosmetics and were deemed physically attractive

were more satisfied with their body-image than those women who did not wear cosmetics. Therefore the main motivation behind the use of cosmetics was to control self-image (Cash, 1987 & Cash & Horton, 1983, cited by Cash et al, 1989). Getz and Klein, (1992, cited by Callaghan, 1994) investigated going to hair salons to gain self-esteem. The main focus of this research was the idea that women connect their appearance with self-worth. The study showed that women indeed went to the salon to look more attractive and enhance self-esteem. It was noted that appearance anxiety was often linked with the need to be more attractive and the avoidance of appearing different. Of course the look achieved in the salon is always temporary, increasing the state of appearance anxiety.

Through the use of marketing strategies the beauty industry makes money from the appearance anxiety of women. The obsession with thinness alone makes an estimated \$20 billion worth of profit for the diet and weight loss industry a year (Rothblum, 1992, p.69). This figure does not include revenue gained from prescription drugs for weight loss, health spas and athletic equipment. Getz and Klein (1992, cited by Callaghan, 1994) state that the corporate producers of beauty items and services are not in agreement with the empowerment and self-acceptance of women, due to the amount of profit they make from products that encourages diet and preoccupation with exercise. Of course the beauty industry did not create the practice of self-adornment, though they contribute to it and benefit from it. Appearance anxiety and beauty specific self-esteem is seen as a problem of individual women and not a public issue linked to the economy and the patriarchal structure of society.

However there are some feminists that do not view consumerism, fashion and cosmetics as purely being the means of women's oppression. Barthes (1990, cited by Young, 1990) offers an alternative view of fashion, suggesting that it can give women the opportunity to dream of various identities and play these out. This aspect of fashion could give women the freedom to unsettle what is seen as appropriate and respectable – the possibility for alternative notions of the 'feminine'. Harrison (1997) also believes that

fashion has the potential to be a means of resistance to fixed images of femininity, rather than the source of oppression.

A poststructuralist perspective on the body provides insight into the cultural underpinnings of consumer's desires and the meanings they attach to their products. Research has shown consumption is used as a means of creating self-identity. Consumer's beliefs about their bodies had a profound influence on their consumption behaviors and the meanings they attributed to products. Poststructuralism views this as personalized expressions of larger discourses (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). A poststructuralist study by Thompson and Haytko (1997) analyzed the meanings consumers use to interpret their experiences and conceptions of fashion. Fashion discourses are constructed by the western fashion pattern that is novelty, rapid change, a proliferation of style and mass consumption. This study investigated how consumers adapt fashion discourses to fit the conditions of their own lives. Six main discourses were identified. The glamorizing discourse, used mostly by women, was organized around the construction of living the good life based on material affluence. The plain and practical discourse is often used by men, who use fashion as a sign of moral virtue, sensibility and rationality. This reflected the desire to be judged on the basis of character and abilities. The anti-conformist discourse was used by those who saw fashion as being an expression of a desire to be unique. Expressing this desire meant distancing oneself from certain social groups. The conformity discourse is based on the construct of using a specific fashion style to stand for a larger social identity and identification with a certain group. This discourse is seen as 'feminine' in the way that it recognizes that one is bound in social relationships. A dominant group will often read a deviant's dress as negative inferences about their behavior. The natural discourse is aligned with 'masculine' ideals of authenticity and individuality. The final discourse is the political discourse, which uses fashion to resist social pressure to look a certain way. In the study women were more likely to interpret fashion beauty ideals as being consequential to their identities. Some of these discourses are more dominant than others, but all exist as a possible ways that people can understand fashion and consumerism in everyday life.

Media advertisements encouraging a woman to buy a certain beauty product imply that she can transform herself into almost any form she desires. This type of advertising which compares cosmetic surgery to fashion accessories without blinking an eyelid proposes serious problems. The first problem with such advertising is that it proposes that anyone can have the body they desire. However it is only those with the privilege, money and time available to buy and use these products that have the chance to benefit from them. The second problem is the one of choice. People are led to believe that they can create themselves into anything or anyone they desire. But along with this message is a very narrow range of 'acceptable' choices. If you do not choose to look like the images that are circumscribed, you are usually classed as being abnormal or unattractive (Bordo, 1993). An example of this can be seen in Tiggemann and Kenyon's (1998) study of hair removal. Women who do not decide to remove body hair are shown in this study to be considered by others as both abnormal and unattractive. Using a sample of over one hundred first year university students, it was found that 92% of women removed leg and underarm hair. Reasons given were for the desire to be feminine as well as attractive. Removing body hair is a practice that is usually ignored by researchers but is one which contributes to the notion that a woman's body is unacceptable as it is. Despite the social sanctions that may be placed on you if you do not follow certain rules with your appearance, putting makeup and styling ones hair, even cosmetic surgery, is commonly seen as being harmless, a type of creative expression. In other words, it is not a political issue.

In recent times technology has become a major part of advertising, especially in fashion photography. Technology has created the possibility for manipulation of images to create certain looks, for example airbrushing, making practically any image possible. This has led to unrealistic or false portrayals of the female body, presenting a beauty standard that is physically impossible to live up to (MacDonald, 1995).

As well as studying the feminine body, the notion of 'femininity' has been investigated in recent times by feminist poststructuralists who believe that "sexuality is a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies and affectivity" (Butler, 1990, p.92).

Simone de Beauvoir was the first to suggest that 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one' (Butler, 1990, p.111). What this means is that being a woman is a cultural construction, a set of meanings and practices acquired in a certain setting. Sex and gender are therefore different. Almost everyone is attributed a sex. In the way that women tend to be seen as 'feminine' and men 'masculine', gender is mostly reflected by sex. At the time Beauvoir's theory was extremely radical, implying that to be feminine does not necessarily mean you have to have a female body. This is seen today in the case of cross dressers and transgender individuals. Another feminist who argues from a poststructuralist standpoint is Iris Young. Young (1990) claims that the female is defined by the historical, cultural, social and economic limits of her situation. 'Femininity' is therefore not what many believe it to be. It does not refer to the mysterious essence inside of a woman, which means that femininity is not necessarily a 'natural' display of a woman's character. Because femininity and masculinity are culturally constructed, without the externalizing acts of gender, gender does not exist. Gender is created and repeated, through action and performance. 'Gender is a stylization of the body' (Butler, 1990, p.140). Because gender is socially constructed, styles of the female figure change over time and are thus a 'social temporality'.

Wittig is another feminist poststructuralist who claims that 'femininity' is a social construction. Wittig (1989, cited by Butler, 1990) argues that to be a male is not to be a gender, because males are already seen as the universal person. Women on the other hand do not imply another gender, but the only one. Therefore gender is discursively produced. Gender discourse oppresses women as well as gay men and lesbians. Language is 'a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality, that are eventually misperceived as 'facts' (Butler, 1990, p.115). Even the shape of one's body and the composite of their parts are constructed by language, which is enmeshed in politics. Poststructuralists believe that western society is governed by binary distinctions, such as the mind/body and female/male dualisms. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) note that dualism is now part of everyday language. The mind/body dualism is a classic example of separating parts of the human subject. The mind and body are now viewed by many as inherent characteristics of reality, rather than social constructions ruled by principles like

power, economics, gender and class divisions. The 'mind over body' dualism is used in the selling of many diet and weight-loss products. Therefore the mind/body dualism has been used to continue the subordination of women. This is a new way of thinking for those who believe that physical features exist outside of language and are therefore unmarked by the social system. Butler (1990) notes that only after analysis is it clear that the numerous parts of the body have gained social meaning through the artificial unity of a given set of attributes, for example, secondary sex characteristics. Because language is so powerful, it either has the ability to establish an inclusive group of persons or establish a hierarchy.

Sociology describes femininity as being achieved through socialization and the formation of the self-concept. A few examples of this are same sex role models and the different forms of media to which boys and girls are exposed. Psychology traditionally treats gender identity as a developmental process that determines our interpretation of the world and our knowledge of socially appropriate behaviors. There are three major psychological theories on femininity. The first states that femininity flows naturally from the physical difference in being a woman and is based on the concept that gender is intrinsic to a person and determined before birth. Social learning theory claims that women acquire appropriate feminine skills by modelling others. Lastly, cognitive or developmental theory states that femininity is developed through interaction between experience and cognition. Kohlberg (1974, cited by MacDonald, 1995) claims that both girls and boys value power, aggression and intelligence, characteristics that are associated with masculinity. However, girls still want to be feminine because of the intense cultural pressure to behave in a gender appropriate manner. Bem's Sex Role Inventory has become a popular measure used in psychology to test adherence to 'masculine' or 'feminine' roles and characteristics. However the 20 feminine and 20 masculine attributes in the Inventory have been criticized by some who believe that Bem is implying that there are essential and fixed characteristics of masculinity and femininity (MacDonald, 1995).

The formation of masculinity and femininity are as mentioned earlier, historically specific. Marxism asserts that the division of industry and the family resulted in the original division between men and women. In capitalist society the definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' arose out of the alienation of the worker within industry and the need for support from his wife who remained in the domestic sphere. The problem is that instead of these definitions being seen as beginning from a certain situation, they have grown to be seen as being natural after an extended period of time. Prior to capitalist society the basis of identity was found in ones kinship. Today the focus for individuality is centred on the meanings of masculinity and femininity, which were in its earlier stages founded on the sexual relationship of husband and wife (Foreman, 1977).

The concept of femininity has been researched to help develop a better understanding of some of society's marginalized women. A recent study involving disabled women and the people around them investigated how they were perceived by others as well as themselves. Disabled women were characterized as being overly feminine – weak, passive and dependant. In a society where the mind is valued over the body, women who are intellectually disabled are even more marginalized. Female body builders who wish to gain strength and masculinity can be seen as contradicting the theory that women desire to maintain a stereotypical feminine body. However when interviewed, female body builders considered what they were doing with their bodies to be enhancing to the beauty and sexiness of their appearance. This is then consistent with the idea that women wish to have and maintain a body that is attractive and appealing to others (Du Plessis & Hire, 1998). The social identities of female leaders in different cultures has also been studied, investigating the way that women in leadership are expected to fit into male leadership roles while still maintaining a stereotypical feminine identity. In this study the women in leadership found that feminine attributes, such as co-operation and fairness, were considered by some as being an advantage rather than a disadvantage, raising the possibility of valuing femininity and feminine characteristics (Rojahn, Fischer & Willemsen, 1997).

The Hyperfemininity Inventory (HFI) has recently been developed to measure women's adherence to a traditional gender role. Studies have shown that low hyperfeminine (LHF) women are less attracted to the macho male and are also less attracted to a man in a non-consensual sexual scenario (Maybach & Gold, 1994). Hyperfeminine women on the other hand were found to be more accepting of adversarial sexual behavior, advocated a less harsh reaction to coercion and were more likely to have experienced sexual coercion themselves. Hyperfemininity was also related to traditional attitudes about the rights and roles of women in society (Murnen & Byrne, 1991; Matschiner & Murnen, 1996). Lyn Harrison (1997) studied the phenomenon of the debutante ball and the construction of femininity that is involved in such an event. Debutante balls still in existence today portray the stereotypical feminine identity, which is marriageable, virgin, modest and subservient. Along with many other things this prepares young girls for heterosexuality and the ideal of romantic love. Women currently have a limited range of acceptable subject positions to draw from in the search for what it means to be a woman. Harrison states that the alternatives to the feminine ideal are not effective because they do not work at the level of desire. Therefore you are either feminine or feminist.

Because femininity has been associated with characteristics such as passiveness and self sacrifice some women fear femininity. Eurich-Rascoe and Vande Kemp (1997) discuss how femininity is often a source of shame for women and even some men, causing them to hide their 'feminine selves'. This type of thinking is supported by feminists such as Irigaray and Reeder (1990) who believe that femininity is a quality that patriarchy represses. However Irigaray and Reeder believe that femininity is an exclusively female quality and therefore society's devaluing of it alienates women from their specific feminine desires. Norton (1997) points out that the fear of femininity is closely intertwined with the subordination of women. From a social constructionist point of view, femininity is the product and effect of dominant discourses that oppress women. Eurich-Rascoe and Vande Kemp (1997) claim that western society relates certain emotions and attitudes with either masculinity or femininity, for example relatedness is considered feminine, while autonomy is masculine. This theory asserts the need for

therapeutic practice as well as change in society in general to validate women's as well as men's femininity.

The expectation to be feminine and fulfil appropriate gender roles can cause not only fear, but also mental conflict for some women. For example intellectually gifted women have reported receiving conflicting messages regarding their intelligence and femininity. Among their confusion was the conflict between the expectation to be feminine and the expectation to meet the needs of others, sometimes at the cost of oneself. The avoidance of arrogant self-presentation and the pressure to be modest was also an issue, as well as the importance of not challenging the natural order of male intellectual superiority and the importance of marrying rather than focusing on a career. Some women found that to be considered intelligent as well as desirable was often difficult, because being desirable meant being feminine, of which intelligence and logic are not characteristic (Kirkpatrick, 1999). Kwiatkowski (1999) found that female athletes who took part in non-traditional or masculine sports were also faced with similar conflicting expectations of what is and what isn't feminine.

In the last forty years there has been a rapid increase in academic interest in the body. This can be seen as a result of the heightened visibility of the body in contemporary culture, such as film, health, fitness and beauty, which are all now scarcely separable from each other (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999). Sandra Bartky (1988) was one poststructuralist feminist to present the problem of 'femininity' and its connection to disciplines of the body, describing it as a form of oppression controlled by patriarchy.

Of course the idea of living out of cultural construction would not be so problematic except that so many women after trying desperately, fail to transform themselves into the ideal 'feminine' and therefore live with a devastating sense of inadequacy. Another problem with the ideal 'feminine' is that even those women who do succeed in the beautiful and sexy body still gain little respect and rarely any type of social power, due to western society's preference for the mind over the body. The possibility of changing a society's view of what it means to be feminine is sabotaged when disciplinary power

creates the impression that femininity is either voluntary or completely natural. Women who decide not to comply with the patriarchal standards of beauty and adornment often find themselves without a male partner and the badly needed intimacy that they may provide. Bartky goes further to explain how a woman's femininity is intricately tied with her sense of identity. Therefore if a woman wishes to oppose the current beauty standards, she is then threatening her character as a woman and a sexually desirable being. Bartky sums this all up stating "femininity as a certain style of flesh will have to be surpassed in the direction of something quite different – as yet an unimagined transformation of the female body" (Bartky, 1988, p.19).

## **Personal Statement**

As a young woman the problem of femininity and the female body has a great deal of personal relevance for me; I am therefore very interested in the development of a better understanding of the problem and its solution. I have always had an interest in people, which naturally led me to study psychology and the social sciences in my tertiary studies. Because the majority of the people closest to me are women, I started focusing on how women feel, think and act, resulting in my involvement in the psychology of women. Several of my female friends have had to cope with clinical depression and I have had one close friend who has suffered from bulimia. Of those who have recovered from their illness, all have told me of the same realization - to be happy, you have to be happy with who you are as you are. Many women suffer from low self esteem, eating disorders and mental illness as the result of trying to live up to society's unrealistic expectation of what it means to be 'feminine'. My belief is that women would be better putting their energies into expressing who they are both as a group and as individuals, rather than focusing on unrealistic expectations. I know of so many women who live on dieting schemes or who refuse to go out of the house without make-up on – the obsession with appearance has become a way of life. I now believe that what women need is the right to celebrate their individual body types, ages, sexualities and histories, instead of experiencing the burden

that comes with trying to live up to the impossible definition of what it means to be a 'woman' in western society today.

I myself have not been without my share of insecurities and obsessive behaviors concerning my appearance. Personally I am sick and tired of seeing myself as the object of the male gaze. I am tired of living as the object of space, and not a person in space. After many hours of conversation with other women my age, I now know that comparison is a way of life for most women, especially physical comparison. Hannah Davis states that "images of the feminine are not only created by men for men, but also with other women and against other women – women look at each other and judge each other and seek to portray each other" (Brugmann, Heebing, Long & Michielsens, 1993, p.183). Instead of constantly being in competition with each other, I believe that women need to appreciate the uniqueness of each and every woman, both inside and out. The competition, jealousy and bitterness surrounding comparison is only keeping women from being united. It is hard to look past the exterior and concentrate on who one is and not what one looks like, when the definition of 'feminine' focuses on appearance. One reason why I am doing this study is because I see it as being a great opportunity for personal growth. In coming to understand why women feel the way they do about themselves, and in learning about the different ways that femininity can be constructed, I simultaneously learn about myself as a woman and why I do the things I do. I believe that knowing and appreciating who you are is an important part of creating a positive self image, and hopefully this study will indicate the huge impact that gender has on this.

As most of the literature I will be using in this study is written from a feminist perspective, so also will my thesis take this standpoint. The word 'feminism' takes on a variety of definitions these days. I believe that feminism should raise people's awareness that women are oppressed, and develop pride and identity in women while working towards positive change. This study takes for granted the first assumption, that women are oppressed. Despite the advancements in equal rights, we still have a long way to go. The main thing that will be discussed in this thesis is the middle part of this statement that focuses on the need to develop pride and identity in women. Of course in order for

women to become proud of who they are and develop a strong sense of self, some changes need to take place.

This project will also be carried out from a poststructuralist perspective. "Post-structuralism is a theory that connects language, subjectivity, social organization and power" (Weedon, 1987, p.2). Feminists who take this standpoint realize that women's oppression is linked with the values that a society holds. These values influence the way we use language, which consequently controls the way in which we think.

If the problem is to be solved, 'femininity' as a certain style of flesh will have to be transformed into something quite different. I propose that this change, although it will not occur straight away, is possible. I think that women should start looking to other parts of themselves to discover who they are instead of looking outward to their appearance, which is only a small aspect of their femininity. Feminist and women's groups are currently trying to change the meaning of 'femininity' to allow for differences as well as commonalities (Du Plessis & Hire, 1998). The notion of 'multiplicity' is very exciting because it allows for a variety of choices, behaviors and identities. I believe that feminism is about celebrating both the differences and commonalities in women. For a long time now society has had an extreme intolerance for difference. This can be seen in the widespread racist, sexist, and homophobic beliefs and practices all around the world. However many do not recognize that language is a contributing force in the intolerance for difference. In this project I will concentrate solely on one word – 'femininity', and the need to change its current definition. I believe that it is time to recognize that women, like so many marginalized groups in society, are not homogenous.

If women learn to take pride in the positive aspects of femininity, and perhaps in the process explore new ways of defining who they are, a strong sense of identity could be achieved. In my project I want to increase the awareness of just how big this problem is, and perhaps suggest a few ways that change can begin. This study involves talking to 11 women aged 18-25 about their views and understanding of femininity and the female body. In talking to women I hope to examine the current discourses that are being used

to construct the ever-changing concept of 'femininity' and understand how these discourses are at work in the larger social environment.

## **Chapter 2**

### **FEMINISM, DISCOURSE AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM**

This chapter covers the theoretical approach of poststructuralism, its implications for psychological research as well as its uses for feminism. Poststructuralism is a theoretical tradition that succeeded structuralism in France. Poststructuralism is not a unified theory, but it generally refers to a theoretical position that is derived from the work of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Althusser and Foucault (Weedon, 1987). Above all, poststructuralism challenges the ideas of fixed meaning, unified subjectivity and centered theories of power. Foucault's work has been used by many feminists to theorize the body, patriarchal power and difference (Weeks, 1998). Not all forms of poststructuralism are useful to feminists, however Weedon points out that there is a particular position and method that can incorporate the perspective, and she names this 'Feminist Poststructuralism'. Despite its use by many feminists, poststructuralism remains controversial and has been criticized by some, including feminists.

Feminist poststructuralism has recently contributed to critical debates within psychology on the nature of knowledge and human subjectivity. Along with other critical theoretical arguments, feminist poststructuralism has raised serious challenges to scientific practice in the discipline. Those who choose to take up poststructuralism and use it are opting for an approach that stretches the boundaries of science as we know it. Discourse analysis is a method used by some feminist poststructuralists because it is so compatible with many of the values and ideas in poststructuralism. I will be using it in this study to analyze women's talk about femininity and the female body.

#### **FEMINISM**

Feminism is concerned with changing the existing asymmetrical power relations between men and women. Asymmetrical power relations are evident in all areas of life from family, to the workplace, to education and welfare. Contemporary feminism and its aim

to establish equality of the sexes started in the late 1960s with the Women's Liberation Movement. The starting point in feminist theory is the patriarchal structure of society. Weedon (1987) defines patriarchy as "power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men" (p.2).

Of course like any other group in society, feminists do not always reach consensus on how a problem should be approached. Different feminists have different ways of theorizing patriarchy and this results in different forms of feminist politics – for example, liberal, radical and socialist. Liberal feminism aims to achieve equality in all areas of life without radically changing the present social and political system. The realization of these aims means challenging the norms of masculinity and femininity as well as the sexual division of labor. Radical feminists aim for a new social order where women are not subordinate to men and where femininity is not devalued. These aims require women to claim autonomy from men and recover 'natural femininity' in separation from men. For socialist feminists, patriarchy is a social system that is connected to class and race, which are both oppressive. These oppressions can only be abolished if the social system is entirely transformed. Socialist feminists do not believe in a 'natural feminine', but see it as being culturally and historically produced (Weedon, 1987). Socialist and poststructuralist feminisms share the understanding of a 'non-essential feminine' and therefore this is the type of standpoint that is taken for this study.

Feminism is not just to do with political change. It is also to do with theory, or a variety of theories depending on the approach one takes. Feminist theory often makes sense of the conflict and everyday experience that women have, giving women a new way to make sense of their world. But recognizing conflict and the power relations that influence a woman's life is just the first step in change. Feminism is concerned with developing an alternative sense of oneself as a woman and transforming the institutions and practices that currently exist. Most feminists link theory to practice. Therefore to change the practices of society, one must also generate new theories from which dominant practices can be critiqued. Feminist theories have developed critiques of patriarchal values and interests.

There is a problem however with feminist theory. And that is that many feminists oppose the idea of theory itself. Many see it as being a male discourse that is based on the narrow conception of rationality and denies the value of experience. It would of course be counterproductive to refuse to use something that could create a positive change, simply because men have used it in the past. However it is important to make sure theory is also addressing women's experience by showing where it comes from, how it relates to social practices and the way that power relations structure them. For poststructuralist theories in particular, women's experiences need to be theorized in relation to language, discourse and subject positions. They must also be able to make sense of competing discourses and demonstrate the social interests supported by these discourses. For example it is critical to identify discourses that resist social change (Weedon, 1987). Sim (1992) claims that poststructuralist theory always turns into practice, so theory must never be an end in itself.

#### LANGUAGE AND SUBJECTIVITY

In poststructuralism language is the common factor in the critique of society and the power struggles that exist there. Poststructuralism asserts that language is the place where social organization is defined and where political consequences of the organization are determined. Different to many people's thinking, poststructuralism asserts that language creates reality for us, rather than describing an existing reality. "Meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language ...this principle is important because it makes language truly social and a site for political struggle" (Weedon, 1987, p.23). According to this, experience has no intrinsic meaning. There is no such thing as true or intrinsic meaning in the world. Of course meaning can be given to an experience, but this meaning always exists within language and a range of discursive systems. Language always exists in a historical and cultural context and therefore meaning can never be finally established (Weedon, 1999).

Poststructuralism asserts that language has the power to organize thought as well as experience. Language is both the carrier and the creator of a culture's ideas and beliefs (Lather, 1992). Any interpretation or understanding of an event is made available through

a particular discourse, a way of signifying or giving meaning (Gavey, 1989). This means that language is not neutral. Language does not reflect reality instead it gives it meaning. Weedon (1987) places particular emphasis on the notion that language is always located in discourse. Poststructuralist theory asserts that when a person acquires language they also acquire the practice of giving meaning and understanding things in particular ways. These ways of giving meaning and understanding are given the name of 'discourses'. "Discourse is a complementary system of accounts, which agree to a shared set of meanings and values which are an outcome of social factors, powers and practices, rather than any one person's point of view" (Gavey, 1989, p. 464). Foucault defines discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Parker, 1992, p.8). In this definition, Foucault emphasizes the discursive practices that come about when a certain discourse is used. The Foucauldian theory of discourse uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, institutions and social power to explain power relations. Particular groups in society and certain periods in time usually hold meanings and modes of thought in common.

Mainstream traditions attribute the creation of meaning to the individual speaker or writer. Poststructuralism aims to shift the focus away from the individual as the originator of meaning. The poststructuralist approach sees the speaker as reproducing a discourse that is available in a certain time, culture and social group, not as a creator of thought or meaning. The meaning that a person will gain from any given text depends upon what discourse they take up to interpret the text. Therefore feminist poststructuralists approach the stories that they are told by those they interview as discursive productions.

Poststructuralism also proposes that the individual is inconsistent and contradictory. Science has never been able to account for the fact the people are often very inconsistent. Weedon (1987) suggests that the recognition of inconsistency in people can introduce the possibility of a person who may use several opposing discourses, each contextually specific. An example of this would be a feminist who has chosen feminism as a way of

seeing the world, but still desires the stereotypic beauty that the media presents her with, even though this is inconsistent with the goals of feminism.

Because there are many different discourses available in a given society, there are also different and opposing ways of giving meaning to the world. Different discourses provide different *subject positions* for people to take up and use. When we speak we are promoting one version of the world and rejecting others (Miller, 2000). For example women can identify and conform to traditional constructions of femininity or they can reject the traditional discourse and challenge it by taking up an alternative discourse. Therefore a woman may place herself, for example, in a 'stereotypic feminine' subject position or in a 'feminist' subject position. Discourses also vary in authority. The dominant discourse in a society is the most powerful and influential and therefore appears the most 'natural' (Coupland & Nussbaum, 1993). The argument that something is 'natural' is a way of understanding social relations that denies the changes that have occurred throughout history and the possibility that change can occur in the future (Weedon, 1987). The dominant discourse is quite often taken up by the majority of people in a given place and time period. Feminist discourses do not constitute the subjectivity of most of the population and are therefore marginalized (Gavey, 1989).

Poststructuralist theory asserts that language and discourse constitute subjectivity. Weedon (1987) defines subjectivity as being "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p.32). Therefore discourses define ones identity and what a person takes pleasure in. Language constructs the way in which we see ourselves. Subjectivity is created in many discursive fields such as the social, economic and political. All of these areas are a constant struggle for power. The subject is constituted in and through power relations. There is therefore no natural essence, such as human nature. Subjectivity changes constantly and can shift from one discursive field to another. Poststructuralism contrasts with the humanist idea of free will and is critical of the autonomous, self-constituting subject. This type of thinking has been termed 'decentering the subject'. The subject is thus no longer the point of analysis, and the role

of subjectivity is displaced in favor of the efficacy of social structures (Weeks, 1998). This type of poststructuralist thinking is displayed in this study where women talk and give meaning to their experiences and then I analyze the talk, not the experience. Many feminists find this theory which challenges free will problematic, an issue which will be discussed later.

Poststructuralism also differs from humanism in the way that it sees the individual. Poststructuralist theory asserts that one's subjectivity is the product of certain power structures and is therefore temporally as well as environmentally specific (Lloyd & Thacker, 1997). In other words, a person's subjectivity is socially constructed through language. Unlike humanism, poststructuralism views a person as being a site for conflict and disunity, as opposed to rational and conscious unity. This is because language is not neutral but culturally and historically located in discourses, so subjectivity cannot be consistent. A person's subjectivity is always in conflict due to exposure to different, contradictory discourses, which provide opposing meanings and values (Weedon, 1987). This often comes as a relief to many who have blamed their conflicts on themselves instead of understanding them as the result of a socially produced contradiction, shared by many in similar social positions.

#### POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND SCIENCE

Poststructuralists do not agree with those who believe that science is objective, neutral and the means of finding facts. In other words from a poststructuralist perspective there is no objective knowledge of social 'reality' that is free of the ways we encounter or represent it. By attending to representation the social sciences shift focus from concern with the substance of experiential reality to concern with the images that people use to signify the real. This view of science is problematic for some because claims that social scientists make about the mind, self and society are taken as no more inherently valid than those made by anybody else. However at the same time that this view undermines the advantage of scientific opinion, it also gives rise to the visibility of those who have so far been marginalized, a possibility welcomed by feminists (Miller, 2000). Along with challenging objectivity, poststructuralism asserts that not all truth claims hold equal

status. Truth claims are situated in hierarchies of power and comply with certain discursive fields that privilege some versions over others.

Poststructuralist theory rejects the notion that there is absolute truth and objectivity, but rather asserts that knowledge and truth in any given time period or society is socially constructed. This therefore means that knowledge is not neutral. Opposing positivism, poststructuralism asserts that research can not be carried out without some kind of bias. Poststructuralism identifies that research findings have limitations. Although scientists today recognize that their methods or theories are placed within a range of different scientific thought, the notion that research has political content is denied as is the idea that referential notions of language structure the world (Lather, 1992; Weedon, 1999).

According to some feminists, knowledge in western society has been constructed from the perspective of the male and has been tied closely with male power interests (Nicolson & Ussher, 1992). Feminists studying similar concepts have come up with their own realities due to a different exploration of the past. This once again reinforces the poststructuralist concept that there is no singular and fixed reality, but rather different and competing interpretations of the truth. Traditionally science was seen as the only plausible way of discovering truth and knowledge. However poststructuralism and its plurality of meanings asserts that science is one of many discourses. Theory and research should be valued in terms of their usefulness in accomplishing politically bound goals rather than basing it on how 'truthful' it is (Gavey, 1989).

## POWER

Weedon states that feminist poststructuralism is concerned with understanding the power relations that currently exist and then noting areas and strategies that can create change (Gavey, 1989). There is currently a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. Foucault's poststructuralism states that meanings are produced within institutionally located discourses. Examples of such discourses are medicine, psychology, various religions and fashions. From a poststructuralist perspective the meaning that is ascribed

to a woman's body is culturally produced and always changing. The fundamental assertion of poststructuralism is that discourses generate meaning and subjectivity, they do not mirror them. This makes meaning and subjectivity a site of political struggle. Meanings are therefore a part of power relations, which have implications for both women and men. As will be discussed in this study, competing meanings have an affect on femininity and masculinity as manifesting subjectivity. The meanings of different bodies in particular points in history are sites of struggle, involving power structures that serve specific interests (Weedon, 1999).

Poststructuralism views the current methods of research as enacting and reproducing contemporary power relations (Lather, 1992). Many feminists believe that poststructuralism, as a different approach to research, is a useful and more satisfactory way to theorize gender and subjectivity. Even though poststructuralism states that there is no discourse that is more truthful than another, there can be discourses that are more oppressive than others. It is possible for a discourse to challenge social power relations. These discourses are usually marginal and are only used by a minority group of individuals (Parker, 1992). Resistance can be defined as an attack on the form of power that makes individuals subject (Foucault, 1982, cited by Lloyd & Thacker, 1997). Power relations are struggles in which dominant discourses remain dominant through the subordination of alternative discourses. Resistance is therefore the refusal to accept dominant discourses. Dominant discursive practices are those which are shaped by the values and interests of those who use dominant discourses. Therefore not all discourses carry equal weight of power (Weedon, 1997). Different types of power will produce different types of resistance. Once resistance has occurred a new discourse as well as a new type of power is produced (Ramazanoglu, 1993).

Consistent with other forms of feminism, feminist poststructuralism recognizes the need for 'consciousness raising'. Resistance and change are already occurring, but their effectiveness depends on the development of a critical consciousness of domination and its modalities. The aim of feminist poststructuralists is to increase awareness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness

is the first step towards emancipation (Fairclough, 1989). Acknowledging the dominant discourses that are oppressing to women and changing oppressive gender relations is part of this process.

#### CRITICISMS OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The majority of criticisms directed to feminist poststructuralism come from liberal, Marxist and radical feminists. Radical feminists are often opposed to the dependence on male theorists such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. However all feminist critiques of poststructuralism are centered on its theory of subjectivity. Liberal, Marxist and radical feminists all theorize subjectivity, and so it is expected that they should disagree with the alternative view of poststructuralism on the matter. One problem that many have with poststructuralism is that it appears to take away power from the individual. Feminist poststructuralism proposes that female (and male) experience is never independent from social and linguistic processes, but is in fact constituted by them. Many do not like this concept because it is understood as meaning that people have little free will, except to choose among the discourses that are available to them. However Weedon asserts that the poststructuralist theory of subjectivity can be useful to feminists. This is because “although the subject... is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling and social subject and agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices” (1987, p.125). This means that even though a person’s subjectivity is situated within discourse, one has the ability to choose and move within the discourses that are available to them. Although a person is not necessarily a free individual in the humanist sense, neither are they a passive subject (Ramazanoglu, 1993).

Another view of subjectivity that disturbs feminists is the idea that the subject is socially and culturally constructed, and there are no fixed qualities that constitute femininity. For some feminists this problematizes the grounds for unity among women (Weedon, 1999).

Critics have also suggested poststructuralism places too much importance on language at the expense of material power relations of oppression. This argument claims that the turn

to language has destroyed any possibility of social change because it does not address social organization beyond language (Miller, 2000). However in defence of this is the idea that poststructuralism is partial in its intervention. As opposed to radical feminism, which relates all cultural practices to the reproduction of patriarchal power, poststructuralist interventions focus on specific areas of concern and do not assume that they are necessarily part of a specific spectrum of oppression, although they quite possibly are (Weedon, 1999).

Another criticism is that feminist poststructuralism privileges the cultural at the expense of the social or vice versa. But signifying practices should not only be understood in terms of language, but as part of a broader Foucauldian concept of discourse that is material and embodied in institutions as well as individual subjects placed in different cultural and social environments. Discourse should be viewed as much more than language, it is material in the form of social and cultural institutions (Weedon, 1999).

Another disadvantage or negative aspect of poststructuralism is that it uses difficult language and terminology and is hard for the lay person to understand. This is of concern to many in the field, as one of the priorities of feminist poststructuralism is the sharing of information with people who would normally be outside formal education channels (Gavey, 1989). I tend to agree with this criticism, as many I have discussed poststructuralism with have struggled to get past its difficult language.

Foucault's theory of power also has been criticized. Controversy is based on the notion that this model of power denies women a place outside of language from which to create change. This lack of grounding is seen by some as incompatible with feminism because in order to create change feminists need a space outside of male determined power relations from which to speak and act. The poststructuralist theory that all discursive practices and all forms of subjectivity constitute and are constituted by relations of power is only inconsistent with the aims of feminism if power is always viewed as being repressive. However Foucault himself is opposed to the concept of power as only being negative (Weedon, 1999). Different to the concept of power being something that is a

judicial mechanism, Foucault asserts that power can also be technical and strategic. “Power produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Sarup, 1988, p.74). Therefore power can be seen as creating new objects of knowledge, which then induce effects of power. This is therefore useful to feminists because it means that new objects can be created in language that may be beneficial to women’s physical and emotional well being, rather than detrimental. An example of this is the discourse promoted by feminists that all body shapes and sizes are beautiful.

There are many positive aspects to feminist poststructuralism. It offers a useful and productive basis for understanding patriarchal power and a promising way of theorizing about resistance and possible change, both important concepts to feminists and their struggle to redress asymmetrical gender relations (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989). A major advantage of taking a poststructuralist approach is that it enables feminists to attend to the practical side of theorizing about women and their oppression, and to appreciate that current feminist theories affect what changes occur. Feminism can be seen as being renewed by poststructuralism, which emphasizes a respect for difference and multiple perspectives. Poststructuralism validates knowledge that has thus far been subordinated, including feminist knowledge. This is definitely an advantage for feminists and women who have seen their perspective constantly ignored for so long.

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A methodology that is consistent with feminist poststructuralism is discourse analysis, a type of critical analysis because it asserts that language is connected with oppression – a central issue in feminist research. Like poststructuralism, discourse analysis is potentially useful for feminism. The emphasis on ordinary talk is seen by feminists as being political, and can help feminists reframe the debates about political actions in helpful ways (Miller, 2000). Discourse analysis stresses the constructive nature of language and its link with social practices which shape power relations as well as identifying the social discourses available to people in any particular culture or society. These discourses provide subject positions that constitute people’s subjectivities. The discourse one uses affects whether a person’s subjectivity will challenge or conform to

the dominant values of the time. Feminists use discourse analysis to investigate how gender power relations are reproduced (Gavey, 1989).

One of the aims of discourse analysis is to provide detailed, historically specific critical analyses of the influence of discursive power on people's subjectivities and the opportunities to challenge that influence. Discourse analysis requires in depth reading of a text to discern the discursive patterns of meaning and inconsistencies. Discourse analysis identifies the language processes that people use to establish their own opinions and understandings of what is going on around them. Because reading a text is never neutral, it is important for a researcher to state what position they are taking. For example, the position I would now be taking is one of a feminist and a poststructuralist in terms of theory, and a middle class, educated, white, female in terms of my social position. Another factor that is important to specify is my relationship with the women I interview as peers. My position in relation to the beauty and fashion industry is also an influence to the interpretation of my analysis. After all, I am a consumer of beauty and fashion products myself and my understanding of my own consumption affects my point of view. All of these factors, as well as many that I am unaware of will influence my reading of a text or transcript (Gavey, 1989). Reflexivity is an important part of poststructuralist research. Reflexivity is used, not only by the researched but also by the researcher, to show the position from which they are influenced. This position is then reflected upon critically, making the researcher accountable for their interpretations (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995, cited by Gill, 1995). Reflexivity highlights the belief that all texts are constructed and subject to analysis, even that which is an analysis itself. When reflexivity is used in this way, the power and authority of the researcher is challenged. This is important to feminists who are dissatisfied with the current relationship between the researcher and the researched.

The semi-structured interview that is often a part of discourse analytic research has become one of the main sources that feminists draw from to gain clarification and debate. Many feminists believe that the open-ended discussion in interviews maximizes discovery and description, giving a far better understanding than any survey ever could.

One of the main reasons for using interviews to gain information is because it allows for a wide range of differences among people, much more difference than the three or four boxes that a survey gives for one to tick. Feminist researchers also enjoy interviews because they are a better tool to discover peoples ideas, thoughts and memories using the participants own words, rather than the words and explanations of the researcher. This is of great importance for women who have been defined in the words of others (male researchers) for many years. Feminists see this as an opportunity to recognize that women's ideas have been ignored altogether and men have previously been allowed to speak for them, and change this. Poststructuralism is not about testing hypotheses; it's about learning what women have to say on a given topic. Reinharz (1992) states that the interviewing technique is especially suited to women in western society who have been socialized to ask people about what they think and feel. She also states that the semi-structured interview suites women who often dislike the idea of controlling others, enjoying rather the sense of connectedness that comes from listening and sharing. This avoids the classic case of alienating the researcher from the researched. All of these values integrate well with the feminist aim of developing more egalitarian research techniques.

Weedon states that

*"... through the concept of discourse, which is seen as a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it. It is a theory which decenters the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness as socially produced in language, as sites for struggle and potential change"*  
(Weedon, 1987, p.40).

The alternative approach to research that is discourse analysis, moves from a focus on the cognitive ways of understanding behavior, towards a socially constructed nature of reality (Willig, 1999). With the use of feminist poststructuralism this project focuses on women's talk about femininity and the female body as the primary site for constructing meaning. Rather than concentrating on attitudes and opinions as an expression of a persons 'true' belief system, this study seeks to understand how, not why, women think

and act the way that they do, concerning their bodies and their conception of themselves as women. Subject positions are analyzed through analyzing the way that women aged 18-25 define and explain everyday experiences of their bodies and how this connects with their identity and well-being. These positions are explored in this study in terms of the available discourses within which women place themselves. It is understood that these discourses work to promote certain practices and conduct, for example specific eating patterns and consumerism within the beauty and fashion industry. The following section outlines the specific methodological approach and research questions guiding this study.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### The Participants

I chose to study women aged 18-25 as these women are in the age group that is a 'target' for the fashion and beauty industries. Also these women would be in the process of choosing discourses that helped them understand their role as women in the world.

All of the women were either acquaintances or friends of mine. They became involved in the study after I approached them personally and asked if they were interested in participating. It was encouraging to find that all of the women that I asked were interested in being a part of the research. I went into the interviews with the hope that the participants would enjoy taking part in the study and gain a better understanding of themselves as women. It was positive to hear back later that many of the women did enjoy the discussion which gave them an opportunity to think and talk about things that they had never dwelled upon before, for example: what does it mean to be a woman? Of course listening to other women's experiences helped me to gain a better and deeper understanding of these women, as well as myself as a woman.

Of the eleven women who were interviewed, three were either married or in a long-term partnership. Two of these three women had given birth to their first child within 6 months of the interview. Two of the women were volunteer part-time youth workers, while five were in full time study either at university or a polytechnic. One woman was trained and seeking employment, while another who was also university qualified was working part time in a local café at the time of the interview. All but three of the women were in a current (heterosexual) relationship.

Interviews took place in the participant's homes, with the purpose of making them feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible. Some women asked to see the questions prior to the

interview but the majority heard questions as they were asked for the first time. Interviews ranged from around 15 minutes to an hour, depending on how much each woman wished to say. All interviews were tape recorded with the knowledge and permission of the participants.

This study was conducted within the ethical guidelines of Massey University, with an ethics proposal being peer reviewed and accepted prior to any of the interviews taking place. Agreement was given by all the participants through a consent form. Participants were all given written information about the study and their rights, including being able to withdraw from the study at any time. Information sheets and an example of the consent form are included in Appendix A.

### **Analyzing the text**

Each woman's interview was transcribed in full. From the transcripts of the interviews, pieces of interview were taken and used as the basis of analysis. These pieces were selected on a method of coding. Coding (which is quite different from actual analysis), involves placing a huge amount of text into manageable chunks. The categories or codes used to organize the text are related to the research questions being asked. Similar responses are placed together and are later the subject of a more detailed analysis. Different from following a recipe type procedure, there is no straightforward method to follow when producing findings from a transcript. Analysis involves detailed reading and rereading. Analysis is not reading for gist. It means paying attention to all the contradictions and vagueness. It may very well be a long time before a systematic pattern emerges. In reading the text the analyst must constantly be aware of the influence of his/her presuppositions and techniques of sense making. The questions that should be always asked are: "why am I reading this in this particular way?" and "what features produce this reading?" In analysis there are two closely linked stages. The first is the search for patterns in the data. The patterns should show differences as well as similarities in the forms or content of an account. The second stage is concerned with the function and consequence of each participant's account. Based upon linguistic evidence

discourse analysis should show that people's talk fulfills many functions and has varied effects (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

It is important to note that there can be many different interpretations of this data and the interpretation presented here is only one of many. When analyzing the data the research questions will be the main focus. The main focus of this study involves the following questions: How do the women talk about themselves as consumers of fashion and beauty products? How do the women talk about the standards of beauty that are presented in the media? How do the women talk about their bodies in relation to their evaluative sense of self? And how do the women talk about and define femininity?

Texts were initially coded according to these four research questions. Analysis involved repeated readings of the text using Parker's (1992) general guidelines for distinguishing discourses and doing discourse analysis.

### **Identifying Discourses**

#### **SEVEN CRITERIA FOR DISTINGUISHING DISCOURSES**

The first criteria for distinguishing a discourse involved treating the object of the study as a text, which meant putting it into words. In this study the women's experiences, attitudes, ideas and opinions became text through the interview and transcription process. After this was done the connotations in the opinions and ideas were explored through free association. Questions were asked such as – What do the women allude to when they are talking? What are the implications of this? For example, what feelings are implied as the women talk about trying to live up to the current standards of beauty?

A discourse is also about objects. Discourses form objects and give them a reality. In this study I looked at what objects were constituted in the women's talk. Many objects referred to in discourse do not exist outside of discourse, such as the 'object' of this study – femininity. There are also objects that are involved in statements about the object, for

example beauty, bodies and diets. In this analysis attention is focused on these objects to identify the discourses through which they are formed.

A discourse contains subjects. The types of people who are talked about in a particular discourse were investigated, some of these were already identified as objects in the text. Questions asked were – How is the discourse being used and making us listen as a certain type of person? What roles does one have to adopt to hear the message? What can the participant say in the discourse and what could one say if one identifies with them?

The fourth criteria for identifying a discourse involved understanding how a discourse is a coherent system of meanings. For instance, how does this discourse create a picture of the world? Different people's statements were grouped together to form a discourse, if they shared a similar understanding of a topic or theme. When using a particular discourse it is also important to be aware of other discourses that oppose it, and how a text using a particular discourse deals with objections is therefore analyzed. Analysis also involved identifying discourses that were both coherent and opposing and making sense of the implications of this.

A discourse also refers to other discourses. Setting opposing discourses against one another and looking at the objects they each create is an important part of discourse analysis. Reflecting on the discourse one is using requires the use of other discourses at work. It is also possible to identify where a discourse overlaps and represents what may seem to be the same thing in different ways. In order to understand how different discourses are intertwined, one must see how a discourse uses metaphors and support from other discourses. For example the way that 'beauty' is associated with a slim figure is intertwined with the way women talk about diet and weight loss.

A discourse can reflect on its own way of speaking. How does the discourse refer to other texts to elaborate the discourse while addressing different audiences? How are the contradictions in the text referred to and how would another person using the discourse refer to these contradictions? Analysis attended to different meanings and

understandings in the transcript. It is also possible to reflect on the term used to describe the discourse. For example, describing the reasons for dieting as being a 'health' discourse and using physical wellbeing to account for concern with weight-loss.

It was also important to understand that a discourse is always historically located. To show the force of a particular discourse in discourse analysis, other examples of a discourse and how it arose were shown. A discourse can also change. Because all discourses are located in time, they refer to past references of the object. What is the current way of talking about the object? This is addressed in this particular study when the changing constructions of 'beauty' are discussed and their implications analyzed.

### THREE AUXILIARY CRITERIA

These are important as they focus on how discourses are connected with institutions, power and ideology.

The eighth criteria for identifying a discourse involved understanding how discourses can support institutions. When analyzing the text it was noted which institutions are supported when a particular discourse was being used. Discourses implicate institutions where they carry out discursive practices. These discursive practices in turn reproduce the institution. For example, a diet is a discursive practice because it helps to keep businesses such as health clinics operating. Institutions can also be attacked when a discourse appears. For example, the discourse that beauty comes from within challenges the use of cosmetics.

Discourses can reproduce power relations. Who gains and loses from the employment of a certain discourse is studied. For example the beauty industry gains from the discourse that 'fat is ugly' and overweight people lose, in that they often feel inadequate. Therefore who would want to promote and dissolve a discourse was also analyzed. Feminists are currently involved in trying to put the message across that all body shapes are beautiful, while the beauty industry often resists this promotion due to the loss of business that may result.

The final criterion for identifying a discourse was being aware of how a discourse has ideological effects. Analysis shows how a discourse connects with other discourses to oppose or support oppression. Ideology should be seen as a description of power relationships and their effects, which are placed in an historical and cultural framework. This means showing how the discourses let dominant groups talk about the past to justify the present, therefore preventing oppressive discourses from becoming dominant.

The following chapters analyze women's talk about femininity and the feminine body, using the style of discourse analysis that has just been outlined. The analysis is separated into six chapters, which each relates to the focus questions of the research.

## Chapter 4

### HOW WOMEN ACCOUNT FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY

This chapter looks at beauty, its associated terms and the construction of its importance in everyday life. The significance of physical attractiveness is discussed in terms of personal and social consequences, as well as the discursive practices that are used to achieve this attractiveness.

#### Looking Good Means Feeling Good

When the women talked about their physical appearance many drew on the notion that if one looks good then one also feels good too. This concept was usually talked of when the question asked was “How does your physical appearance affect the way that you live your life?” The following extracts from the transcripts of the interviews construct a relationship between a woman not feeling happy herself, and feeling unhappy about her physical appearance –

*And I think it's so many things, it's not just physical appearance, it's the whole holistic kind of thing. If you're not happy with yourself and that, you manifest that in your appearance.....  
(Phillipa, p.12)*

This quote draws on a holistic discourse in understanding the way that feeling good is related to looking good.

The extract below discusses the concept of looking and feeling good in relation to plastic surgery. This interpretation of the plastic surgery argument states that a woman who undertakes surgery is quite possibly changing the wrong thing.

*I: So why do you think it's not good to have cosmetic surgery?  
C: Well, obviously the, I'd tend to say the females are looking for something else in their life, it might be me just making a judgment upon them, but generally if, if they're not*

*happy with the way they look then it's saying something about the way they're feeling too.*

*(Christine, p. 10)*

*..... since I sort of got, depressed and started, yeah, suffering from depression a bit, then since then I've never really been that happy with the way I look or anything like that, and I'm always really critical about, the body, and just, yeah.*

*(Stacey, p.14)*

In these three extracts the women's emotional wellbeing or feelings about themselves are used to account for feelings about their appearance. The following extracts also construct a relationship between feeling and looking good.

*Z: .....If you feel you look good, you feel a lot better.....not mind being noticed..... I find when you're not looking the way you want to, you're way more hung up on the way that you look...*

*I: ...And if you feel kind of good about the way that you look?*

*Z: It's like you can just walk out of the house and not even think about it again.*

*(Zaria, p.14-15)*

*.....I don't feel comfortable being big. I'm a lot happier when I'm a lot slimmer, which I've been 3 times in my life, I've been slim. And I've, yeah really enjoyed it.*

*(Lauren, p.7)*

These women say that when they don't feel good about the way that they look, they don't feel very good about themselves. Both the quotes construct confidence and emotional wellbeing as being dependent on physical attractiveness. The use of this discourse positions the subject's happiness as dependent on the understanding that they are 'looking good'.

Some accounts were given about how if one thinks that she is not looking good, she does not feel good. This feeling was constructed by many as being self-conscious, particularly in public and social situations.

*..... Being this weight at the moment, when I go out I feel conscious of it. I'm conscious that everyone else is slimmer than I am and probably thinking that "man, she's put on a lot of weight" or "man she's really big"..... I don't feel very good about myself.*

*(Lauren, p.13)*

In this case the self-consciousness about weight creates negative feelings about oneself. Self-consciousness is portrayed here as being aware of other's perception of her physical appearance. The judgment of others as critical of this weight means that this woman often feels as though she lives in her body under the judgmental gaze of those who are a different size.

The women who felt self-conscious about their appearance, very often their weight, constructed this self-consciousness as stopping them from taking part in activities that they enjoyed, causing them to act differently in social situations.

*I: Would you feel, or do anything different if you looked differently?*

*C: .....I'm really conscious of what I look like in a bathing suit. So I would swim a lot more..... I actually went through a stage when I wouldn't even wear, I wouldn't even wear shorts..... As well as my weight I have very white skin ... that changes what I wear.....some of the activities that I would probably do. Because to do something more active I need to be wearing shorts..... I won't do them because I have to wear clothing that makes me too hot..... I used to love to dance too. And I probably went off that because I got too big..... I'd just imagine people thinking um, how ridiculous I would look..... being such a big person.*

*(Crystal, p.12)*

*L: ...I won't swim in public, um, because of my weight. Wearing togs and stuff like that. And it really does, you know I love swimming. I'd love to feel like I could do that. But it's just something I won't do. Um, I think all of my issues like that would have to do with weight, would have to come down to weight.*

*I: Like swimming and what else?*

*L: Swimming, what I wear um, (pause) just being comfortable around people.*

*(Lauren, p.13)*

The following extracts refer to the way that looking good often affects the way that one relates to others in social situations.

*I: ...So do you think like, when you feel good, do you do different things, than if you weren't feeling so good... about the way you looked?*

*Z: ...Yeah, probably just do more things. ...And probably be a bit more outspoken and (pause) yeah... not mind being noticed.*

*(Zaria, p.15)*

*But it's probably also the fact that when you don't feel attractive you don't feel like being seen quite as much or you know, dressing in the clothes that you, you have..... if you don't feel comfortable in the clothes you're wearing, as in you think you're bulging out of them. (laugh)... Then yeah, you feel very anti-social .....*  
(Christine, p.11)

In these excerpts feeling good about one's physical appearance is constructed as having a major effect on social conduct, in the way that one feels more comfortable being noticed and heard in public settings.

The discourse 'looking good means feeling good' creates problems for many women who construct their physical appearance as failing to live up to current beauty standards, for example, a slim figure. As a result of this many of the women described feeling depressed, anti-social and self-conscious, as well as limited in the activities they partake in.

### **Judgements on Appearance**

A number of the women talked about how people and society in general judge a woman, at least initially, by her physical appearance.

*..... everyone always reacts to what they see on the outside first anyway. You can't help it really..... I guess you make some assumptions in that way.*  
(Anna, p.13)

*I guess, being brought up the way that we have been in this kind of society, that's what everyone judges you on straight away..... And it's nice to think that you don't need to look a certain way but I think I've come to know that, I don't consciously do it, but I know that people look at me and..... judge what kind of person you are from what you wear. And I'm conscious of, I'm conscious of that.....*  
(Phillipa, p.5)

*..... You never know if people like you cos of the way you look, or because you're funny, or your personality...but I think (my appearance) has an affect on the way people perceive me and treat me. And so indirectly in that way.....*  
(Stacey, p.6 & 12)

These quotes differ in that the first two extracts discuss the role of appearance in the making of first impressions. The first speaker even claims that she makes initial judgements about people based on their appearance – “you can’t help it really”. The second speaker places the blame on the society she lives in for people’s focus on clothes and outward appearance in determining a person’s character. The last excerpt talks about the ongoing role of physical appearance in relationships and how it is always going to be a part of how people perceive others. This woman expressed that sometimes she feels uncertain as to whether people are making judgements about her based on her personality or her looks alone. She was also very aware of how her physical appearance affected the way people treated her. All of these women present themselves and others as being subject to the harsh criticisms of a society that places importance on the physical and material when making judgements. This implies that first impressions are based on the construction that appearance is closely linked to character and this is why it has an influence on social acceptance.

### **Impressing and Attraction**

Consistent with the idea that physical appearance is related to social acceptance, many of the women constructed beauty as something that can be used in order to gain something, whether it be a partner or another person’s respect. When relating wearing makeup and dressing up to particular social situations, the women often discussed how it was done in order to gain a positive response from others. Therefore it can be understood that cosmetics and dress clothes are constructed as being important components of being attractive to others.

*Well, I guess the clothes I do wear just reflects that... I don't care about fancy clothes ... unless I'm trying to impress someone and dress up and try and be perfect. And, and then I'm not being true to myself, I'm not being me. I'm trying to show that I'm somebody else, and that's only cos I feel inferior, normally. Cos normally they'll be the type of dressy person.*  
(Lauren, p.5)

Here 'dressing up' is constructed in terms of creating a positive impression for acquaintances or strangers. As a result of feeling inadequate this woman 'dresses up' when she would usually not care about 'fancy clothes'. Although it is constructed as an untrue depiction of her character, this woman relates 'dressing up' as a way to try and convince certain people that she is 'perfect'. The excerpt below discusses the role of dressing up to make positive impressions in the work environment.

*..... that's why I wear it, if I'm going out. Like if I'm just at home or something then there isn't any need, but if I'm sort of presenting myself to people..... if I'm working then it's kind of important to look good.*  
(Stacey, p.1)

As well as constructing 'clothes' and 'dressing up' as trying to create a good image, makeup was also used by some of the women when they were accounting for trying to impress young men to whom they were attracted. These particular extracts make use of personal examples to tell how cosmetics can be worn to try and win the attention of young men.

*A: ..... and because of boys and stuff like that.*  
*I: Yeah, do you think that impresses boys, wearing makeup and things?*  
*A: Well not now .....but I would have back then.*  
(Anna, p.3)

*..... If I was going to impress a boy I like..... if I was nervous about seeing somebody ... that I kind of liked or something I'd wear it then.*  
(Sophie, p.1)

In the next extract physical appearance is constructed as an asset. Looks are seen as being important here, because it is felt that this is the only way a potential partner's attention will be gained. Similar to the other respondents that use their physical appearance as one way to attract the opposite sex, this extract is skeptical that attraction could be gained by any other means.

*..... my looks are important to me. Um, I see them as an asset and... I'm being utterly truthful here. I see them as an asset and you know that's just, probably I feel that ... I*

*don't have that much else to offer... like I could never attract a guy through my personality ..... I'd have to try and (laugh) suck them in ..... through my looks. (laugh)*  
(Lisa, p.6)

The above extract reconnects looking good with how you feel about yourself, but a little differently because this woman constructs appearance as 'compensating' for what she feels she lacks in herself.

The importance of beauty is constructed here as vital to the attraction and impressing of others. Clothes and cosmetics are used by the women for 'beauty' reasons and thus to gain attention (especially of young men).

### **Hide Bad Parts/Highlight Good Parts**

Whether it is the desire to create a certain impression or to look and feel good about oneself, many of the women felt that they needed to alter their appearance in some way. Many provided an account of needing to hide parts of their bodies which they considered to be bad or unattractive, while highlighting the parts of their appearance that they thought of as being good or attractive. This hiding or highlighting was usually done with the use of certain clothes and cosmetics. Here are some examples of the hide/highlight construction.

*..... just because I like an item of clothing like, if it doesn't, it won't work on me I won't wear it..... Cos just, accentuate the good points and hide the bad points.*  
(Zaria, p.16)

*When you're bigger you've got to hide bumps and things ... And when I was more slimmer I felt more comfortable with myself. Um, I didn't feel I was, I could, you know I didn't feel the need to hide my body.....*  
(Lauren, p.7)

The above extract discusses how hiding parts of the body, in this case 'bumps and things', was done due to feeling uncomfortable with ones body. Here bumps are seen as something that people do not consider attractive.

*L: I've always wanted a smaller bum, but I'm not, I've just kind of accepted that I haven't got one. So I've always thought that um, if you buy clothes that flatter your figure, you can kind of hide your defects. Ha ha ..... Your defects – that's bad. (laugh)*

*I: (laugh) What are defects?...*

*L: You know... things that..... you think don't look that good. Things that you're not that proud of. .... I always buy trousers that ..... don't accentuate that area.....*

*(Lisa, p.13)*

This woman reflects on her way of talking about parts of her body. When the word 'defects' is used, it is immediately apparent that this is not an acceptable way of talking about one's body and she replaces the word with the definition of 'things that you're not proud of'. All of these women are talking about the techniques that they employ when buying clothes to 'flatter their figure'. Makeup was also worn in order to hide 'bad points', as well as using it to highlight the 'attractive' features of one's face. Here are some examples -

*..... Usually if I'm wearing it to enhance eyes or enhance mouth or that kind of thing it's just kind of subtle..... It highlights different parts I suppose especially, I don't know, you can see it kind of coming from an artistic point of view. It highlights certain features, and certain features like lips and eyes, which are supposedly the beautiful features I suppose in women ... And like cheek-bones and that kind of thing. And especially if you feel like you're wanting to hide certain of the things, I don't know, like zits and stuff. You want to put stuff on to cover that up.*

*(Sophie, p.1-2)*

This construction of the hide/highlight discourse understands the concept from an aesthetic point of view. Parts of the body such as lips and eyes are understood as beautiful on a woman. However in this case, and in the excerpt below 'zits' and acne are seen as something that is unattractive and therefore needing to be hidden.

*C: ...I use, um, concealer, and I use powder and, and that's basically just because I really have a nasty complexion. So I only use it really to cover that up ..... sometimes I can actually go without wearing it if my complexion is not too bad. But because I have kind of an acne problem that's why I wear it.*

*I: ..... so you feel generally a little better wearing it?*

*C: Oh yeah, much rather be wearing it.*

*(Crystal, p.1)*

An extension, so to speak, of the notion of hiding and highlighting different parts of the body, is the idea of 'hang ups'. These are constructed differently in that 'hang-ups' are long term, and a more serious concern with particular parts of the body that caused the women to be self conscious and uncomfortable.

*Z: .....I find when you're not looking the way you want to, you're way more hung up on the way that you look.....*

*I: ... And if you feel kind of good?*

*Z: ...It's like you can just of walk out of the house and not even think about it again.  
(Zaria, p.15)*

This extract suggests that when one is feeling good about the way she looks, she does not focus on her appearance. However if one is 'hung up' on how she looks, she will focus on this a lot. The next woman constructs 'hang ups' as sometimes limiting her from having a good time when she goes out.

*..... sometimes I used to wear dresses and I have a big issue about my legs.....And so if I went out somewhere and suddenly felt really uncomfortable, and really like, I don't like feeling like I can't enjoy the situation because I'm too wrapped up in what's going on with me and what I'm wearing and stuff...And I start feeling paranoid and things like that, it's not very nice. So I just don't really wear short dresses anymore, (giggle)... because then I don't have to feel that.*

*(Anna, p.5)*

The relationship between appearance and 'hang ups' can be seen when a 'hang up' is constructed as an intense focus on a particular part of ones physical appearance which causes distress.

Therefore in order to look attractive many women talked of the alterations they made to their bodies to become so. Fashion and cosmetics were constructed as either highlighting or hiding certain parts of the body to achieve a desired look. 'Hang ups' were talked of as being particularly disliked parts of the body that a woman went to great lengths to disguise. 'Hang-ups' were often constructed as causing one to be anxious and self-conscious.

## Confidence

When talking about wearing cosmetics, the women constructed the hide/highlight effect as giving them confidence, especially in social settings where they did not feel completely comfortable.

*I: ..... How does it make you feel, like why do you wear it?*

*S: Hm, I think it's a confidence booster or something. It almost bolsters you so you feel a bit braver. Like especially, if I'm round people I'm completely comfortable around then I wouldn't even bother putting it on. Well it's like why really bother? ..... But if I'm going round people, or I, it just makes you feel a bit, sometimes it just makes you feel, just feel better wearing it. So it's more fun. It makes the night more of an adventure. It's like putting on your nice clothes, or good dress or something. It's like "wow, I feel cool now, I feel better".*

*(Sophie, p.2)*

This construction of makeup as a confidence booster involves dependence on the social surroundings. Makeup is worn to avoid feeling uncomfortable, and if this discomfort is not felt around people then there is no need to wear it. For some women the fact that they felt more attractive when wearing makeup resulted in a sense of confidence that was irrelevant to the social setting.

*I: ..... Why do you think you wear it?*

*S: ..... I spose it's cos it makes me feel better about myself I think, well, more confident in myself because, I don't know. I just like the way, you know, it looks, it just sort of dresses me up better when I'm having an ugly day or something. (laugh)*

*(Stacey, p.1)*

*I: So why do you wear makeup? What's kind of your reasons behind wearing it?*

*Z: I don't know. Just, just um, makes me feel a bit better..... cos I think my skins kind of reddy, pinky kind of thing. I don't know just, I don't know. Just a more confidence mask putting thing on.*

*(Zaria, p.1)*

In the extract above makeup is constructed as being a mask. The wearing of this 'mask' makes the respondent feel better, giving her the confidence that she may not have if she was not wearing it. The hesitance displayed in saying 'I don't know just, I don't know', may suggest that this woman has difficulty in talking about what wearing makeup means to her. This kind of hesitance is another example of the reflection on the discourse.

The use of cosmetics is constructed as an important part of looking good and thus feeling confident. Makeup is seen as a creator of confidence, due to its use in hiding parts of the face considered 'unattractive'.

### **Dressing Up**

When the women were asked questions about fashion and makeup, many alluded to the concept of dressing up. Similar to the cosmetics and confidence connection, 'dressing up' was fun and made them feel good.

*I: ..... so how do you feel when you wear cosmetics? .....*

*B: .....Um, all like, excited and special.....Cos like you don't wear it very much so it's fun to dress up.*

*I: Yeah it's a treat aye.*

*B: ..... Yep. And like wear nice clothes.*

*(Bridget, p.1)*

*S: I don't wear heaps of makeup unless I'm going out, and then I've got like nice makeup and stuff left over from the wedding and things like that, that I might wear if I'm going out ..... with a group of friends. I'm not worried about fitting in or anything else, mostly I'm just dressing up cos I like dressing up. And it's like, yay a chance to dress up...*

*I: yeah, it's kind of fun.*

*S: When I go out to dinner, usually like to get dressed up, just cos I like wearing nice stuff.*

*(Stacey, p.4-5)*

Here dressing up is emphasized as being purely done for the enjoyment that is gained from it. By pointing out an opposing argument, that of dressing up to fit in, enjoyment is emphasized as being the only reason for dressing up. However the construction of dressing up for enjoyment contradicts earlier evaluations of the activity by the same speaker, which emphasized the need to impress and attract others as well as look and feel good.

In the following extract we were discussing how wearing makeup is related to feeling as though you look better. However this excerpt states that some people may not

necessarily perceive cosmetics as making a person more attractive. Note how looking better is synonymous with 'dressing up'.

*It makes me feel like I look, I don't know if it's better but just, just the way that you're always taught that cosmetics are there to improve your appearance. So when you put them on you feel, like you appear..... dressed up... or doing something to make yourself look better. Which is interesting cos in the eyes of other people it doesn't necessarily do that.*

*(Phillipa, p.2)*

### **Slim Equals Beautiful**

When constructing attractiveness and beauty, words such as 'slim' and 'skinny' were used frequently.

*..... my cousin tried to get into modelling..... she was quite thinish, well just kind of average, what I would think as a slim attractive girl..... But she wasn't tall enough.*

*(Crystal, p.10)*

In the above extract 'slim' and 'attractive' are placed together to mean the same thing. Height was in this case seen as another important aspect of being attractive.

*But when I was a young cat I was just like "oh my goodness if I'm not skinny enough I won't be beautiful and guys won't like me". You know, even though I never came out front with that. It was always something in your mind, this mindset.*

*(Sophie, p.7-8)*

The positioning of the respondent through the construction that 'slim equals beautiful' has specific implications in the excerpt above. The belief that she is not slim enough to be considered beautiful meant that as a teenager she worried boys would not be attracted to her. The use of this discourse has the potential to be damaging for anyone who does not regard oneself to be slim, because it will also mean that they will not consider themselves to be attractive either. As discussed earlier the discourse of physical attractiveness is connected with other discourses about creating positive impressions, attraction, confidence, and feeling good about oneself.

## **Fear of Gaining Weight**

The construction of beauty as being slim can have some very severe implications for those women who are not. For some women the fear of gaining weight and therefore not being attractive was a thought that distressed them.

*If I put on a little bit of weight, I start feeling really "oh my goodness, oh my goodness. I'm going to blow up like a balloon and nobody's going to like me." Ha ha.  
(Lisa, p.12)*

From the perspective that beauty is important in doing things such as impressing and attracting, to associate being slim with beauty means that gaining weight may have harsh social consequences as this extract suggests. However it is not always the fear of rejection that causes anxiety to be related to gaining weight. The excerpt below shows how even though others can put pressure on a woman to put on weight, there is still a fear that doing so will result in a 'downward slide' into becoming overweight.

*..... I've always taken for granted that I've been really skinny and I've been able to eat what I want and do what I want. And suddenly now that I've stopped growing it's like, I can't do that anymore... I probably would never be able to get really fat. I just, I get scared it's like, "oh I'm not going to be that really skinny person anymore, that I used to just be able to be" ..... Paul's always telling me to put on weight and my family are always telling me to. And it's, it's not that I think these people won't like me. It's more just a, a fear that if I do I'll never be able to get back to what I was or it will just be a downward slide or something. (laugh) I dunno.  
(Stacey, p.20)*

The close association of slimliness with beauty is evident in these constructions. Fear of gaining weight is a constant cause for concern and even pressure from others to gain weight is constructed as doing little to change this.

## **Dieting and Exercise for Weight-loss**

With so much emphasis placed on being slim, many women discussed the lengths that they went to as teenagers to in order to fit this ideal.

..... *I think it starts when you're in your teens, or that's my experience anyway. Um, when especially I suppose, at puberty time when your body's changing and doing crazy stuff and you've got that bit of puppy fat..... definitely diet big time when I was younger. But I think even more so... first year and second year uni was when I probably did my most crazy stuff.*  
(Sophie, p.8-9)

*I: Did you diet when you were a kid?*

*Z: Yeah.*

*I: Yeah, like how old?*

*Z: ..... Like um, I don't know from one and two..... Just when you start to notice all those sorts of things and I don't know.*

*I: Your body's changing ...*

*Z: Yeah, um but that was mainly yeah, when every little girl thinks that she's fat and stuff ..... but that was mainly just not eating.*

(Zaria, p.7-8)

Both of these accounts locate puberty as the beginning of concern with dieting, due to the way that a girl's body develops and puts on weight at this time. The first excerpt uses the words 'crazy stuff' to construct the seriousness and the extent of dieting and the desire for weight loss as being explicitly extreme. In the second excerpt dieting and concerns about weight are portrayed as being very common through constructing adolescence as "when every little girl thinks that she's fat".

Four of the women discussed how they changed their diet and exercised to lose weight when they were in their twenties. Here are some examples of these accounts.

..... *But I've always been into sport and stuff as well. But it's a good excuse as well to run the extra mile ... or to do the extra gym class. "Oh I'm just doing it to keep fit". When in the back of your mind it's also like "and I'll probably lose weight". It's like a great incentive.*  
(Sophie, p.8)

*I became a vegetarian I think a lot because I thought that if I didn't eat meat and diary products and things I'd lose weight, subconsciously.*  
(Anna, p. 9)

Both of these women would not have admitted at the time that they were using diet and exercise to lose weight, but in retrospect they acknowledge that they were.

*C: .....I've probably have gone maybe three or four times in my life, over the last maybe five or six years. But they've only lasted a couple of months, maybe at the very most.*

*I: Yep, what kind of diets were they?*

*C: Um, calorie controlled..... Ah, trying to keep to the, I remember what it was now, I think it was under 1200 calories or something eaten a day..... And I was, you know, really containing myself, really eating hardly anything and was you know, very conscious of what I was eating. Hardly any fat or anything like that. And, and exercising I was doing aerobics ...but it made very little, I think over that 3 months I lost about maybe six or eight kilos ..... I think I was disappointed in myself to begin with that I couldn't keep it up. But yeah, I felt like, and I still feel now about diets, that it's um, if it's not something that you could keep with, up with over a long period of time it's just pointless. (Crystal, p.6)*

Implicit in this extract is the extreme amount of effort that went into trying to lose weight. However frustration is felt due to the lack of results, despite the devotion to the program - "I was really containing myself". After the disappointment, this woman changed the way that she constructed diets and weight-loss, deciding if she couldn't maintain the high level of discipline and self-regulation, it was not worth it. It is apparent here that how a woman constructs early experiences of dieting, shapes how she will later construct the notion, and whether or not it will be undertaken again.

In the next extract, toning is constructed as being just as important as weight-loss. This woman has dieted in the past and felt good about the results. Because she constructed dieting as being positive, now after she has had her first child, she is willing to diet again.

*..... Cos dieting, yeah, you lose weight but it doesn't tone..... with exercising it actually tones you more, so you actually fit clothes a lot better..... I have started on the exercising thing, but I just need to do it on more of a regular basis. And I was going to start Weight Watches again but I've seen this different diet ad, on tv..... It actually helps speed your metabolism up, it's all about combining the right foods. I'm going to try that one.*

*(Lauren, p.8)*

These constructions on dieting and weight-loss suggest that being slim is considered of great importance and much effort is put into achieving this. Puberty is usually the beginning of what is constructed as sometimes an ongoing effort to become and stay slim.

## Restricting Eating

While some of the women had never been on what they constructed as a 'diet', they were concerned about what they were eating so they would limit themselves to certain foods.

*S: ..... Some days I, I have fat days and hm, then I might do a bit of extra exercise and starve myself for the day or something ..... I don't starve myself, but you know, just ...*

*I: Not eat as much maybe?*

*S: Yeah, or eat healthily or something for a while, but that doesn't last long. It's not like, I've never been on a strict diet .....*

*(Stacey, p.7)*

In this construction exercise and healthy eating is a substitute for the type of strict diet discussed in the previous account. This type of modified diet and extra activity is portrayed as being temporary and usually a result of having a 'fat day'. It is assumed that feelings experienced due to feeling fat are short lived and therefore food restriction and extra exercise is not a permanent fixation. The talk can be seen here as reflecting on itself, when the respondent corrects her use of the words "starve myself", knowing that this type of phrase is not appropriate.

*But, but I think I got to the point where I restricted what I ate, and said "I'm not allowed to have chocolate" or "I'm not allowed to have this". Then I'd want that thing heaps more because I wasn't allowed to have it ..... Your body, like you kind of rebel against yourself.*

*(Anna, p.9)*

*S: I've read lots and lots of diets and stuff... I try to eat healthy, as much as I can, but I've got too much of a sweet tooth. (laugh)*

*I: ... So what ideally would you like to be eating everyday?*

*S: ... if I could make myself I would just, I would eat heaps of fruit and veges ...cereals and bread...and cut all the like lollies... chocolate and cake... but yeah, and I don't know, it's a bit unrealistic. (laugh)*

*(Stacey, p.9)*

The restriction of food is constructed in the first extract as causing you to "rebel against yourself". In the second extract the distinction between what the mind and body wants is too different and therefore the desire to restrict eating is constructed as 'unrealistic'. The idea that a person can be split into two, the rebel and the disciplined, is a common

linguistic tool often used to portray the way that a person feels pulled by two opposing directions.

### **Dieting for Acceptance**

*..... When I lost the weight to get married, I wasn't losing it for me, I was losing it for the honeymoon, for Simon. Um, so that, as soon as I was married and, and everything was fine and I knew I was accepted... I just started putting the weight back on.*  
(Lauren, p.9)

Dieting is constructed here as being a way to gain acceptance. The desired result of dieting, which is weight-loss, is often related to the concept of beauty, as it was discussed earlier. Therefore one way of interpreting this account is in understanding how beauty is an important tool used to gain acceptance. This woman constructs dieting as something that will create a slim and thus attractive figure, which will then result in acceptance from others.

### **Beauty Brings Love**

Similar to the concept of dieting for acceptance is the construction of women desiring to be beautiful because it brings about not only acceptance, but also love. The wish to be beautiful is constructed in this excerpt as being an unconscious desire to be loved. This interpretation means that if one feels loved, then beauty is not needed because it is simply a means of gaining what one already has. In this case the media is presented as being the source of the relationship between beauty and love, in particular the love of a man.

*..... I think love is a really important thing, just going on a tangent. But I think that if people feel loved then they don't care so much ..... I think that people are looking for love and they think well if I'm beautiful somebody will love me because on the movies... you know, subconsciously, on the movie this woman was beautiful and she was the one that got the man.*  
(Sophie, p.16)

The importance of beauty is therefore constructed as once again being a vital part of impressing and attracting others, in this case males.

### **Ugly Days**

Five out of the eleven women interviewed mentioned that they have things called 'fat' or 'ugly' days, when they feel unattractive.

*...I can get up and get ready in about ten minutes..... But then again, I do worry. I do, obviously worry about it enough, to, to um, have those days when I'm "oh I look stink" or you know "my hair looks dumb" ...*  
(Phillipa, p.12)

The use of the word 'obviously' in this extract can be interpreted as portraying 'ugly days' as expected to happen. Although in this case it is minimized by emphasis on the short amount of time that is taken to get ready in the morning in comparison perhaps to those women who spend a large amount of time 'getting ready'.

*..... people I know kind of say like ... "my hair's looking really bad today" or something, and "oh I've got so many pimples" and you hear people say stuff like that but you really don't see it.....Yeah but I understand what it is like to see that..... and often I know that it's not really anything anyway.*  
(Claudia, p.9)

This woman provides an account of how people often complain of looking unattractive, but others including her, never actually notice any change. She then moves on to present herself as knowing what it is like to feel this way, but in the midst of experiencing an 'ugly day' she realizes that 'it's not really anything'.

*..... some days I feel great. Some days I feel crap. And probably to everybody on the outside you look same on both days..... It's a mind thing I think in a big way...*  
(Sophie, p.16)

This extract constructs 'ugly days' as a 'mind thing' and 'not really anything'. Therefore it is something that is not necessarily observed by other people. The construction of no

'real' difference between an ordinary and an 'ugly day' may function to minimize negative thoughts.

Similar to the suggestion that 'ugly days' are usually only a change in perception rather than physical appearance, is the notion that was addressed by the respondents – you are your own worst critic.

*..... often you'll be your own harshest critic as well.....Like you look at yourself in the mirror and you'll spot like the defects or whatever. And no-one else is going to notice that..... I think we worry, look introspectively too much about how we look. And whether this is going to look cool or whatever.  
(Sophie, p.14)*

Parts of the body that are considered unattractive are referred to here as 'defects'. Again it is emphasized that these 'defects' are usually only perceived by the person to whom they belong, in other words they are personal rather than observed by others. In this extract, these supposedly unattractive features are discovered because 'we worry ... too much about how we look'. 'We' can be understood here as pertaining to all women, particularly in this case those who experience 'ugly days'. Therefore it can be understood that if women did not worry so much about their physical appearance, they would not experience 'ugly days'.

### **Distorted Perception**

Sometimes the women spoke of being so critical of their appearance that in retrospect they realize their perception of what they look like was very different from what they physically looked like.

*..... Like I've always been really really, like pretty much thin and um, quite bony and stuff. But for some bizarre reason during third form I yeah, dieted quite heavily... And like, yeah, stressed out heaps about it and would like, like pinch my skin and stuff and like everyone can pinch skin but I'd be like "oh no"..... And one day I just saw myself in my leotard in my ballet class. And just saw that I was really like gaunt and sick. And I just went "oh my god" ... I just realized that it was just crazy. And I don't have any idea of*

*why. Yep, it was just like a really distorted perception of my size for a bit.  
(Claudia, p.5)*

In both this extract and the one that follows, there is a connection drawn between worry or stress and 'distorted perception'. In the second account this relationship is directly linked to the social context – 'all of my friends' - and feelings about herself and her self-esteem.

*... I probably started dieting when I was about 14, started worrying about my weight. And when I look back at photos of myself I was very lanky, very skinny young girl ...being quite tall and stuff, I just presumed that I needed to diet because all the, all my friends were. I don't know, I just didn't have very good self-esteem about body and stuff like that.  
(Sophie, p.7)*

*..... I always say to Paul "oh, I think I'm putting on weight". And he's like "oh don't be stupid, I think you've lost weight if anything", and stuff like that. But in my head I'm, I never, I'm never actually very happy with the way I look.  
(Stacey, p.14)*

This last excerpt differs to the other accounts of distorted perception, due to the way that this woman still feels unhappy about her appearance even though others are trying to persuade her that she is not putting on weight. This construction can be linked back to how feeling good is closely associated with looking good for many women.

### **"I Hate the Way I Look"**

Some women constructed what is commonly understood as a 'hostile relationship' – 'hate' - between themselves and their bodies.

*..... I know I look bad now. Um, especially with just having Samantha my baby. Um, and I hate being this big. And I do, I do think a lot about what people must think about me. Because I think that way about myself, about being a big fat blob. It's horrible with clothes, and I've got a whole wardrobe full of clothes that I can't fit.  
(Lauren, p.8)*

This woman had recently given birth to her first child. Even though gaining weight is a natural part of pregnancy, she still feels very bad about the way she looks.

*... I really hate my, really do hate parts of my body and I think that you've got to try and yeah, like we were saying, really consciously work on not doing that.*  
(Phillipa, p.12)

This woman, although admitting that she hates certain parts of her appearance, suggests that this way of thinking can be challenged – it can be resisted. The importance of this resistance is emphasized when it is said ‘you’ve got to try’.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEDIA WOMEN**

The importance of beauty was also evident when the women talked about the construction of media women. There are discourses that are in resistance to the argument that the standards of beauty that the media display are wrong.

### **I Wish I Was Like That**

These two extracts display the wish to fit the standards of beauty that would define them as being ‘beautiful’.

*... Sometimes I suppose I sort of think, “I wish I looked like that” or “I wish my breasts were that big”... Things like that.*  
(Stacey, p.11)

This construction may appear inconsistent with later constructions of beauty, which construct media women as being ‘flawed’ (refer to chapter five). However when co-articulated with discourses on the importance of beauty, and the benefits of looking like these women do, the suggestion of wanting to look the same is consistent.

*... You go through the stage of - oh it's so unfair you know. How can they look like that and I look like this? And why couldn't of I got the genes to look tall? Cos I'm short. Why couldn't I... um, you know, look like that? But you know, you're sort of disgusted*

*initially, like "oh what a bitch". You know. (laugh) But you don't really feel that way. (Lauren, p.10)*

In this extract the concept of fairness is discussed. This woman feels as though she has been treated unfairly due to the way that she looks, and wishes that she could look like the media women. She discusses her initial reaction to media women as jealousy and disgust. However after this initial reaction she looks back on her way of constructing as being untrue of her real feelings towards them.

### **Admiration of Beauty**

Although not constructing a desire to look like media women, some women discussed how they appreciated their beauty.

*I: ...What do you think of like, the models and stuff that you see in like the magazines? ...*

*C: Um, yeah I guess I just either admire them if I think they're beautiful and attractive and think "wow".*

*(Claudia, p.7)*

*... Like you just look at them and go "she's so pretty" or you know, "he's a real spunk". But like, I don't ever really think "I want to be like that" or anything ... Like Rebecca and all that will sit there going "oh I want to be like that. I want to dress like that". And I'm just like "nah".*

*(Bridget, p.6-7)*

In this extract, although this woman recognizes that certain media women are considered attractive, unlike her friend, she does not desire to be like them. The extract below constructs a dilemma from wanting to embrace beauty at the same time as realizing that the standards may be socially imposed.

*... Like if I was going to be a fashion photographer or something, I'd have this huge dilemma on my hands. Cos I'd want to pick the most gorgeous models and stuff like that, because I think they're beautiful and I'd like to photograph something that was beautiful. But I don't know whether, do I think it's beautiful cos it's been fed to me as that's what's beautiful?*

*(Anna, p.11)*

Here beauty is portrayed as something that is desirable not only to own, but also to look at and enjoy. However the possibility that what is considered beautiful can change because it is culturally constructed, leaves its value open to question.

To conclude, this chapter highlights the way that beauty has become an important part of a woman's social and personal life. The reliance on looking good to feel good is a theme that comes across strongly when women talk about being confident in social settings and about themselves as a whole. Constructions of beauty, especially the equating of slim with attractive, is often a hindrance for women who feel that they cannot achieve social and personal confidence until they have achieved a slim figure. Even the women that perceive themselves as thin often fear the consequences of gaining weight. Because the desire to be a certain size is so great, many women told stories of how they restricted eating and formed 'hang-ups' about their body, which caused them to be self conscious in public.

## Chapter 5

### HOW WOMEN RESIST ESTABLISHED WAYS OF CONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE BODY

Although much of the women's talk focused on the importance of beauty, there were discourses that contradicted the construction of stereotypical beauty standards.

Contradictory constructions were employed where the aspiration to be beautiful and thus desired, conflicted with the realization that striving to obtain beauty is destructive. The following discourses construct beauty standards as being troublesome for women's mental, emotional and physical health, and explain ways of resisting these standards so that well being is achieved.

#### Deciding Not To Worry

The following women's accounts involve experiences of feeling bad about the way they look and thus avoiding doing certain things and seeing certain people. They also provide accounts of realizing that this relationship is not positive and thus challenge their initial reaction by doing exactly the opposite. Accounts of self-discipline and self-regulation in relation to bodily acceptance contrasts with the previously identified discourses of self-consciousness, hang-ups and hate for ones body.

*..... I was wanting to go visit a guy that I liked. And I was like "oh my goodness it's winter". And I thought, my first thought was "oh no, I've probably put on weight cos it's winter time". And I was really almost not going to go and see him ...because I thought that I'd put on weight. And I thought that he wouldn't be attracted to me still or maybe that would be a thing. And I was just like so mad at myself. I thought "imagine letting that kind of a thought ruin a possible relationship with somebody" .....I felt like slapping myself and then was extra ultra determined to go and have a great time and just forget about that.*

*(Sophie, p.13)*

This account of deciding not to worry emphasizes the way that a woman's perception about her body can affect what she does and who she sees. In the realization that ones

thinking will affect one's actions, this woman changes her perception of the situation in order to create positive consequences. The following excerpt is another example of this kind of construction.

*Um, I always try and make myself do things. Especially if the reason why I'm not doing it is something silly, like worried about what I look like and stuff like that..... And you have to kind of like eventually just go "well, I want to do this thing and I'm gonna do it". Even if it's hard sometimes you still make yourself and you get stronger all the time... (Anna, p.16)*

Worrying about what one looks like is referred to here as being 'silly' and trivial in the face of things that are more important. Resistance to oppressive constructions is said to make one stronger each time it is employed.

*..... I especially wanted, I really used to want to get a breast reduction .....and then I kind of got to the stage where I realized that I'm not, I don't want myself to care that much about them that, to actually go through with having you know, cosmetic surgery.....And even though people say like "oh you've got to feel good about yourself". I think I've got to feel good about myself as it is. (Phillipa, p.12-13)*

This construction resists dominant discourses on the female body, when this woman discusses the importance of feeling good about herself as she is, rather than believing that she can only be attractive if she changes her appearance in some way, in this case having a breast reduction. However this extract also suggests that heavy self-regulation is necessary to monitor the association between looking and feeling good.

### **Acceptance**

Another form of resistance to the discourses on beauty is the notion of acceptance. This notion implies the realization that you do not necessarily look like those women who are considered stereotypically beautiful but have learned, or are in the process of learning to appreciate the body that you have, while not trying to change it.

*... I think I'm pretty good at accepting, um, well this is just me, I'd like to be thinner..... but yeah, it's not so much of an issue. It's probably more of an issue in high school but that's just because I was hassled..... but because it's not such a big thing anymore.*  
(Crystal, p.8)

This construction of acceptance is based on a change in social circumstances. Acceptance of one's body is helped by the way that those who made acceptance difficult are no longer around. Acceptance is also clearly distinguished here from preference – you may like to look differently but this desire to change is no longer sought after.

*About the way I look..... I think I'm just coming out of that phase where it's, it's an issue..... you just become more accepting of yourself so you don't let those things get in the way. Cos you know that there, like there's more to life than that and it's bullshit really and it's, it's, it should be irrelevant...*  
(Anna, p.16)

This excerpt constructs age as a factor in the acceptance of one's physical appearance. Concern about appearance is constructed as a 'phase' that one grows out of with the realization that "there's more to life" and "it should be irrelevant". Acceptance is seen as coming first, and as a result of accepting oneself as a whole, bodily acceptance follows, with fears or concerns about appearance no longer being 'an issue'.

### **I Love My Body**

Only one of the eleven women talked about loving her body and the reasons why she did.

*I love my body..... absolutely love it..... I'm fascinated by it all the time, at the things it can do. And um I love it just how it is as well. I don't um, make too many efforts to change it or to alter it in anyway .....I'm not into hair removal or anything like that. And I, and I love the things that my body can do. Like um, yeah just, it's a wondrous thing and yeah and it's beautiful and I really love it.*  
(Claudia, p. 10)

Challenging to the notion that you can only love your body once it is altered or the 'bad parts' are hidden, this woman talks of how she loves her body as it is, so she doesn't 'make too many efforts' to change it in any way. Focus here is on what the body can do

as well as what it looks like, a concept that is dominantly seen as relating to men more than women.

### **'Natural Feminine'**

A construction that challenges the suggestion that women should diet to become slim and therefore beautiful draws on the discourse that women are 'naturally curvy'.

*...I think women have actually probably got the wrong idea about what men think a lot of time as well. You'd be surprised. Like so many women think "I've got to be skinny"...and then you'll talk to guys and they'll say "I actually like women with, that are a bit curvier and look more womanly". Because it is natural for women to have curves and stuff like that.*

*(Anna, p.13)*

This construction of a woman's body is in resistance to the discourse of slim equals beautiful. This position is justified in two ways. It is suggested here that women are deceived when they believe that only slim women will be considered beautiful, because the speaker has discussed the issue with men and found that they often prefer women to be 'a bit curvier'. Secondly is the idea that it is natural for women to be more voluptuous, quite possibly because of their role in childbirth, as mentioned below.

*... We're just expected ... to be skinnier. And um, even though we have children so we're naturally supposed to be heavier than guys anyway, and things like that.*

*(Stacey, p.19)*

In this excerpt the natural shape and form of women is compared to the expectation by society to be skinny. The natural is set against the socially sanctioned.

### **Physical Appearance Irrelevant**

Only one instance was found where physical appearance was said to be irrelevant.

..... *Like none of my friends are the same at all. They're all different. So that puts me in heaps of different situations. And the way I am doesn't stop me being in those at all..... I don't sit there going "oh if I looked like that or you know, if I acted like that then I could do that". I just do it anyway.*  
(Bridget, p.7)

The reason physical appearance is irrelevant is emphasized by the range of social situations this woman appears in. The way she looks is never a limiting factor in how she feels or what she does. To emphasize the strength of her position an alternative discourse is reflected on, to show the possibility of thinking such as "if I looked like that... I could do that" even after considering an opposing way of thinking about the issue, this woman still locates herself within the discourse of irrelevance. The speaker emphasizes the permanence of this construction in the way that she stresses her ability to accept herself as she is in any situation.

### **Beauty Comes From Within**

Even though only one woman mentioned the irrelevance of physical appearance, others did talk of how being attractive is important, but it shouldn't be. The following extracts suggest that to discern whether a person is beautiful and attractive, one must look at who they are on the inside.

*...I've got a friend of mine and she's absolutely gorgeous ...Yet at times she has looked so ugly to me, when she's being real bitchy and I've seen like just the ugliness of her character come through ... And character is what makes people beautiful. Soul is what makes people beautiful not externally. And sure externally counts for a bit. Um, not, it's not as important as what people put the weight upon it.*  
(Sophie, p.13-14)

This discourse is expressed through a personal account of why beauty does come from within. By focusing on the description of her friend whose 'ugly' character is displayed in her appearance, this construction becomes a personalized example and justification is given for maintaining this position. Here character and soul are given more weight than external beauty, due to the way that ones character will always 'come through'. By

referring to other discourses on the importance of beauty, and by mentioning that 'it counts for a bit', this argument is not portrayed as being one sided.

*..... I mean beauty comes from within. And I can see beautiful, like a beautiful quality coming out in somebody that is not necessarily ... stereotypically beautiful..... But I think when I see someone that's beautiful it takes more to do with, the combination of what's inside and what's outside.  
(Anna, p.12)*

This construction of beauty emphasizes the balance of character and physical attractiveness. In this case, even those who are not considered stereotypically beautiful can be seen as attractive if they possess a beautiful quality that is displayed in appearance.

### **Society To Blame**

The following extract suggests that women are often not happy with the way they look because of pressure from society, especially the media, to look a certain way.

*..... Like we're all taught that society isn't happy with the way we look. And like, heaps of women take that as being how they feel. Like if they really, really thought about it, they've been living for so many years the way they are and they're happy. And then society comes along, and you know, like says like "that's not right". Like TV, you know, and all that says "that's not right, this is how you should be feeling". So they take that in and they think that that's how they do feel.  
(Bridget, p.7-8)*

This woman's acknowledgement of the way that society, especially the media (TV) creates appearance anxiety in women, places the individual in opposition to the culture that surrounds her. In discussing how society teaches us to feel about our bodies, women are then portrayed as confusing these feelings with the true feelings that they would have about their appearance if these lessons were not taught. In this construction society and the individual are seen as being separate entities. Women are 'taking in TV' and therefore the individual is unable to distinguish what is nature and what has been nurtured.

## RESISTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES ON ADORNMENT AND WEIGHTLOSS

Discourses relating to altering ones appearance with adornment and weight-loss constructed these things as being harmful to a woman's sense of self, as well as being inconvenient and bothersome.

### Comfort

A couple of the women talked about how they place comfort and practicality first when they decide what they are wearing.

*.....With kids and stuff you've got to ...you've got to be able to move... Like I couldn't wear anything that was tight or anything cos you can't really do anything... Don't really wear skirts or dresses um, (pause) I've been like that for a while. I think it's just because I like to be comfortable. I like to sit how I want to sit and you can't do that in a skirt. (Crystal, p.5)*

This woman does youth work and feels it is impractical to be wearing something that is not comfortable in this line of work. She also stresses the connection between wearing comfortable clothing and having freedom of movement, which is not possible in clothing that is traditionally for women – skirts and dresses.

Just as the notion of 'comfort' can be used to resist the constriction of 'feminine' clothing, so the notion of a 'hassle' can be used to construct adornment as less than a priority.

*...I put comfort first... I'm not one of those people that put their makeup on and all their flash clothes just to go into town. Or just to shopping or something. (giggle) I don't care. It's too much hassle. I get really shitty if I'm not comfortable ...Especially if I'm wearing something and I don't feel comfortable in it I, I may as well not wear it cos it's not worth how shitty I feel. (Lauren, p. 3)*

The evaluation of adornment as a hassle is emphasized by the negative effect it has on this woman's mood during the day. The extract below draws on the way that the use of

cosmetics can sometimes lead to embarrassing situations, causing one to be preoccupied with self-consciousness.

*... You can be very paranoid of it if you've got like mascara that runs or lipstick that smears...*  
(Christine, p. 2)

Therefore the extracts above explain how cosmetics and 'dress clothes' are not worn in order to attain both physical and emotional 'comfort'.

### **Fun**

Although some women do not use cosmetics and dress up because they see it as a burden, others see it as being a source of enjoyment and wear it only for this reason. In opposition to what some may believe, the wearing of cosmetics can be consistent with resistance to dominant discourses on adornment when the reasons for wearing them do not result from the need to hide ones 'defects' and lack of confidence without them.

*I wear glitter occasionally. And I have a mascara that sometimes I wear but um yeah. So no, I like I kind of see it as kind of a frivolous thing. Like I do it for fun and hardly ever do it..... like sometimes when I'm just home by myself and I'm hanging out in my room and I ...start playing and stuff.*  
(Claudia, p.1)

This woman discusses her use of cosmetics as unsanctioned by social situations. Her positioning on the matter is solely focused on the enjoyment of wearing makeup. This can be seen with the use of words such as 'fun', 'frivolous' and 'playing'. This construction could be used to resist the beauty imperative that is evident in the majority of constructions about cosmetics.

## Health

An overwhelming majority of the women interviewed suggested dieting and exercise for health and fitness are now of greater importance than for weight loss.

*...But I mean I like to feel that I'm fit and I think, I think that's more important than losing weight to me anyway.  
(Phillipa, p.7)*

*...I don't really believe in diets. I mean I have tried to eat healthy and less fat and stuff like that. But I've never done a strict like official diet.  
(Anna, p.10)*

In this case healthy eating is compared to strict, formalized diets. This woman positions herself as being skeptical of diets. However while others showed the same type of skepticism towards dieting, some women, while seeing health and fitness as their main priorities, still desired and sometimes expected weight-loss.

*...I did exercise a lot last summer and I didn't eat much junk food. That was mostly cos I wanted to get fitter though. But I very disappointed when my weight didn't go down at all! (laugh) Well, not disappointed, I just, I suppose I just realized that I was basically the lowest weight that I could probably be, anyway healthily.  
(Lisa, p.5)*

*..... I just, from time to time I've been on what I suppose I'd call a healthy diet. But that, that's I suppose the appearance is a benefit of it, but it was mainly for the fact that you feel so much more better. You get so much more energy and it, it all goes hand in hand. Good eating, rather than a diet as such, just healthy eating and exercise and all the rest of it.  
(Christine, p.6)*

This extract justifies a healthy diet by pointing out all the benefits that result from it. A healthy diet is defined as 'good eating', which goes together with exercise to benefit general well being and results in 'feeling good'.

## **Exercise for Enjoyment**

The notion of exercise purely for the sake of enjoyment can be used to resist the discourse that women should be exercising for weight loss and the effect it will have on their appearance.

*...I do exercise stuff and that but ...I haven't sat down and gone like "oh I need to do it". It's just like, just been part of what I do during the day..... cos I'm studying sport ... I still like, go and play touch with the boys. And like golf and stuff. And if I didn't do that, I'd just be like, I wouldn't be me.*

*(Bridget, p.4)*

This woman's interest in sport led her to study it as well as play it recreationally. She enjoys playing sport so much that it is incorporated into her sense of identity - "if I didn't do any ... I wouldn't be me".

Although the following women were doing exercise as part of a weight loss regime, they discussed how they enjoyed it, a concept that is consistent with a discourse of resistance because it does not focus on the need to change ones appearance.

*I: So how did you feel while you were on it? What kind of things were you feeling?*

*C: ...At first it felt good. I enjoyed the exercise and I still do enjoy exercise. Um, I like to walk. I don't like anything too vigorous but I like to walk.*

*(Crystal, p.6)*

*... I try to exercise and I know I need to more and I've actually just got an exercycle. So, cos I really liked biking when I was younger.*

*(Lauren, p.8)*

In summary using discourses such as comfort, fun and self love, women were found to be actively resisting the constraints of self-discipline. However this resistance was done in a manner that indicated an obvious awareness of the dominant discourses on beauty and attraction, with resistance being constructed as a conscious effort involving plenty of self-regulation.

## Chapter 6

### HOW WOMEN TALK ABOUT WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

When the women were asked what they thought of the models and actresses they see in the media, there was plenty to be said – most of it was not positive. The following section explains what was said about women in the media. The media is contextualized as institutions where ‘beauty’ and/or ‘femininity’ are constituted through dominant discourses.

#### DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEDIA WOMEN

In this section the women were asked questions such as ‘what goes through your head when you read women’s magazines?’ and ‘what is your reaction to the female models and film stars you see in the mass media?’ In answering these questions some also referred to pop-stars as being women who dominate the media. Therefore this part of the chapter looks at the construction of media women as pop-stars, models or film stars. It can be seen that the majority of constructions refer to the media women’s appearance, with only a few discussing their personality and intelligence.

#### Models All Look the Same

*Z: ...Everyone’s sort of (pause) like medium, long length, medium brown hair and everything as well, so they’re not too overly something. I don’t know.*

*I: They’re not overly, they’re not very overly individualistic aye.*

*Z: Yeah, yeah that’s what I mean...It’s just so they can fit into any sort of part...  
(Zaria, p.14)*

*...I’m really bad at generalizing but a huge amount of the women that are prominent in, in like mainstream charts and stuff like that, heaps of them all look the same ... in that they’re all thin and that they’re all stereotypically beautiful. They all talk about, all their song lyrics are based upon um, not only sex but being attractive to men and sort of suggestive in their dancing and their clothes.*

*(Phillipa, p.9)*

Words such as 'everyone', 'everything', and 'all look the same' construct media women as being extremely homogenous in appearance and personality. The first extract suggests that media women rarely have distinctive characteristics so that they have the opportunity to be cast into any given role. The implications of this 'interchangeability' means those who have particularly distinctive physical characteristics will not get a role. The second extract constructs female pop-stars in particular as only consisting of women who are considered in the western world as being 'attractive'. It is suggested that this focus on women's physical beauty is not only displayed in the type of women who appear on the mainstream charts but also the way they act, sing and dress, which displays their sexuality. The link between beauty and sexuality is made in the way that media women are 'stereotypically beautiful' and 'suggestive in their dancing and clothing'.

*It just, I think there's a filter that just goes across. You're just so used to it, it's like um, it's like getting white sliced toast bread ... You forget that there's all the other varieties of bread you can get out there.*  
(Sophie, p.11)

A metaphor is used here to discuss how the media usually shows women that are of similar physique and excludes anybody that does not meet the implicit criteria. The extract suggests that the media induces a type of thinking in viewers that causes them to believe that this criteria of woman represents what woman look like in everyday life.

### **They Are Fake**

*... They've kind of paid for their bodies in a way. I mean they've got millions of dollars, and they can buy personal trainers, cosmetic surgery, get their own nutritionist, all that sort of thing. I mean, they only look like they do because of all the money they have poured into it. And it's, it's all fake, and they are air brushed half the time on TV anyway, and so it's just so unrealistic. It's not funny and yet guys and everybody else who watches it still expect you to be able to look like that you know, still holds that up as the ideal female, even though they're not real...*  
(Stacey, p.10-11)

In this extract media women are constructed in terms of being fake, suggesting that the beauty that media women have is not natural but bought with the type of money that the

majority of others can not afford. The terms 'unrealistic' and 'not funny' are used to emphasize and draw attention to the construction of these 'fake bodies' as unattainable. The words, 'still expect you', is an inclusive term that draws both the speaker and the interviewer into the position of women who are expected to look like media women. 'Guys and everybody else' are then constructed as those who are expecting the standards to be met. The consequence of this construction creates a 'us' and 'them' relationship between everyday women and women who are in the media.

### **They Are Unhealthy**

The majority of women talked about how they thought many models and actresses looked unhealthy.

*I actually think it's quite sad actually ...especially when I hear about what they do and how strict their lifestyles are. So they look like these beanpoles that look ill to me. Ha, they just don't even look healthy ... who is it that decides that, um, to be attractive or appealing you have to be 6 foot tall and a bean pole?*  
(Crystal, p.10)

The questioning here of 'who is it that decides?' creates the concept that there is something or someone who is setting the standards of beauty. This person/thing is constructed as being wrong when the words used to describe the standards of beauty are 'bean poles' and 'ill'. This 'ill' look is constructed as an outcome of intense self-regulation and 'strict lifestyles'. This supports Foucault's theory on the disciplinary power that is placed on people's bodies, in this case women's bodies.

*Especially magazine ones and catwalk models I just really think I'd like to take them home and give them some food and give them a big hug ...especially how they look so gaunt and stuff, they look so sad ... it's not beautiful and it's not healthy ...*  
(Sophie, p.10)

*... I think it's actually quite sad, especially like in a lot of the women's magazines you see stars that are anorexic and they actually look dreadful. I'd rather be a bit big than look like that.*  
(Lauren, p.11)

*... One thought that I had not long ago was with "Friends" TV program. When they started most of the females there were quite healthy looking and you've sort of noticed them over the shows they've actually got skinnier and skinnier and skinnier, and more unhealthy looking. And it ages them as well real quick ...There is so much pressure with people being on TV to be skinner and skinner and skinner.*  
(Christine, p.10)

The majority of these extracts talk of the sadness felt for media women due to the amount of pressure that is believed to be on them from the modeling and film industry to be a certain weight. The size that the industry requires media women to be is seen as harmful. Use of the words 'unhealthy', 'anorexic', 'ill' and 'gaunt' place this construction of media women's size in a health discourse. The connection of health and beauty in the western world, places great importance on the link between appearance and physical wellbeing. These arguments are legitimized because health is associated with medical discourses on the body which are presented as being objective and scientific, therefore they have more authority.

### **They Are Unattractive**

All of the extracts above connect being unhealthy to looking unattractive. However the argument that being skinny is unattractive seems to contradict the popular idea that to be thin is to be beautiful. Use of the words such as 'dreadful' and 'anorexic' distinguishes between a healthy slim person and one that has crossed the line into a weight that is 'unhealthy'.

*.....Models I think look ugly. I truly do. Like, um, just because you know that you're never going to be able to attain that figure anyway.*  
(Lisa, p.8)

This extract creates a new concept - that models are ugly not because they are too thin, but because they set up a standard of beauty that is unattainable. This type of construction challenges the stereotypic beauty standards in the way that they are considered 'ugly' and not 'beautiful'.

*... I think a lot of those people in the movies and stuff actually look quite ordinary. And if you saw them walking down the street you wouldn't look at them twice..... There are a few amazingly beautiful women but not really that many.*  
(Lisa, p.11)

Here again is the emphasis that only a minority of women are 'amazingly beautiful', including those who appear in the movies. This construction contradicts the previous argument used by the same woman that media women are 'ugly'.

### **They are Ditsy/Shallow**

Very little emphasis was placed on the media women's personality. However two women did discuss the character of media women, although nothing positive was mentioned.

*...A lot of them are still pretty ditsy though.*  
(Zaria, p.13)

*..... She's such a shallow character a lot of the time. Like she's just the look, she's the body, she's the sex thing. She has this little, maybe a little bit of spunk for one part but usually doesn't carry through.*  
(Sophie, p.12)

These two extracts differ in two respects. The first woman's statement is relating to models and how a lot of their personalities are 'ditsy'. The second excerpt refers to the fictional characters that women play in movies and how they are usually only written and cast in a film because of their physical appearance. The justification for constructing female film characters as shallow is based on the suggestion that their personality is never developed - 'she's the body, she's the sex thing'.

### **They are Image Obsessed**

*I: So that makes them less attractive do you think? If they, they have like plastic surgery do you think? More than somebody as they are, without any plastic surgery or...*

*S: Yeah, well I just think it shows that they're um..... so obsessed about their image.  
(Stacey, p.12)*

Here plastic surgery is constructed as something that only the 'image obsessed' would undertake and this personality trait makes them less attractive. This interpretation of media women's decision to have plastic surgery contradicts the previous construction of the importance the industry places on weight loss. Here media women are constructed as having free will and the choice of whether to have plastic surgery or not, therefore their decision is based on the personality trait of being 'image obsessed'. Whereas the previous argument on media women's unhealthy weight was founded on the idea that the reason why media women lose weight is because of pressure from the industry. This highlights conflicting ways of constructing media women in terms of free will or controlling forces.

## **DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS USED TO DESCRIBE THE MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN**

This section focuses on how the women talked about the media itself and the way in which it portrays women. As with the women's talk about 'media women', the majority of discussion constructed the media's portrayal of women as negative.

### **Too Much Focus On Body**

In every interview the participant was asked 'what goes through your head as you look through women's magazines?' in order to understand the women's perception of the representation of women in the media. The following extract constructs the frustration felt due to the huge amount of focus on women's bodies and how to achieve an 'attractive' look.

*... Most of the time I get really sick of them and get angry and throw them away (laugh)  
... Everything is focused on body image and everything is about, um, the latest diet or such and such in Hollywood does this, and get her look, or you know, wear these cosmetics or these clothes or whatever...  
(Stacey, p.9)*

It is suggested here that the pressure on media women to look a certain way, is also placed on those women who are not in the media's spotlight. Many examples are given to support the argument, such as diets, cosmetics and clothes. Of course all of these things if bought by the women who are targeted, provides the diet and beauty industry with the income needed to keep their business profitable.

### **Unrealistic Standards**

The majority of women mentioned that the media constructs unrealistic beauty standards.

*...You couldn't feel good about yourself because it's just unrealistic all the goals and things that they seem to think you should be able to look like ... It's like "Your ten step way to looking like Jennifer Lopez" ... you can't do that. I mean unless you're born her ... it's just not going to happen.*

*(Stacey, p.9)*

This woman accounts for feeling frustrated when reading women's magazines through the notion of a high expectation that women reading the magazines could actually meet the criteria that are presented to them.

*But like those magazines they're not reality either ...Like they're so air brushed and all that kind of thing ...It's not even a realistic thing to aspire to cos it's not even real. It's all computer manipulated and stuff ...But people are looking at that and going "I want to be like that" but it's not even real.*

*(Anna, p.11-12)*

*... Like heaps of the TV ads and TV programs and that, like they've got these like super pretty chicks and stuff like that. Like it's all about, everything's like, they use sex to sell heaps of things. And it's all, it's all "well that doesn't happen in the real world guys".*

*(Bridget, p.7)*

In both of these extracts the world of media is compared to the 'real world'. The first extract discusses how the introduction of computer imagery sets up a standard of beauty that is bound to cause a woman to fail because it is physically impossible to achieve. The second quote suggests that the sex and beauty that is predominant in the media, is not a true representation of how life is. The extract below talks about the speaker's realization

that the women who prevail in the media are really only the minority of woman in real life.

*...I know that they only represent a small population.  
(Lauren, p.11)*

The media portrayal of beauty standards that are impossible to live up to is therefore very evident in the women's talk. The high degree of negative emotion expressed as a result of this is discussed next.

### **Unrealistic Standards Cause Depression**

A couple of the women discussed how the expectation to achieve the standard of beauty presented to them in the media often left them feeling depressed because of the knowledge that they will always fail at any attempt to achieve this standard.

*... Like you read a magazine with beautiful chicks in it ... you end up being depressed, which is dumb.  
(Sophie, p.16)*

*..... You couldn't feel good about yourself because it's just unrealistic all the goals and things that they seem to think you should be able to look like ... it's constantly going in your head ... "oh my goodness I shouldn't have eaten that" or "such and such doesn't eat that and if I ever want to look like that then I shouldn't be doing this" ... and it's just too much stress on your life and you really don't need it.  
(Stacey, p.9)*

Another feeling that is expressed in the second extract is that of guilt, when attempts to discipline and regulate oneself in the manner that will achieve 'beauty' are met with failure. In this quote 'beauty' is constructed as something that a woman is expected to have. Note that both of these extracts use inclusive words like 'you' to include the susceptibility of all women into the argument.

## Wrong Message to Teenage Girls

Many women expressed concern for the physical and mental wellbeing of young teenage girls who would be influenced by the message the media gives about beauty and physical appearance. Worry was often accounted for by the construction of teenagers as easily impressed by the media's portrayal of women, making them susceptible to forming certain ways of thinking about their bodies that are dangerous. All of the extracts below take the form of a moral argument, blaming the media for being insensitive towards the young and easily impressionable who are seen as victims in the matter.

*... kind of disturbed me that the models are getting younger... it disturbs me because I know how much I got affected by um, the ideal image of beauty and stuff that I was seeing when I was in my teens ...It's not so much how it affects me ...It's like " oh god, what's it saying to younger kids?" ... Like I know how hard your teenage years can be anyway. ...You know it can really fuck people up.  
(Anna, p.10-13)*

This extract uses personal experience to convey the authenticity of the argument that the media is not responsible in the way that it portrays young models and images of beauty. The employment of extreme case formulations are sometimes used for justification of a particular subject position – for example “it can really fuck people up”. The two excerpts below place blame on the media for causing teenage girls to develop eating disorders and a poor self-image. Note that both of the extracts focus on the major problem of beauty ideals as being the issue of weight, and how it causes danger to teenage girls.

*And what sort of example they're setting I suppose, for teenage girls, more than anything, is the thing I'm worried about. Um, in, and the anorexia and all that kind of stuff that, that comes about through that.  
(Crystal, p.10)*

*... I can see that it's a real danger for young girls to grow up. Especially if they tend to be a bit overweight..... because they're impressionable... here people look to Hollywood to see how they're meant to be ..... And all they're seeing is beautiful, pretty, tall women ...And if they don't fit into that category then they're going to feel inferior and wonder why not and strive, always strive to look that pretty.  
(Lauren, p.11)*

### **Only A Certain Type of Person is Attractive**

*I: What about film stars and stuff like that? ...*

*L: Um, it makes me think that only a certain type of person is attractive ... Whereas I know that's not true.*

*(Lisa, p.9)*

Similar to the talk about unrealistic standards, this construction of the media and women presents all the representations of media women as the same, implying that these women are the only ones who are attractive. This quote focuses on the knowledge that what the media depicts as beautiful, may not necessarily be true of all people's opinion of what is attractive. The implication of understanding beauty as diverse as opposed to focusing on a 'certain type' would construct a wide range of people as attractive, rather than singling out a few.

### **Limits Opportunities**

Some of the women spoke of concern about the consequences of strict standards of beauty for women who chose modeling or acting as a career but did not fit the description of what is considered 'beautiful'.

*... My cousin tried to get into modelling ...she was quite thinish, well just kind of average, what I would think as a slim attractive girl..... But she wasn't tall enough. And, and yeah so she didn't get in and she was quite crushed about that. But I just think "oh this is so silly".*

*(Crystal, p.11)*

*...If I was an actor it would be quite dumb because, not getting roles because you didn't look right seems a little unfair.*

*(Lisa, p.11)*

*...If a young girl wanted to be an actor then they'd have to look right. And that's, it's a bit exclusive really.*

*(Christine, p.9)*

Words such as 'silly', 'unfair' and 'exclusive' are used to construct the argument that the current system of criteria is not appropriate. In the first two extracts a personal stance is taken to demonstrate the potential damage that the current beauty standards hold.

## **Focus On Relationships**

*...I think so much of it is focused on women not being happy unless they're in a relationship... the thing that bugs me most is definitely the emphasis on relationships and how you're not happy unless you're in a relationship, and how to please the man all the time...*

*(Phillipa, p.8)*

Although much of the discussion in interviews addressed beauty standards, this extract focuses on women's magazines emphasis on women in relationships. Constructing women as only being happy while in a relationship evokes negative emotions in the reader, as she does not construct relationships in this way – 'that bugs me'. Pleasing men and placing others needs above ones own is a construction closely connected to femininity and will be developed further in Chapter 8.

## **Double Standards**

*I think fat males are more accepted in Hollywood than fat females ... You have a lot of overweight male actors that make it big ... but not so many um, big women.*

*(Lauren, p.12)*

Another moral argument that is positioned in feminist discourse is that of the double standards displayed in the media. This excerpt suggests that the strict standards of beauty that are placed on women in the media, such as the pressure to lose weight that was mentioned earlier, are not placed on men, creating inequality between the sexes. The extract below suggests that these double standards are evident not only in the media, but are also found in everyday life.

*... I do think that there's heaps of pressure on us to look a certain way. And um, because you only have to be around guys or something, and watch TV and be out shopping and if a fat women walks past or sort of an ugly women it's like, "oh, did you see her!" sort of thing. As there can be like a hundred ugly guys walking past, or overweight men, and not a single comment ...*

*(Stacey, p.19)*

Therefore the double standards in the representation of women in the media are also constructed as being evident in everyday life, with personal experience being used for justification.

### **Contradictory Message**

Similar to constructing the media as producing double standards is the notion that the media gives mixed messages about body image and acceptance, due to the way that the media provides women with two conflicting constructions. The extracts below discuss how some women's magazines do contain articles that talk about accepting yourself as you are. However the pictures and advertising that are in the magazines contradict the constructions in these articles by refusing to show a diverse range of body types.

*... They do have articles on things like how dieting is bad...But the, the women that they use to illustrate ... aren't even big anyway ... it's so true that "that picture means a thousand words". And you look at the advertising and all the women in the advertising are ... exactly the same.*

*(Phillipa, p.9)*

*...And just the irony of them. Like on one page they'll be saying "you're free to be yourself, like be the woman you've always wanted to be", and this whole confidence thing. And then the next page they'll have, you know five ways to have the perfect butt for summer. And it's like so like, conflicting arguments ...*

*(Sophie, p.9)*

The idea that many women's magazines have mixed messages about women and their bodies can be interpreted as being the result of the pressure from opposing forces. Both the beauty industry and feminist arguments compete for recognition and a chance to be incorporated into women's self-concept. Of course when these two opposing positions come together on the pages of a "Cleo" or "Girlfriend" magazine for example, a confusing mix of values are displayed.

This chapter has looked at the way that women talk about women and the media. In general most of the talk was negative, discussing the way that the portrayal of women in the media is wrong and results in negative thoughts and feelings.

Even though there are suggestions of a few discourses that made these constructions of media women possible, the majority of the women interviewed constructed them as unhealthy, ugly or shallow in character. The use of both health and feminist discourses were used to justify these viewpoints. However it was not only media women who were criticized. The media itself was constructed as being unfair on women with the presentation of unrealistic beauty standards, combined with too much focus on physical appearance, which was constructed as causing depression and presenting a potentially dangerous message to young teenage girls. This type of discourse can be seen as resistant. Double standards in the representation of men and women in the media was also discussed, as well as the contradictory messages that the media presents, including the portrayal of unattainable beauty standards along side 'feel good' messages of accepting yourself as you are. The construction of beauty standards is an example of a dominant discourse, which implies that women should maintain a specific standard of physical attractiveness. This dominant discourse is achieved by the appropriation of discursive practices such as the use of cosmetics, fashion and weight-loss products. The following chapter will focus on how women talk about their use of cosmetics and fashion.

## Chapter 7

### HOW WOMEN TALK ABOUT FASHION, COSMETICS AND CONSUMERISM

During the interviews questions were asked about fashion and the women's use of cosmetics. Their reasons for wearing particular clothes and makeup were discussed along with situations where they felt as though they had dressed inappropriately. In response to these questions it was apparent that there are discourses that construct the way in which a woman should present herself to others, as well as the particular clothes and cosmetics which are needed to achieve this look.

#### Overdressing and Underdressing

The social consequences of dressing inappropriately were addressed in all the interviews, with the most common response involving the construction of overdressing or underdressing.

*...I usually sort of, in situations of going out, or going to a party and not really knowing ...I usually just go for looking as nice as possible that's not over dressed... And then you can just fit into any category really.  
(Crystal, p.5)*

In discussing the concept of overdressing this woman accounts for protecting herself from the embarrassment of dressing inappropriately by wearing casual but 'nice' clothing, so that she will not stand out in any situation that she finds herself in. Use of the word 'category' suggests that there are groups of people who wear certain types of apparel. An example of this can be seen in the following account.

*...Sometimes if I'm going to say, a party, like a 21<sup>st</sup> or something, and it's a friend of mine but I don't know the kind of people that they hang out with I'll dress up and everyone else will be wearing jeans. Or I'll be wearing jeans and they're all*

*wearing cocktail dresses... So I've had a few faux pas.*  
(Lisa, p.3)

Wearing inappropriate dress to a social gathering is justified by the uncertainty of what to expect of others who were attending. The use of the word 'faux pas' suggests that overdressing is indeed a cause for embarrassment.

*... Like I've felt maybe a bit overdressed once or twice but that's only me thinking that, like nobody else did think that...*  
(Stacey, p.6)

This excerpt constructs a distinction between the speaker's and other people's perception of how overdressed she is. This distinction implies that self-monitoring may be more intense than social monitoring.

As well as overdressing, underdressing was also constructed as being the cause of discomfort in social situations.

*... Quite often I find myself at places anywhere where I'm wearing clothes that are different from what other people wear ...like I'll walk in wearing say um, (pause) pyjama bottoms and say a funny top ... and everybody else is wearing a nice black skirt. I'll be like "uh oh, this is meant to be a dress up occasion" ... like if it's just a group of friends ...I'll be like "yep, so I didn't dress up that's cool" ...Whereas if it's around people, like a group of strangers... it's like "oh noooo." And spend probably half of the evening just hiding in the corner because I'll be just like "ah I'm a freak". (giggle)*  
(Sophie, p.3-4)

This woman accounts for an original dress by constructing her clothes as 'different from what other people wear'. This account justifies her feeling too casual in some of the places that she goes. However the embarrassment that often comes along with realizing that you stand out in a situation is only felt if those that are around are strangers rather than friends. This idea can be connected to discourses on the importance of beauty in making impressions and in attraction. It is assumed that if a person is amongst a group of friends, the need to make impressions and attract others is no longer necessary. In the

following excerpt casual attire is also the cause of sometimes feeling inappropriately dressed.

*...I guess a lot of the time I dress, not scruffily ...I just feel really um, casual most of the time. And most of the time, sometimes I go places and I think, "oh maybe I should have made a bit more effort" ...just when you just look around and you just notice that you do stand out ...I notice it but I don't feel bad about it... I like the way I dress. It's me.  
(Claudia, p.4)*

This construction of under-dressing is not seen as a source of embarrassment due to notion of comfort, and the connection made between casual dress and identity - 'it's me'. Note the initial contradiction though. The first thought that appears with the realization that she is inappropriately dressed is the recognition that she should have perhaps been a little more thoughtful in her attire. However after this initial conviction that comes with the realization that she stands out, is the knowledge that the way she dresses is an expression of her individuality, which she enjoys and therefore will not change.

*... A friend... some of her family members... had a housewarming... I was probably 14 at the time and I really didn't give a stuff so I went along in, in these scruffy ah T-shirt and shorts... and some comments were made to her were along the lines of "where did you find her? In the gutter?" (laugh)..... So that was a good hint that I was dressed inappropriately.  
(Christine, p.4)*

The majority of accounts that were given were about the perceived difference of ones own dress compared to that of others. However in this extract there is blatant acknowledgement by others that this woman did not fit in. This account clearly positions the person who is not appropriately dressed as an outsider. Along with the feeling of exclusion, are feelings of lesser worth compared to those who are dressed more formally. This can be seen in the comment "where did you find her... in the gutter?"

### **Specific Outfits**

To avoid feelings of exclusion or embarrassment, accounts were given of how specific clothes are often set aside for specific occasions.

*...I mean I often have to get something for specific things cos I don't have any like nice stuff for yeah, yeah for special things.  
(Phillipa, p.4)*

*...I don't wear heaps of makeup unless I'm going out ... and then there's clothes and things that I might wear if I'm going out, cos they're too dressy otherwise.  
(Stacey, p.4-5)*

These extracts both construct dressy clothes as those set aside for the appropriate occasion. Note in the second extract how the possibility of overdressing is mentioned by stating that some clothes would be too dressy to wear if one was not going out.

*...I have church clothes and sort of like if we're going out to dinner at a restaurant or just somewhere a bit nice ...Otherwise I just, around the house or just going into town, I just basically um, in winter just tracks, in summer just shorts.  
(Lauren, p.3)*

In this case certain situations where it is appropriate to dress up are outlined, such as attending church or going out to a restaurant. Ones home or going to the shops are not constructed as being situations for dressing up.

The discourse of 'specific outfits' constructs fashion as a means of avoiding social embarrassment. Specific clothes are worn to specific social environments in order to avoid either over or underdressing.

### **Individual Style**

The concept of having an individual style was addressed by a couple of the participants, here is an example of what was said.

*... If it was to go out, out clubbing with, something probably a bit different like, not the usual thing that you ... you know, you, you want to be differentiated a little bit ... rather than looking like another girl out on the town sort of thing ... but yet you don't want to be ha, called an absolute fruitcake either, so ..... there's a borderline to it.*  
(Christine, p.3)

Here individual style is portrayed as a desire to be different and 'stand out a bit'. As discussed in the discourse of dressing inappropriately, there is a line that is drawn however. This woman emphasizes the importance of being differentiated but not to the point where one is considered an outcast or a 'fruitcake'. Individual style therefore must align with societal norms of what is appropriate dress in any given circumstance.

To establish ones individual style while maintaining a standard of dress that is appropriate, many women discussed how they mixed together different styles from the different types of dress.

*...I don't really wear extreme clothes, to any extreme. I don't really fit into any of the main categories..... I think I just take bits from each one and mix them all together.*  
(Zaria, p.6)

Different styles of dress are referred to here as 'categories' - constructing different groups of people by placing them in certain categories of the type of clothes they wear. Therefore the different styles that are worn construct different categories of people. By discussing how she does not wear extreme clothes, this woman suggests that she is different from those who adhere strictly to a certain style.

*...I'm more interested in wearing clothes that feel like me... it's actually not in any particular category. Like I'd buy clothes from an op shop, I'd buy clothes from a really trendy store, I'd buy clothes from, I never used to buy clothes from like K-mart or DeKa or even Glassons and stuff...but it doesn't bother me now. I kind of mix and match everything... I've been in phases where I wouldn't wear anything but labels, like certain labels and things like that. But, but it takes a while, a lot of trial and error to figure out what you like.*  
(Anna, p.7-8)

Mixing and matching is constructed here as finding clothes that suit ones personality or 'feel like me'. Once again the term 'category' is used to refer to the different styles of clothes available. Some examples of these are given, such as op shop clothes, clothes from trendy stores or clothes from discount department stores. Finding individual style is referred to as discovering what one likes.

### **Modern/Stylish**

The desire to be stylish was discussed by the participants as one of the priorities when buying clothes.

*...Like to stay sort of semi mod. I'm not sort of all into being high class but... I like to try and keep up with things... Cos I work with youth too, I find to keep them interested and so that I'm not out of date I actually try and keep in with that too...I actually think that is an influence ... in why I dress like I do.  
(Crystal, p.2)*

The need to remain stylish is justified in this account because of involvement with youth. It is implied that youth are more focused on fashion and being up to date, therefore wearing modern clothing is a way of making sure that they can relate to her.

Because of the importance that is sometimes placed on being in fashion, those who are not are often made to feel excluded.

*...I got to high school and you have the first mufti day and I didn't realize that it was such a big deal. And I just cruised in, in like, I don't know I wore some funny pants and some funny top...I didn't even think about it really. And yeah I got teased really badly for it. And yeah, it was quite insane because yeah, the same things that I was teased for then, were the things that made me kind of "trendy" by the time I got to fifth form.  
(laugh) And all of a sudden it was fashionable. And it was like "oh wow, but I'm still the same".  
(Claudia, p.3-4)*

This woman's account of her first ever 'mufti day' at high school has similarities with the earlier claim made by a different speaker about the importance that youth place on being

fashionable. The notion of how fashion can change is constructed here by the way that even though this woman's dress sense did not alter, as the fashions changed so did others perception of her change. In the extract below social sanctioning is feared by the speaker. The feeling she was not 'styley enough' is constructed as being inappropriately dressed in this particular setting.

*L: ... I've been invited to recent parties and I thought that I didn't have clothes that were the right kind of, to wear. Um say, not styley enough.*

*I: So that kind of, did it make you hesitate in even wanting to go or?*

*L: ...yeah. Just I suppose certain groups of people um, would judge you on what you wear and whether you're styley or not.*

*(Lisa, p.5)*

The modern/stylish discourse is therefore not only constructed as being important in creating positive impressions on others but also in the way that not being modern/stylish can lead to social exclusion in particular social circles.

### **Clothes for Attraction**

Similar to the construction that beauty is used for attracting the opposite sex, so are certain types of dress used for attraction.

*...You feel really vulnerable especially in like feminine type clothes... Feminine type clothes I think of clothes that are kind of built to sort of attract men.*

*(Phillipa, p.5)*

Feminine clothes are constructed here as being the types of clothes that are often used to attract men. However in the following extract, the way that dressing up and wearing makeup does attract the opposite sex is seen as being a source of anxiety. This woman perceives the times she goes out and she doesn't dress up as being more enjoyable due to how she understands others, particularly men, as relating to her.

*And I realize now that the times when I really think about dressing up, putting on makeup and going out trying to look good, are the times I feel the most nervous... I'll probably feel nervous because I think I feel more hit on. Either guys hit on me more or, or I feel*

*like they are when I'm talking to them...And the times where I've gone "oh yep, I'm going out", and walked out in whatever I'm wearing, gone out and had a really great time. Because it's just like you're meeting people... it doesn't seem like the ulterior motive, doesn't seem just to get scored.*  
(Sophie, p.4)

Use of the words 'get scored' and 'ulterior motive', suggest that when women 'dress up' for other people, especially men, others perceive the reason for this is to attract attention. Therefore this makes the speaker feel uncomfortable because she believes that men are reacting to this unspoken message by trying to 'hit on' her.

### **Clothes Reflect Character**

Many respondents believed that how a person dressed had a lot to do with their personalities as well as their interests.

*...I don't actually set aside a certain way that I want to look...but I definitely think it does express your identity.*  
(Phillipa, p.6)

This extract suggests that even though a person does not try to fit into a certain 'category' by wearing specific types of clothes, their identity will still be portrayed in how they dress. By constructing fashion in this manner, what a woman wears can be one way of expressing herself. This is exactly what the following extracts refer to.

*...When I was a teenager... I'd try different clothes and things like that to reflect my personality then.*  
(Christine, p.5)

*...I suppose casual. I dress casual cos I like to be considered as a casual easy-going type of person. I spose that works that way.*  
(Crystal, p.5)

Because many construe a person's dress sense as expressing their interests and personality, attire is often used as the indicator of potential friends in social situations where few people are known.

*...I identify with other people who sort of dress the same way as me...Like if I go into a room of twenty people and one person's wearing similar clothes as to what I am, I'm more likely to move towards them and talk to them... I definitely think there's a certain stereotype that goes with how you dress and I just try to, I probably identify with that - I go "yep, I'm into those kinds of things as well".*  
(Sophie, p.6-7)

The idea that the type of clothing a person chooses to wear reflects a person's character is evident in the way these women talk about their personal experiences. Some women chose clothing that they considered expressed their character, while others did not make a conscious effort but still constructed clothes as portraying the type of person they are.

### **Fashion is Shallow**

In opposition to the argument that dress sense reflects character is the belief that a person's clothing has little to do with who they are as a person.

*Before people get to know you they might think you are going to be about 'this' because of the way you look and stuff. But I think that when you're older..... you know that the material side of things is just bullshit anyway...*  
(Anna, p.4)

This extract acknowledges the discourse that clothes are related to character but denies that there is any truth in the relationship. The former construction of clothes is construed as something that only younger people adhere to, and as one grows older they realize that material possessions are irrelevant.

*...Excuse my expression, but I saw what bullshit it was... when I was on my ... course you'd see all sorts of people ...They could be the, you know, the biggest bitch or the nicest person and it would have nothing to do with what they would wear. So I stopped judging other people in that way and ...I suppose I stopped judging myself in that way as well.*  
(Christine, p.5)

This woman uses personal experience as the basis for her belief that what a person wears has nothing to do with their personality. Interests are not referred to, but it is suggested

here that judging someone's personality based on what they wear will lead to a false understanding. Once this theory is discovered, this woman decides to stop trying to portray her personality through what she wears because she knows that this is a false assumption.

## **CONSUMERISM**

In order to conform to current beauty standards, women talked about having to purchase particular products and clothes that created a certain look. The following section discusses the implications of relying on the consumer market for physical attractiveness.

### **Cost**

The excessive cost of some clothes is discussed here as making fashion available to the rich only and not for people, like students, who have a minimum income.

*...I really like clothes but I always buy second hand clothes, or not always but generally because ... I don't have the money ...I think like the price of them is ridiculous. Like you can't if you're a student look at those and think "oh I'll just go down and buy one of them"...*

*(Phillipa, p.3)*

*...I would probably buy more clothes if I had more money.*

*(Anna, p.5)*

*I: ...Do you buy clothes very often?*

*C: No, but that's only cos I don't have any money. (laugh)*

*(Crystal, p.2)*

A popular construction presented the desire for more clothes but the high cost combined with one's financial situation meant that this was not possible. In cases such as this, the fashion and cosmetic industry can be seen as being responsible for inducing a state of desire for products that many people cannot afford.

### **Buying Out of Need**

Although many women desired more clothes, they discussed how they usually only bought garments when it was necessary.

*..... 90% of my buying would be out of need.  
(Crystal, p.3)*

*My motivation to buy clothes? ... I buy things if like I really need them...Otherwise I won't buy them.  
(Lauren, p.2)*

*... If I'm shopping for clothes it's cos I specifically need something... Very rare that I'll just buy it on impulse.  
(Christine, p.2)*

The construction of 'buying on impulse' suggests that there are different ways of buying clothes, which have different motivations behind them. Buying out of need positions one as having control over what is being bought. However buying on impulse signifies lack of will power and buying out of want rather than need. This type of impulse buying can be related back to the concept of retailers inducing a state of desire in people so that they will purchase their goods.

### **Wanting Everything**

This extract clearly displays the way that shoppers can experience the desire to purchase goods that they don't particularly need.

*...I stay away from the shops ...If I go shopping I start getting that feeling of like wanting everything again...but yeah, I do get that greed thing happening as soon as I go back into the shops.  
(Anna, p.4)*

This woman's comment about how she stays away from the shops suggests that she is aware of how her 'greed' is context specific. The reasoning behind staying away from shops signifies self-control. However greed is constructed as something that is uncontrollable once she goes near the clothing stores.

*...I mean if I had money and just decided that on the odd occasion that I do have a few extra dollars and go for a binge, I'll get something just because I really like that.*  
(Crystal, p.3)

This extract constructs buying on impulse or 'bingeing', as something that is done occasionally as a type of treat. This type of unrestrained behavior is portrayed as being a source of pleasure, due to the way that it is constructed as an indulgence.

### **Feeling Guilt For Buying**

Not all women found it easy to spend their money on things that they needed.

*...I find it easier to spend money on other people than I do on myself...I've actually been a lot better at it lately. I will actually buy clothes but I never used to. But ...I do put it off, when I need clothes I do put it off.*  
(Lauren, p.1-2)

This extract portrays a notion that is closely bound with the idea of femininity. Those who are considered feminine often find it difficult to pay attention to their own needs and would rather look after the needs of others. This can clearly be seen in this passage when the speaker states that she finds it easier to spend money on others than to spend money on herself, even when what was being bought was a necessity rather than a luxury.

### **Fashion Doesn't Cater for Larger Sizes**

Whether buying as a treat or out of necessity, some women found clothes shopping a difficult endeavor.

*Since I had Tamsin it's really, really, really hard trying to find the same things that I like ...that fit me.*  
(Zaria, p.2)

*...There are probably certain things that I would like to wear but I wouldn't because I know they'd just look hideous on me because of my size.*  
(Crystal, p.5)

The first speaker accounts for the difficulty that was discovered in buying clothes when her body changed after childbirth, as the clothes that this woman likes are not available in sizes that fit her different body shape. The second extract suggests a similar construction of clothes as being liked by women who wear larger sizes but not designed to look good on them. The excerpt below constructs shopping for garments as an unpleasant experience because it is difficult to find clothes that fit and look good.

*...With my body shape it's difficult to go into a shop and find something that fits and looks good ...I've found buying clothes to be quite a, not a good um, self confidence building experience.....And when I'm looking through magazines... the people that they have them on you think "oh that's not going to look like that on me anyway".*  
(Phillipa, p.3)

Advertising is pointed out here as also creating negative thoughts, due to the way that the models used in them are usually the only people that may look good in the particular clothes being promoted.

### **Clothes and Creativity**

Connected with the discourse that clothes express a person's identity, is the idea that people use clothes to be creative.

*...Most of the clothes I've got...I've had um, made for me...Me and my mum make them together and stuff ...I like to make nice things... creating clothes, like thinking of what I want and then having them afterwards and going "oh yeah, this is all mine". Like yeah, I'd love to have all of my clothes just being that I'd made myself.*  
(Claudia, p.1-2)

This extract clearly constructs the enjoyment that this woman receives from making her own clothes. The position of ownership that is adopted - 'this is all mine' - is portrayed as being part of the reason why making rather than buying her own clothes is such a source of satisfaction.

*...Yeah I do love to go op shopping and pick up bits and pieces. I'm sort of like a magpie ...I like variety...I like to look for stuff that is different and colors I like and certain styles*

*I'm into. For stuff I can create new shapes and that with.  
(Sophie, p.2-3)*

Even though this woman chooses to buy her clothes, she still perceives this experience as an expression of creativity, due to the way that she looks for colour and styles with which she can create new garments.

In this chapter an analysis has identified various discursive constructions used by the women interviewed to explain fashion and consumerism. The women's accounts clearly suggest there are particular personal and social consequences for those who do not adhere to the dominant discursive practices in this society, for example feeling embarrassed and excluded from certain situations. However it is very difficult for many to adhere to the standard of appropriate dress due to the fashion and beauty industries failure to cater for larger sizes and those who are economically disadvantaged. Of those who do not use fashion and cosmetics to fit into social settings, are women who prefer to construct fashion and cosmetics as tools to expressing their creativity as well as their personality.

## Chapter 8

### HOW WOMEN TALK ABOUT FEMININITY AND BEING A WOMAN

This chapter explores the construction of what it means to be a woman, and how femininity is viewed by women in their late teens and early twenties.

#### **Pink/Soft/Weak/Quiet**

The majority of women used a discourse of femininity as a stereotypic character, which constructed traditional female qualities as being quiet, soft, and weak.

*... Words that spring to mind when I think of feminine are things like um, like just totally off the top of my head - things like light, soft, gentle, warm um, yeah, things along those lines.*

*(Claudia, p.15)*

This extract suggests that femininity is characterized by qualities that are culturally and stereotypically associated with being a woman. The words 'light', 'soft', 'gentle' and 'warm' all have positive connotations. The word 'soft' was mentioned frequently in discussing femininity. The extract below discusses the culturally constructed nature of being feminine and the efforts that a woman can make to become so.

*... I suppose being quiet and um stuff, is more feminine to me than being more extravert and stuff...I remember um, when I was younger trying to be more feminine kind of thing. ...cos somebody said 'you walk like a boy'. ...I didn't quite get that. But I just tried to don't know, be a bit slower and softer and ... I think softer yeah, women are more softer, pretty much.*

*(Lisa, p.15)*

Being feminine is constructed here as something that a woman should be. When it was pointed out to this woman that she 'walked like a boy', although she was young and

didn't fully understand the issue at the time, she changed her style of walking to be 'softer', and thus more feminine.

*I: So what at the moment, if someone says feminine what does that mean to you?*

*A: (pause) It would mean, like I still think of the old type meaning and it makes me cringe cos I think of lace and frills and pink. (giggle) ...And fluttering eyelashes and passiveness....It has connotations of being a wuss and not being that confident and, and looking out for everyone else's needs other than your own... (Anna, p.20)*

The stereotypical nature of being feminine is constructed here. Even though this woman did not enjoy viewing femininity in this way, it was readily available to her. Pink, a color traditionally associated with girls is mentioned along with lace and frills, a thing that young girls traditionally wear. Qualities such as passiveness and self-sacrifice are mentioned, and are constructed as being negative because they inhibit women from their full potential - 'not being that confident' - compelling them to deny their own needs.

### **Nurturing/Caring/Sensitive**

Qualities that are needed for looking after the needs of others, such as being nurturing, caring and sensitive, were often discussed, but not always as being attributes that women had, rather than men.

*...Everybody has some feminine and some masculine in them ... The soft spoken side, the feeling side of you almost, is your feminine side...Your masculine side is, I suppose it's just the strong side, the logic... (Lisa, p.17)*

In this extract both men and women are seen as being masculine as well as feminine. The culturally constructed nature of masculinity and femininity are presented here in the way that culture has named strength and logic as being masculine and emotions as being feminine. The following extracts however construct the feminine qualities that are nurturing and sensitivity, to be intrinsic to all women.

*Nurturing something. That's a real womanly instinct, to want to take care of something and look after something.*

*(Anna, p.19-20)*

*...I think mostly just like, being sensitive towards people and like, caring. And I think that's pretty much the only thing...listening to them and stuff. I think that's, that really is more a woman quality than a mans..... Like we are naturally more nurturing and sensitive, those sort of things.*

*(Stacey, p.15-16)*

Use of the words 'instinct' and 'naturally' positions these women as taking the nature rather than the nurture side of the argument. To imply that qualities such as sensitivity and caring are intrinsic to women can and has been used by many people to argue that women should therefore be responsible for childcare and the needs of others, because they are 'naturally' better at doing it. This discourse could also be used as part of a feminist discourse which re-values feminine qualities.

### **Nature vs. Nurture**

The debate over whether femininity is an innate quality or whether it is something that women learn to be was a popular topic brought up during the interviews.

*...You're either feminine or you're not feminine and I think it comes from your upbringing and what your parental role models were like ...*

*(Crystal, p.16)*

This extract uses the importance of modeling and parental influence to account for whether a woman will be feminine or not. The suggestion that it is possible for a woman not to be feminine emphasizes the social nature of the argument. In the following excerpt nurture is also seen as being the reason why girls take on 'feminine' interests and boys have 'masculine' interests.

*...But I know I've been conditioned. But what disturbs me the most is going into a childhood, a, a children's toy store ...Everything is gearing a little girl to get a mate when they're older...Like, it's all, like beautifying things. Like little mirrors and little combs and little rings...it's all dolls and things ...boys are bought up to be able to learn*

*about science, um, geography, technology, um. All their toys are about action and doing stuff...*

*(Anna, p.21-22)*

The idea of conditioning is seen here as having a negative influence on children. This can be seen in the use of the word 'disturb'. The lack of choice that is given to children at such a young age is constructed as troublesome.

*...Some women are more feminine all of the time it's just ... whether it's just something that they've practiced all their life so this is how they act or whether it's just something that's pulled out of them. That is, they happen to per chance be a woman who this is how they are naturally and also is the stereotypical, stereotype of femininity.*

*(Sophie, p.19)*

In this excerpt the nature versus nurture argument has not been resolved. The two possibilities are presented as being opposing ways of understanding the same concept. Therefore women have access to both the nature and nurture accounts of femininity, but they use them differently depending on the function of the argument, for example to construct women as caring and sensitive, or as experiencing or constrained by a limiting number of roles.

### **Stereotypical Women**

When asked 'what do you do that makes you feel like a woman?' a lot of the women knew what traditional 'women's work' was, but admitted that they did not feel 'womanly' doing it.

*I can't think what else I do – womanly. The dishes. (giggle) No it's not. That's not womanly.*

*(Zaria, p.20)*

*...What do I do? I cook on protest... but that's classed as a stupid women's job – I don't know why. I don't think that makes me feel like a woman – that's stupid.*

*(Lauren, p.15)*

Both of these women refer to household chores as things that are stereotypically women's work. 'Stereotypic' refers to the dominant western discourses on femininity. Note how all of the responses referred to work and not to other things such as leisure activities. In the extract below cooking and gardening are seen as enjoyable, but even though these things are often perceived as women's activities, as they center around the home, they still do not make one feel like a woman.

*...I've thought about it and like ...I like cooking and gardening and stuff like that, which people perceive as being a really womanly thing to do. But I don't, that doesn't make me feel like a woman.*

*(Stacey, p.15)*

### **Being a Wife/Mother**

The roles of being a wife and mother have always been emphasized as women's responsibilities in family life.

*I: ...so do you think of yourself as being feminine?*

*S: ...I do now. I wouldn't have before but I do now.*

*I: What changed your mind?*

*S: ...now I'm a wife it's like the ultimate in 'female'.*

*(Stacey, p.17)*

This woman's recent marriage is used to account for changes in the way that she perceives herself as a woman. Taking on the role of a wife is seen as being feminine and 'the ultimate in female'.

*...I guess I'm a good mum. That makes me feel ... like a woman. Um, pleasing my husband makes me feel like a woman.*

*(Lauren, p.15)*

Doing well in her role as a mother and wife is constructed here as being womanly. This is also related to the construction of femininity as looking after the needs of others, particularly men.

## **Women's Activities**

Talking and bonding with friends was a popular response to the question 'what do you do that makes you feel like a woman?'

*I: What else do you think that you would do to make yourself feel like a woman, yourself?*

*L: ... Watching girly, like um, chick flicks... Eat chocolate... Go talk at a café with my friends, paint pictures...*

*(Lisa, p.18)*

*... I've got like really girly friends that I hang around with that like going shopping.*

*... Like when we went to Wellington the other day and all went shopping. ... That was a girly thing, made me feel like a lady.*

*(Bridget, p.9)*

*... I like to paint my nails with my friends or sit around chatting...or um, going up town or just doing things that guys wouldn't do... going to um, girly movies, as the boys say.*

*(Lauren, p.16)*

Doing activities that men would not do is portrayed as being feminine here. In the last extract what is not masculine is seen as being feminine. The construction of particular activities which are not considered work, for example talking with friends and shopping, are associated with the words 'girly' and 'lady', which can be tied back with the 'stereotype' of femininity and things that women are expected to want to partake in.

## **Intuition**

Intuition was constructed as a positive quality that women possessed.

*... Women tend to have quite active inner lives and there's a lot of potential for creativity and things like that. But it's been suppressed because of all the stereotypes and things that have been placed on women... in terms of intuition and things like that.....*

*(Anna, p.21)*

In this account intuition is constructed as being something that has been suppressed by the false stereotypes that have been created about women. The suggestion that women possess 'active inner lives' means that things such as creativity are a result. Because intuition is constructed here as resulting from ones inner life, it can be constructed as

something that is innate. In the following passage intuition is referred to as a skill that women learn to develop.

*C: Things like I hate to say it – natural instinct. Partly because, especially when it comes to judging... first impressions or instincts towards people are, you know vibes and that, probably because we've got to be a little more onto it. I mean we are at a much higher risk of being harmed than what males are...*

*I: Intuition*

*C: yeah, intuition, that's the one. We've got to listen to that. Where as guys don't need to be quite so onto it so they perhaps don't develop it...*

*(Christine, p.14)*

Due to the way that women are at 'risk of harm' intuition is constructed here as a necessary tool for survival. Intuition is defined as making sound judgements about people and listening to 'vibes' which help give women discernment.

## **Creativity**

Creativity was emphasized as being a feminine quality.

*And anything creative and stuff is a big part of like, being a woman. Expressing your inner emotions, in whatever way. Poetry, um, yeah.*

*(Anna, p.20)*

Creativity is constructed here as being a means of expressing ones feelings. In relation to the stereotype, feminine as synonymous with emotions and sensitivity, this extract is consistent in constructing femininity as meaning 'being a woman'.

*...They're sort of quite lovely, quite talented, quite into, like probably quite creative, quite arty, quite um, musical... sort of being able to pick up a guitar and play it and sing a song. But then put it down and go and do something quite, quite adept as well.*

*(Sophie, p.19)*

In the discussion of what type of woman is feminine, this extract constructs the idea that creativity is a big part of who a woman is. Talents such as music and arts are mentioned along with the ability to be quite diverse. Stereotypic qualities are also discussed as part of being feminine – for example 'quite lovely'.

## **Spirituality**

Consistent with the idea that women are more in touch with their inner lives and emotions is the construction of spirituality as being appealing to women.

*... Perhaps being in touch a little more with our spiritual side. Um, I'm not saying that guys can't be spiritual but quite often in a different way... um, including the feelings and all the rest of it.*  
(Christine, p.15)

Note the association of a kind of 'feminine' spirituality, which is different from men's because it is specifically 'emotional'. The linking of emotionality with women has been a traditional construction of femininity.

## **Dancing**

A couple of women mentioned dancing as something that they do that makes them feel womanly.

*...Dancing's one... Cos woman are kind of more flowing and you get your whole hips into it and your whole body and stuff.*  
(Anna, p.19)

Dancing is construed as being a way of focusing on ones body, its movement and form. The idea of women as flowing is consistent with the construction of femininity as soft and gentle.

*...Dancing is something I do and I love. And I think I love, and I feel very feminine, womanly when I dance...I'd love to be a ballet dancer sometimes ...yeah like I just love the, the way they control their bodies and they dance and move. And it's so expressive and floating and beautiful.*  
(Sophie, p.18)

The words 'expressive', 'floating' and 'beautiful', are all consistent with the discourse on femininity as emotional, feeling, and soft. Focus is also placed on ballet dancers bodies and the way that they move.

## **Girly-Girls and Guy-Girls**

The opposite definitions of 'girly guys' and 'guy girls', were discussed by some women.

*Z: ...Like I think I was a bit of a tomboy when I was a kid as well...I wouldn't call myself a girly-girl...*

*I: What would a girly-girl be like?*

*Z: I don't know. Um, (pause) giggly, ditsy, (giggle) It's hard to say.  
(Zaria, p.26)*

*... Because heaps of my friends are guys so I sort of class myself as a guy-girl. Like you know, I play touch with the boys and like, go out and play golf and stuff with them. But then I've got like really girly friends that I hang around with that like going shopping.  
(Bridget, p.9)*

In the first extract being a 'tomboy' is constructed as being the opposite of a 'girly girl', which is presented as being 'giggly and ditsy', characteristics that are associated with traditional ways of talking about femininity. In the second extract being a 'guy girl' is accounted for in the way that this woman associates mainly with males. Activities such as playing rugby and golf are also seen as contributing to this woman's identity as a 'guy-girl'. However it is emphasized that being a 'guy-girl' does not inhibit one from associating with women and doing 'feminine activities' such as shopping.

*I am pretty much a girly girl... I like pretty, little, cute (laugh) ...girly things. I like sparkly things and..... I don't really have a problem with that.  
(Anna, p.21)*

The way that this woman states that she does not 'have a problem' with being a 'girly girl' suggests that others may see being feminine as negative.

## **Pampering**

Contrary to the construction of femininity as looking after everybody else's needs but ones own, the idea of 'pampering' oneself was discussed by several women.

*Um, what do I do that makes me feel like a woman? (pause) I spend lots of time getting dressed. I don't like um, put makeup on and stuff. But I spend time moisturizing my face... I like to feel nice. And moisturizing my face makes me feel nice.*  
(Lauren, p.15)

*...Like I love like... moisturizing and brushing your hair or playing with your hair. I love doing that kind of, like just putting moisturizer, like just sitting in your room and just spending like just half an hour just pampering yourself with moisturizer and like plucking your eyebrows, and nice things like that. Face washes and back rubs... pampering things. I really like that.*  
(Sophie, p.18)

'Pampering' is constructed in the last two extracts as being a way of feeling 'nice' and focusing on ones body, making it look and feel good. These women's attention to constructing feeling 'good' as relating to their body is similar to the 'looking good/feeling good' construction discussed in an earlier chapter. However this construction is quite different in the way that it focuses, not so much on how the body looks, but on how it feels and the enjoyment that is received from this feeling.

*... Yeah, looking after myself a lot...It's something I like to do. I like to have long baths and self -massage and stuff like that.*  
(Claudia, p.15)

This extract constructs the focus and attention on ones body – 'pampering' - as a way of looking after oneself, as well as something that is enjoyable.

### **Feminine Equals Physical Appearance**

When asked 'what does the word feminine mean to you?' some women discussed the close relationship between their identity as a woman and their physical appearance.

*It probably comes back to that really traditional like be seen but not heard thing. Like it's always the emphasis is on the physical appearance for women. Whereas for men it's what you do. It's what you've accomplished, it's how much money you earn, all that really kind of practical stuff.*  
(Phillipa, p.17)

*...My view of femininity is probably very much just, the wordly view ...wearing feminine clothes ...taking pride in your appearance...But I mean, is that, that's not really female, it's just something that we've...it's been thrust on us as...you know, yeah – females are supposed to look nice, so that's it.*  
(Stacey, p.16)

Both of these extracts discuss the way that western society places a lot of emphasis on women's bodies. The second extract constructs women as being different from men in how they are given attention for their accomplishments. In the first extract the cliché 'be seen but not heard', usually related to children, is seen as being applicable to grown women also. The second extract constructs this view of women as being 'thrust upon us' and women have had to accept this definition even though this is not really what it means to be a woman. These extracts draw upon the theory that women's identity has been defined by men, a definition which women do not agree on themselves.

*But at the same time there is also very feminine in a positive way, as in I'm a female, I'm sexual um, feminine as in all the good qualities that go with being a female.*  
(Christine, p.17)

Sexuality is closely linked here to being 'feminine', which is seen as being one of the many positive 'qualities that go with being a female'. Sexuality is constructed as being a positive association with being a woman. Sexuality is a dominant discourse which defines 'feminine as physical appearance', the discourse discussed previously.

### **Adornment**

The focus on body was not only discussed in negative terms or in terms of sexuality. Many women, no matter how hard they tried, could not resist talking about adornment and dressing up as being a major component of what they do to make themselves feel like a woman.

*What else would I do to feel like a chick? ... Dress up and wear makeup and stuff.*  
(Lisa, p.18)

*I think I'm a feminine person... I like to dress up and feel nice and pretty and I don't wear jeans all the time. I hardly ever wear jeans actually.*  
(Lauren, p.17)

The above extract constructs dressing up as synonymous with 'feeling nice'. Wearing jeans is seen as being neither 'feminine' nor 'dressing up'.

*...I used to feel like a woman when I wore higher shoes and things like that. Cos I was a bit taller ... I paint my nails and things even though I've got none...I like getting my hair done and things. Getting my hair dyed.*  
(Anna, p.18-19)

In this extract wearing high heels is constructed as being 'womanly' due to the way that it makes one 'a bit taller'. Therefore being tall is constructed as 'feminine'. Paying attention to one's physical appearance, specifically hair and nails, is seen as making one feel like a woman.

### **Feminine Equals Beautiful**

An extension of the adornment discourse is the discourse that equates femininity with beauty.

*Beautiful goes in there as well... Yeah, it's such a beautiful sounding word as well isn't it? Hasn't it just got the most wonderful kind of ...Feminine, yeah it's beautiful.*  
(Claudia, p.15)

*...I hate to think that I think this way. But my first thought when I think "ok, what does a feminine person look like?" She's attractive and she wears a dress, and um, she's even got blonde hair I don't know why that is...*  
(Crystal, p.15)

In the extract above being feminine is associated with a particular type of dress and even hair colour. This woman feels bad about her initial construction of femininity and she is clear about the way that it is closely linked with physical appearance. This can be seen when she says - 'ok, what does a feminine person look like?'

*...To me it says something about softness, and womanly and curves. And like a certain beauty and a kindness, and a loveliness.*

*(Sophie, p.18)*

Along with the traditional discourse of feminine as being kind and soft, is the construction of these qualities as being beautiful.

### **Opposite to Male**

Many women found that being feminine was simply the opposite of being masculine or male.

*...Being 'feminine' is more um, probably having feminine characteristics or things that are more, not um, guys aren't into...*

*(Lisa, p.15)*

*I: ...What does being feminine mean to you?*

*C: My first reaction is to think that it's the opposite of masculine.*

*(Crystal, p.14)*

*...It's the opposite to being male.*

*(Lauren, p.17)*

This comparison of femininity as being the opposite to masculinity and 'what guys are into' has implications for women's identity and the way in which it has not been formed by women themselves but reflects their difference (and exclusion) from men and masculine activities.

### **Femininity is Devalued**

The way in which femininity is devalued was discussed by some of the women as part of their definition of what it means to be a woman.

*S: ..... Because I had brothers and ha, if I ever wanted you know, to watch anything sappy, or you know, if I ever said anything that was a female comment, I'd just get*

*jumped on and you know, mocked for it. So, I just sort of became one of the guys, and yeah.*

*I: So it definitely wasn't sort of something that was valued? Like femininity and feminine qualities?*

*S: Not, not really. Well..... well, not by my brothers (laugh)... Not really by males, I don't think.*

*(Stacey, p.18)*

*I: Yeah so do you think it's used in a positive way or a negative way more often?*

*C: (pause) Probably in a negative way more often. But I, probably these days associate with a lot of males and I think it's possibly their views rubbing off on me a little bit.*

*(Christine, p.17)*

Both of these women highlight how feminine qualities and activities are viewed negatively by the males that they know. In the first extract, this devaluing forced the speaker to 'become one of the guys' and therefore deny her femininity to avoid the mockery that she received because of it. The second extract also highlights the strength of these negative convictions in the way that negative evaluations of femininity have 'rubbed off' and become a discourse that this woman now uses.

## **Feminism**

Having a feminist viewpoint was constructed by some women as contributing to their identity and the way they account for things.

*...Now kind of, yeah I've kind of started to see things from a feminist perspective heaps more it's interesting to apply that to everything. And I don't know if that makes me feel like a woman but it's like a real woman centered view on everything.*

*(Phillipa, p.14)*

In the following extract being feminine is constructed as being extremely different to being feminist. Different ways of constructing feminine identity are highlighted here and the way that every view can be evaluated either in a positive or negative light.

*...There's two different ways of looking at a female – either feminine or feminist... Which are two different things. And both of them can be held in a negative light and both of them can be in positive lights. But it, it seems that it's hard to find females which have a*

*nice balance of the two.*  
(Christine, p.17)

The construction of all feminisms as being relatively homogenous is displayed here, with the lack of talk about any different types of feminist standpoint. There is also an implication that a 'balance' is difficult but would be desirable ('nice').

### **Respect and Pride**

Although the way that femininity is devalued was discussed by some, many women found that being a female was a source of pride for them.

*I: ...So do you think of yourself as being feminine?*

*P: ...I think of myself as being a woman and I do take pride in that. But I don't know if that does mean that I'm feminine.*

(Phillipa, p.15)

In the extract above, having pride in oneself as a woman is not necessarily associated with femininity, perhaps due to the stereotypical definitions that surround the word.

*I: ...So what does being feminine mean to you? ...*

*B: ...I guess being able to be yourself and express yourself as, as an individual.*

(Bridget, p.9)

*I: ...What else do you do that makes you feel like a woman?*

*C: .....I have a great deal of respect for myself. And I be very independent ...it gives me great deal of satisfaction when I have people seeing that in me as well ... That actually makes me feel really feminine...when I see especially males respect me ...for being a female as well. Not in the way that they respect me cos I'm one of the boys...*

(Christine, p.13)

A concept that differs from traditional constructs of femininity is independence. In both of the extracts above independence and freedom of expression are constructed as relating to femininity. In the second excerpt independence gives a 'great deal of satisfaction' to those who claim it. This satisfaction implicates the way that an independent attitude can gain respect from men, who were constructed earlier as being the ones who devalued

femininity. However the valuing of femininity with relation to traditionally 'masculine' qualities like independence may be problematic due to the way that women are not valued unless they act like men. This possibility is recognized at the end of the second quote.

Strength of character was also discussed in the definition of femininity.

*I: ...What does being feminine mean to you?*

*C: ...My first thought, um, is that somebody who's nurturing and um, softly spoken and yet on the other hand strong. I think um, definitely don't think it means to be weak...As in they'll stand up for what they believe ...Because there are just you know, so many things that women do that require so much I think...*

*(Crystal, p.14)*

This woman constructs a feminine woman as someone who has the 'traditional' characteristics of being 'nurturing' and 'softly spoken'. However these qualities are not constructed as being a 'weak'. This soft and nurturing side is compared to the 'other' side of women which involves 'standing up for what they believe in'. The roles that women take on are constructed here as requiring strength and diversity.

*... strong minded, like know what they want but at the same time aren't really pushy. Like they'll ask for it and expect it. And they're fair...*

*(Sophie, p.19)*

This construction of femininity suggests that while a feminine woman is 'strong minded' she is also fair, a quality that relates back to the 'traditional' views on femininity, as taking account of others.

### **Don't Need to do Anything to be a Woman**

Only one of the eleven women interviewed constructed gender as being irrelevant to the activities that one participates in and the way one feels.

*... I don't think I've ever had to do anything to make me feel like a woman ... There's boys and girls in our family but we've all done the same things and played the same*

*sports you know... And all been treated the same way... We've never had "oh you're a guy you have to do these things, you're a girl you have to do these things."*  
(Bridget, p.8)

This extract focuses on upbringing and family as the main reason why gender is irrelevant to the speaker. Because her brothers and sisters were 'all treated the same way' by her parents, she now constructs gender as being unrelated to how she lives her life.

### **Never Thought of it Before Now**

When the concept of femininity was brought up in the interview many women claimed that they had never really thought of it before as being a component of who they were.

*I haven't really thought about femininity as a concept that much. But what I do to make myself feel like a woman? I don't really, I don't really consciously think about it I don't think. I think I'm just me*  
(Phillipa, p.13)

*...Especially with like the whole thing these days of trying to be so equal. You try not to think about being a woman and the feminine side of things a lot.*  
(Zaria, p.25)

This excerpt focuses on society's new emphasis on equality as being the reason for not specifically focusing on 'being a woman'. The construction of gender equality is based on the assumption that women are now equal to men. This suggests that they were not equal in the past and assumes that 'man' is the standard by which women are judged.

*I know I'm a woman and I do woman things. And yeah, but I couldn't say what makes me feel like a woman.*  
(Lauren, p.16)

This extract states that being 'a woman' is not something that is clear cut. Even though the speaker is aware of the activities she does that make her a woman, she is still not sure whether it is these things that make her 'feel like a woman'.

In conclusion, femininity and being a woman has been constructed as being both a positive and a negative phenomenon. Most of the women who constructed femininity as being negative relied heavily on traditional and stereotypical constructions of the word. For those women who viewed femininity as relating to independence and strength of character, a more positive evaluation of femininity was used and pride in being a woman was expressed. Therefore what discourse a woman uses can be seen as closely relating to her identity and how she sees herself as a whole.

## Chapter 9

### SUMMARY

The analysis that I have provided in the previous chapters has identified various discursive constructions used by women aged 18-25 to explain the way that they understand beauty, the female body, the representation of women in the media and femininity. As such it provides an insight into the meaning and significance of what it means to be a woman and the part that physical attractiveness plays in this. Throughout the analysis my focus was on language and the discursive tools that are used to construct meaning, relating how language has an immediate effect on how we think, act and shape our identity. Emphasis was placed, not on the women's experiences themselves, but how they constructed these experiences and the consequences of these constructions in shaping their behavior and future experiences in the world. Of course when looking at the social construction of femininity and the female body there is always a need to place analysis in a cultural context. All of the women that I interviewed were of Pakeha or European descent; either young mothers, students, employees or job seekers. Therefore what was discussed by these women is a representation of the discourses that are available to them in these social groups. It is also important to point to the assumptions that I brought into the research being a white, middle class woman, coming from a feminist-poststructuralist perspective. This analysis is therefore a partial reading but I hope that enough 'pieces' of talk were given to enable the reader to determine the 'reliability' of this reading.

In the first chapter the discursive constructions used to account for the importance of beauty were discussed. The way that the majority of women constructed looking good as feeling good, reflects the strength and prevalence of how women construct their physical appearance as the basis of how they feel about themselves as a whole. This finding gives support to Du Plessis and Hire's (1998) theory: that a woman's identity is often dominated by her appearance, body and sexuality. The beauty, fashion and weight

loss industry uses this construction as a method of selling their products. For example 'buy our product and you'll not only look good, but feel good also'. The assumption that women's mental and emotional wellbeing is often dependent on their physical appearance is problematic however, if a woman does not construct her physical appearance in a positive way. Many of the women did not feel good, due to their construction of their physical appearance as not looking good. This often caused them to feel badly about themselves as a whole. This supports the many findings that women experience a high level of body dissatisfaction, (Muth & Cash, 1997; Smith, Handley & Eldredge, 1998; Feingold & Mazzella, 1998) which results in feelings of guilt, shame, depression and self-loathing. The overwhelming majority of women who did not feel comfortable with their appearance constructed their size as being the reason for this. This led them to construct activities that required them to wear clothing such as swimsuits or shorts, as being 'uncomfortable', so they stopped doing them. Bartky (1988) was one of the first feminists to note how the construction of 'femininity' limits a woman's movement. This also supports empirical research that finds women to experience high degrees of situational body dissatisfaction (Smith et al, 1998). Women who did not understand their bodies as reaching the ideal notion of 'femininity' often reported feeling self-conscious in public and social situations, which they said hindered them from being comfortable and having a good time. Part of the reason why the women felt self-conscious was due to their construction of others placing great importance on appearance when making initial judgments. This can be likened to Tseelon (1995) who claims that physical appearance is the defining feature for a woman, both in the way that people respond to her and in how she perceives herself. This discourse can be supported in findings that women who are considered attractive are perceived by others as being more friendly, likable, and socially desirable (Goldman & Lewis, 1977). This discourse can be traced back to the Victorian idea that physical beauty reflects spiritual beauty and beauty of character (Tseelon, 1995).

Because many women reported feeling inferior due to constructing their body as failing to live up to societal beauty standards, this led them to understand that they needed to hide the parts of their bodies that they constructed as negative, while highlighting parts

that they believed to be attractive. Only when their bodies were altered in some way, either parts hidden or highlighted by clothes and makeup, did many of the women express feeling confident in approaching a social situation. This construction is consistent with the conclusions of Cash and Horton (1983, cited by Cash, Dawson, Davis, Bowen & Galumbeck, 1989) who found that the major reason why women use cosmetics is to improve their self-image. Women talked of feeling a major sense of inadequacy when using the construction of slim equating with beauty. Because the women desired to be attractive, they very often reported the practice of weight loss as a means of becoming so. Although a few women reported going on structured diets such as 'weight watchers' or calorie counting programs, the majority of women simply restricted their eating, usually during their teenage years. Some women reported how they were aware of the motivations behind their desire to lose weight. The construction of weight loss for love and acceptance was suggested by a couple of women. This can be supported in literature on how women who are considered attractive gain certain benefits, such as job promotions, and are seen as being more friendly and socially desirable (Goldman & Lewis, 1977; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985, cited by Drogosz & Levy, 1996). It also supports Bartky's (1988) theory that being attractive is not an end in itself but also a means of gaining approval and acceptance.

The prevalence of the desire to be thin had further implications when many women discussed what they constructed as 'fat' or 'ugly days', when they felt unattractive and anxious about their appearance, although realizing that this was quite possibly a distorted perception of how others perceived them. This supports the findings of Thompson (1986, cited by Rothblum, 1992) in saying that 95% of women over-estimated their weight. Some women though, reported an ongoing 'hostile relationship' with their body and discussed how they hated the way that they looked. The poststructuralist belief that western society is governed by distinctions is shown in the 'hostile relationship' construction of how the mind and body can be separated into two opposing components. The mind's hostility to one's body can be explained in terms of a sense of failing to fit into society's current construction of what it means to be 'beautiful'. This would not be so much of a problem, except that in today's western society, as women gain more

economic and social freedom, great emphasis is now placed on the demand to be physically attractive (Wolf, 1990). Due to the way that so many women express experiencing body dissatisfaction and depression, the mind/body dualism has been constructed by feminists as being a tool in the subordination of women.

The second chapter reviewed resistance to the established ways of constructing the female body discussed above. With the realization that many of the discourses used to construct the female body were physically and mentally damaging, women talked about how they consciously decided not to worry about their physical appearance. The 'deciding not to worry' discourse was employed often, but mostly when women constructed their physical appearance as limiting them from doing the things that they wanted to do. While some women decided not to focus on their appearance in order to feel good about themselves, others discussed how they have learned to accept their looks. Even though this acceptance was achieved, some women still constructed their bodies as being less than their chosen ideal. Only one woman discussed how she loved her body. In order to accept their bodies as they were, some women drew on the construction that women are 'naturally curvy', as a requirement of natural functions, such as childbirth. Only one woman believed physical appearance to be irrelevant to her identity and activities. When talking about beauty, some women found it useful to construct beauty as being something that comes from within a woman, rather than the traditional view of physical attractiveness. The implications of this meant that women focused on creating a beautiful character instead of focusing on physical appearance and sexuality as the basis of their identity.

In resisting the dominant discourses on adornment and weight loss, the desire to alter ones appearance was constructed as being both impractical and harmful to a woman. In achieving an 'attractive' look, some women found the clothes and cosmetics they were expected to wear to be uncomfortable. Therefore in constructing comfort as being the main priority when deciding what to wear, these women made a decision to resist dressing for others approval or expectation. Freedom of movement was also discussed as motivation for wearing clothing that felt comfortable. As mentioned earlier, Bartky

(1988) claims that freedom of movement is one of the sacrifices that women make in order to conform to stereotypic notions of 'femininity', therefore the constructing of comfort as a priority resists this. Other women constructed the use of fashion and cosmetics and being fun and a tool for creativity rather than the traditional hide/highlight discourse discussed earlier. Using clothes and makeup as unsanctioned by social circumstances and purely for ones own enjoyment is in resistance to the majority of advertising that aims to show women their flaws and sell their products as a 'solution' to these 'problems'. Barthes (1990, cited by Young, 1990) supports the idea that cosmetics need not be a means of women's oppression, but rather gives women an opportunity to dream of different identities and play these out.

Resistance to the weight loss industry was also evident in the women's talk, when health and exercise for enjoyment was constructed as more of a priority than the desire to lose weight. This may be seen as a positive step forward, as Smith, Handley and Eldredge (1998) reports women who experienced body dissatisfaction often exercised to lose weight. Food was also constructed by many women as being a means of staying healthy rather than a construction that emphasized weight gain. With awareness of the currently dominant discourses on the female body and the expectations of alteration and appearance anxiety that fashion and beauty industries rely on, some women were able to resist the desire to conform to current beauty standards and use discourses of comfort, self love and acceptance.

The next chapter was concerned with representations of women in the media and the discourses that are used to talk about models and actresses in the spotlight. The majority of discourses focused on the appearance and character of media women and the implication of current representations of these women. Media women as a group were constructed as being alike in both their appearance and personality, due to the strict beauty standards that are necessary in the modeling and film industry. Many of the media women were constructed as being 'fake' in their beauty, due to the extent of alterations and cosmetic surgery that they applied to their bodies as a result of the extreme pressure on them to maintain a certain look. Many women who were interviewed constructed the

weight of media women as unhealthy and ugly, with words such as 'anorexic' and 'gaunt' being popular descriptions. Because of the way that media women were constructed as constantly having to change and maintain a particular look, some women constructed them as having a personality trait termed 'image obsessed'.

When it came to discussing the representation of women in the media, much talk was focused on how little emphasis was placed on women's personalities and character, and too much emphasis was placed on the body and sexuality. Young (1990) writes that this is because women in western society are placed as a mere 'object', due to the focus on a woman's body as a thing. This focus on women's bodies and the limited portrayal of different types of women in the media was constructed as setting women unrealistic beauty standards, with which they were expected to live up to and yet destined to fail to achieve. The knowledge that they will always fail at trying to achieve these impossible beauty standards was constructed as creating depression and anxiety for some women. Because of the depression that these women experienced, some reported being worried about young teenage girls who were constructed as being easily impressed by the media's portrayal of women. The representation of women in the media was also constructed as limiting women who wanted to enter into a modeling or acting career and didn't have the particular look that these industries require. Double standards between the portrayal of men and women in the media were also brought up. Men in the media were constructed as having very few disciplines placed upon them in terms of appearance. Overweight and older men were constructed as being more acceptable not only in the media but also in everyday life. Contradictory messages were also an issue for some women, who reported feeling confused by the verbal messages given by the media promoting self-love and acceptance, and yet the refusal by the media to show a diverse range of body types.

Resistance to the immorality of beauty standards in the media was limited but was still evident. A few women discussed their appreciation of media women's beauty. Some feminists interpret this appreciation as a woman taking up the subject position of a male and appreciating the objectification of other women. Others wished not for the media to change their standards, but for their appearance to change, in order to conform to that of

the media women's. Perhaps this desire to change one's own appearance was seen as being more achievable than the altering of the media's portrayal of women, which would involve an extensive amount of pressure, work and unity from those who opposed the notion.

The next section on fashion and consumerism focused on the discourses that women used to construct their use of fashion and cosmetics and the motivation behind this use. Adherence to particular social rules was discussed as being the reason for wearing specific clothes to specific places. The social and personal consequences of wearing the wrong thing, particularly either overdressing or underdressing were constructed as causing embarrassment, feelings of exclusion and of being an outsider. To avoid these negative feelings women talked of how they owned particular clothes and cosmetics for specific social circumstances. Within the social rules of what to wear in certain situations, some women discussed their desire to be slightly different and the importance of having an individual style, which was based on clothing that one liked. Other women preferred to place themselves within the fashion discourse of being modern or stylish, which was often constructed as being a tool for attracting others, particularly the opposite sex. Many of the women interviewed believed that their chosen style of dress reflected their character, including their interests and values. However others constructed fashion as being something that was shallow and had little to do with a person's personality.

Dressing appropriately and developing one's own personal style meant inevitably being a consumer of fashion and beauty products. Many of the clothes that were considered 'modern' or 'stylish' however were constructed as being unattainable, due to either their excessive pricing or the industry's failure to cater for larger sizes. Therefore the majority of women discussed only buying clothes out of need, although some reported that if they had more money they would definitely enjoy buying more. The construction of 'individual style' led some women to construe clothes as being a means of expressing their creativity, done by sewing one's own clothes or buying clothes and altering them to produce a particular look.

The final chapter of analysis explored the construction of femininity and what it means to be a 'woman'. The majority of women drew on traditional and stereotypic discourses on femininity, which constructed women as being weak, quiet and self-sacrificing. Although many women disliked using such a discourse, they struggled to find a discourse that constructed femininity as being anything different. Qualities such as caring and nurturing were often brought up in constructing the nature of a woman that would be considered 'feminine'. Most women considered nurturing and sensitivity to be qualities that were innate to all women, although some drew on the construction that women are socially conditioned to act in such a way. Women who constructed themselves as being feminine tended to call themselves 'girly girls', whereas women who saw themselves as being 'tom boys' when they were younger or as having 'masculine' interests, constructed themselves as 'guy-girls'. When asked 'what do you do that makes you feel like a woman?' household chores were continuously constructed as women's work, but none of the women agreed upon this construction as being a discourse that they preferred. Rather women's social activities such as shopping, watching 'chick flick's and talking with friends were constructed as a source of enjoyment that made them feel 'feminine'. A couple of women mentioned dancing as an activity that made them feel especially feminine due to the way that it is focused on the movement and form of the female body, and how the idea is related to being 'flowing' and 'soft', two stereotypic notions of 'femininity'. Qualities such as intuition and being spiritual were also brought up as being unique to women and a way of making sound judgements. Both intuition and spirituality were constructed as being based on emotions and feeling. When discussing what the women did to make them feel like a woman, almost all of the respondents drew on the concept of relating feminine to the physical – either pampering or adornment. This can be traced back to the idea that a woman's sole conception of herself as a woman is based on her appearance and body (DuPlessis & Hire, 1998). The construction of femininity as pampering was seen as being an enjoyable experience that focused not so much on what the body looked like but how it felt. Adornment was also constructed as something that was enjoyable and made one feel good. The focus on adornment tended to construct 'femininity' as not only being physical, but also physically attractive. This supports Heilman and Saruwater's (1979, cited by Drogosz & Levy, 1996) study that proposed

that physically attractive women are considered more feminine. The association of femininity with physical attractiveness can be seen as creating possible identity problems for women who do not construct their bodies as being 'beautiful'.

However not all the discussion on femininity was focused on body and appearance. Some women drew on the construction that being feminine is simply the opposite of being masculine. This supports Wittig's (1989) theory that males are viewed as the universal person to whom women are compared. Women therefore do not imply another gender, but the only one (cited by Butler, 1990). Others drew on a feminist discourse to construct femininity as being devalued by western society. Irigaray & Reeder (1990) believe that femininity is an exclusively female quality, and therefore society's devaluing of it alienates women from their specific feminine needs and desires. Norton (1997) points out that the effects of dominant discourses oppress women by devaluing femininity and feminine qualities. Many women chose to 'reinvent' the definition of femininity into a woman that was confident, independent and strong in character, typically masculine traits. This can be interpreted as support for the argument that femininity is devalued, and therefore if women wish to gain any respect they must take on 'masculine' traits. Although some of the women interviewed drew on feminist constructions, at the same time they viewed feminism and femininity as being quite different. This supports a quote from Harrison (1997) - 'you're either feminine or feminist'. This seemingly contradictory construction was probably used due to the way that the 'traditional' discourse of what it means to be a woman was still in some ways being used. However almost all of the respondents at some stage of discussing femininity, talked of how they found it difficult to answer such questions because they had never really thought about what it means to be a woman. Martz, Handley and Eisler (1995) find that a woman's self esteem is enhanced with the exploration of what it means to be a woman, as well as a positive attitude towards being a female.

It is implicit in these women's accounts that physical appearance is a major factor in both their identity and subjectivity. With current beauty standards being so strict and the immense pressure on women to live up to these standards, many women construct their

emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing as being dangerously at risk. Therefore current definitions of 'femininity' that are tied so closely to physical appearance can be seen as maintaining the subordination of women. Some areas that emerge from this study may provide the basis for future investigation. The investigation of how teenage girls view their body and understand 'femininity' could be important in understanding how the women in this study achieved the understandings expressed in these interviews. Male discourses of the 'feminine self' would also be of interest, as much of the dialogue in the women's interviews focused around their perception of how males expected and desired them to look. Of course it is highly evident that the prevention and promotion of particular discourses is needed in order for women to view their bodies and themselves in a positive light. The use of feminist discourses have been shown to correlate highly with body satisfaction and positive constructions of being a woman and therefore should be promoted as a means of gaining physical and emotional well-being for women.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **QUESTIONS**

What does being feminine mean to you?

Do you think of yourself as being 'feminine'?

Why or why not?

Do you use any type of cosmetics?

What kind?

How often?

Why do you use them and how do they make you feel?

Do you buy clothes very often?

What is your motivation when you buy clothes?

How much do you think you would spend on clothes and cosmetics in a month?

How many of the clothes and cosmetics you use are context specific?

Have you ever been in a situation where you realized that you were inappropriately dressed?

Yes – tell me about that experience.

How much do you rely on your appearance to reflect your identity?

Have you ever dieted or been on a strict exercise program?

Tell me about that experience?

Do you read many women's magazines?

Yes – What do you read them for?

What goes through your head as you look at and read them?

No - Have you ever read them?

What were your reasons for stopping?

What is your reaction to the female models and film stars you see in the mass media?

How much of an influence does your appearance have on the way you live your life?

A lot of research has suggested that many women do not feel comfortable with the way they look. How do you experience your body?

We've talked mostly about appearance. What else do you do that makes you feel like a woman?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **‘DOING FEMININITY’**

#### **CONSENT FORM**

I have read the information sheet and have had the details for this study explained to me.

My questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and also to refuse to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be connected with any information from interviews or discussions. The information will be used for this research and publications arising from this research project.

I agree to the researcher audiotaping the interview. And know that I have the right to ask for it to be turned off at any time during the interview/discussion.

I understand that the researcher may use brief direct quotations from the interview in her reports of the study, given that these do not identify me in any way.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out on the information sheet.

Signed: .....

Name: .....

Date: .....

## **'DOING FEMININITY'**

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

#### ***WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?***

The aim of this study is to explore how young women experience and think about femininity. Natasha Eagle is doing the research as a thesis for her MA under the supervision of Mary Morgan, in the School of Psychology at Massey University.

#### ***WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO DO?***

If you agree to take part, you will be interviewed by myself, the researcher. During the interview, which will take around an hour, you will be asked some questions and invited to talk about your thoughts and experiences of femininity. The interview will be audiotaped so that it can later be transcribed. I am doing the transcription myself, so only I will be able to identify the information as yours. After the research is completed, the audiotapes will be destroyed.

#### ***WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?***

If you choose to take part in this study, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time.
- Ask any further questions about the study arising during participation.
- Provide information on the understanding that it is completely confidential to the researcher. Records are only viewed by the researcher and her supervisor. Though excerpts from your script may be included in the thesis and any related research articles, a pseudonym will be used so that it is not possible to identify you.
- Turn off the audiotape at any time during the interview.
- Have access to your own transcripts.
- Be given a summary of the findings from the final report.

If you are interested in taking part, please let me know. We will then arrange an interview at a suitable time to us both. Please contact me through the Massey psychology department on (06) 350 5799 ext. 2041.

Thank you.

Natasha Eagle