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JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER:

The narrativity, materiality, and performativity of
successful slimming

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in
Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Slimness is associated with physical attractiveness, and fitness and health. Given that one in three New Zealand adults is overweight and one in four is obese, a desire to lose weight is common, especially for women. But weightloss, and particularly maintaining a reduced weight in the long term, is very difficult. Of people who lose a significant amount of weight, 95 percent are likely to regain the weight lost within five years with most relapses occurring soon after losing weight. My research explores the stories of nine women who have defied these odds and maintained a loss of over 25 percent of their body mass for over five years.

In this thesis I have used a multiple-methods approach to draw out my participants' stories of successful slimming. My diverse methods involved engaging in a series of four one-on-one, unstructured, conversation-type interviews with each participant. During these interviews, participants were asked to produce material objects such as photographs, pieces of clothing, diaries, and medical records to facilitate storytelling and discussion. Each participant also created a graph of her weight plotted over time, which was informed and elaborated by the objects she brought, and punctuated and further extended with annotations about life events. The timeline helped focus attention on how weight changed over time and the connections between weight change and meaningful life experiences and events. Creating the timeline also extended and enriched storytelling, and encouraged each participant to become a researcher of her own life. As an aid for drawing out stories and visualising lived experience, the process of creating the timeline (*timelining*) has become a useful new method for arts-based graphic elicitation.

Continuing with arts-based methods, I have used an ethnodrama, *Wishing at a Wedding*, to present my research findings of the everydayness of successful slimming. My decision to explore Performative Social Science was premised on an awareness of the limitations of orthodox forms of research representation, and my respect for my participants' motivation to take part in this research in order to help other women transform their lives. Performative Social Science forms such as ethnodrama are used to pique emotions, interrogate and disrupt long held prejudices and beliefs, and reach and edify wider audiences. In performative works the burden of interpretation is on the audience and there is potential for a broad and varied range of understandings. Because the voices of authors and theorisation can be thought to be sidelined in performative works I have also presented my research findings in a conventional

academic form; a scholarly book chapter called, “Defying the odds—Successful slimming”.

To further explore the broad and varied range of understandings elicited by performative works, opinions on the play are presented in the form of a magazine article, written by a member of the audience who *attended* the play, and an excerpt from a blog, written by a playwright. These different ways of explicating research findings invoke polyvocality. Polyvocality has been used to provide a variety of alternative positions or standpoints from which to view my research findings and enrich understandings of the world of weightloss and the day-to-day complexity of successful slimming.

A metaphor of an expert tightrope walker performing (extra)ordinary feats of balancing is proposed to understand the *ease* with which successful slimmers maintain a reduced weight, and also the *fear* they face of slipping and falling from their narrow path of weightloss success. I argue that successful slimming requires obsessive moment-by-moment, day-by-day, year-by-year focused discipline and commitment. It is not a simple matter of eating a little less and moving a little more.

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This thesis is a narrative—it's a story that needed to be told. So finally, my last thank you goes to my audiences—there have been many. You patiently listened when I needed to talk and you talked when I needed to listen—all stories need an audience.

¹ Professor Kerry Chamberlain, Massey University

² Associate Professor Ann Dupuis, Massey University

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