A descriptive study of positive body image among female adolescent dancers

Amy Bobo Courrier

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UMI
A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE BODY IMAGE
AMONG FEMALE ADOLESCENT DANCERS

by

Amy Bobo Courrier

Bachelor of Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

A Descriptive Study of Positive Body Image Among Adolescent Female Dancers and Cheerleaders

by

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This study examined whether groups of adolescent girls, who society defines as having a positive body image, actually feel positive about their own body image and how they express it culturally. Cheerleaders and dancers were chosen as accessible groups that embodied the ideal body image as defined by popular Western teen culture. Qualitative analysis was conducted using interviews, observations, and focus groups to determine how these groups felt about their body image and how they defined a positive image. The influence of attitudes towards perfectionism, perceived control over the body, and the desire to follow “healthy” habits all contributed to how the participants defined a positive body image. All of the participants stated they felt positive about their bodies, but wished to change their perceived bodily flaws in order to feel better about themselves. Increased confidence and more revealing clothing were stated as cultural examples of a positive body image.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Our culture's attitude toward the body is something that is not qualitatively examined in the field of psychology. The study of body image in psychology has primarily relied on survey questions relating to cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal constructs of how one perceives their own body image (Cash, 1981, 1990; Thompson, 1991). Numerous articles and statistics report the staggering numbers of women (and now men) who report feelings of "inadequate body shape" or a "strong desire to lose weight" or "I would feel better if I could change...about my body" (Cash, 1981; Cash & Henry, 1995; Wolf, 1991; Wooley, & Wooley, 1984). Psychologists look at these responses as "low concepts of body image" or "low self-concepts," however, they do not look at the larger social system of the individual through which these messages are interpreted and acted out.

Psychological research shows that from the day they are identified as female, girls learn that others evaluate them in terms of their appearance (McKinley, 1999). The social construction of the female body as an object to be watched makes the definition and evaluation of women in terms of appearance seem natural (Berger, 1977). Since women themselves, as well as dominant culture, define women by their appearance, women are particularly susceptible to public claims related to appearance and weight (McKinley, 1999). Beauty is the defining characteristic for Western women. No matter how intelligent, creative, or witty a woman is, she will always be judged by her body as the
necessary and often sufficient condition for social success. Outward appearance is important for women of all ages, but the pressure to be beautiful is most intense in early adolescence. Girls worry about their clothes, makeup, skin, and hair, but most of all they worry about their weight (Pipher, 1994).

Psychological research has made great strides in examining how we interpret our body image, but it does not explain “why” beyond the scope of what can be quantified. Body image is a complex construct that by definition is unstable over time and unclear in meaning due to cognitive interpretations made by the individual (Cash, 1990). Current research does not state exactly what a positive body image is, or whether or not it is socially acceptable to have one. Many women know what a negative body image is. In fact, according to statistics (Wooley & Wooley, 1984), 75% of women have a negative body image. What is unclear is what characteristics define the 25% of women who have a positive body image.

Purpose of the Study

In this study I refer to the definition of body image that is used by Cash and Pruzinsky (1990): “body image refers, most simply, to a persons’ highly subjective experiences of their own conditions of embodiment (p. 209).” Normal body image is defined as an absence of “distorted body image.” Defining a concept based on its absence as a definitive strategy is common in medical terminology. It serves as a functional absence defining what the “thing” is not (Burke 1969, cited in Haworth-Hoeppner, 1999). The problem is, the line between what is considered negative, normal, or a positive view of one’s body does not stretch across a very wide continuum for women. A recent meta analysis of 222 body image studies from the past 50 years reveals continual increases in women’s body dissatisfaction (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998). Studies show that the girls or
women who are most satisfied with their weight are considered under-weight by
insurance weight chart standards (Birch, Dolan, and Lacey, 1987; Wooley &
Wooley, 1984). It has been well documented in the research literature on eating disorders
and body image of what constitutes a negative body image (Thompson 1990) however, it
is still unclear what constitutes a normal or positive body image (Cash, 1984, 1990). This
is mostly due to the fact that a normal body image is a negative body image (Bordo,
1993; Brown and Jasper, 1993; Chernin, 1981). What is clear is the amount of time and
energy young girls and women place on the appearance of their body and how it is
directly related to their self-esteem (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Hamacheck, 1992; Pipher,
1994).

The purpose of this study is to examine the definition of a positive body image among
the groups of teen girls who are defined by society as embodying a positive body image.
I chose cheerleaders and dancers as the participants of this study because they represent
the body type that is most desired among girls in society, yet at the same time they have
some of the highest incidences of eating disorders (Le Grange, Tibbs, & Noakes, 1994). I
do not claim that other envied body types do not exist among other groups, but due to the
scope of this study I will only focus on the two groups. This study examines the complex
relationship between having a thin body and feeling positively about one’s body image.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of the adverse affects of having a negative body
image. The continuum of body image satisfaction does not span very wide for women,
which is in itself problematic. What is even more problematic are the consequences the
women who lie at the far end of the continuum face: those who risk their lives in order to
maintain the ideal body type. While anorexia affects only 1-3% of the population, it has
the most fatalities associated with any type of psychological disorder (Pipher, 1994).

Anorexia can produce death by starvation or heart attack, while the health risks for
bulimia include dental problems, esophageal tears, gastrointestinal problems and
sometimes dangerous electrolyte imbalances that can trigger heart attacks. Body image
may seem like a trivial concern, but as the review of literature will demonstrate, it is a
deeply ingrained societal attribute that is used historically, psychologically, politically,
and socially as a source of control and power over women.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The idea that a lean muscular body is attractive, desirable, and healthy is so widespread in Western societies that it often goes unchallenged, despite the fact that it has not always been, nor is it everywhere the case (Brown & Jasper, 1993; Bordo, 1993). The dominant discourse within the Western tradition and within the psychology it has produced are generally exclusionary of history, culture and community as being central to the understanding of what are presumed to be universal psychological processes (Sampson, 1996). The positivistic discourse can only interpret what can be observed and replicated, it is not able to take into consideration the social, cultural, and historical forces that contribute to the cognition, corporeality, or identity of an individual.

The challenger and possible successor to the dominant tradition’s discourses, social constructionism, is inclusive of history, culture and community, but it shares with the dominant tradition an exclusion of embodiment. Sampson (1996) defines embodied discourse as, “the intrinsically embodied character of human endeavor: to the idea that we are socialized into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what we say and the embodied quality of how we say it are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined,” (p. 609). Social constructionism has joined with the dominant tradition in focusing its attention on the object-body while excluding the inherently embodied character of human endeavor.
Unfortunately, most people are not aware of the historical, social, scientific, and political influences that determine what is considered a healthy and appropriate way for a body to appear (Bordo, 1993). Most people are aware of their own embodied experience, but are not aware of how it is historically, culturally, and socially situated. Widespread preoccupation with weight, dieting, and exercise has escalated to such a degree that it is an accepted, encouraged, and rewarded aspect of both personal and social life in Western culture. Brown and Jasper (1993) give an excellent example of how this is embodied through the experience of the female body:

By exerting control over their bodies, women hope to gain self-esteem and an increased sense of power and control over their lives. Powerlessness and dissatisfaction can be replaced by the self-satisfaction, social approval, and sense of accomplishment won through weight shape and control. Women's bodies become the arena for their expressions of discontent and protest. Focusing on 'improving' their bodies in order to feel better about themselves distracts them from the actual sources of their discontent. As the expressions of protest become obscured, a socially and politically generated problem becomes personalized. When women say they feel better when they are thinner, they really mean it. They actually feel better about themselves. Complex dissatisfaction are transformed by being shifted onto the body. Unhappiness fades and an uneasy well-being emerges as the body changes shape. (p.16)

The Biological Body

The dominant discourse of psychology assumes a world of neutral objects and natural meanings, including the biological body, on which culture writes its particular message of sex and gender (Butler, 1990; 1993). "The efforts to exclude the body from philosophy and psychology have been an exclusion only of the female body; the male body has
always been secretly housed in these phallocentric discourses, serving as the unstated, normative standard by which the female is inferior because she lacks what the male possesses.” (Sampson, 1996, p. 613). Biological difference has been used in Western society for centuries as the justification of the subjugation of women. Women are conceptualized as being ruled by their bodies, bodies which are seen as unstable and inherently weak (Ussher 1989). According to Naomi Wolf (1991), “There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counter offensive against women” (p. 12).

Many feminists and critical theorists argue that there is no natural body. It is clear, they argue, that if a pre-culture body exists, it may serve as an invitation to house the power differentials with which we have become so familiar; for example, men are by nature dominant and aggressive and so are meant to lead, women are by nature weak and are therefore meant to be submissive (Sampson, 1996). Social historian, Joan Brumberg (1997) provides an example of biology being socially constructed through the history of the hymen. In the Victorian era an intact hymen was a prerequisite to a good middle class marriage. The hymen was jointly owned by a girl and her bridegroom. Due to social and economic changes the hymen has ideologically disappeared. Girls are far more active than they were in the 19th century, and social changes allowing more sexual freedom have made the modern day hymen obsolete as a necessary or determining factor of virginity. The hymen serves as an example of girl’s bodies functioning as a template for the vast social transformations of the twentieth century. A thorough description of the history of the body provides a foundation to understand how the body is governed by historical,
social, and economic changes and how biology is used as a negative attribute for women and a positive progressive attribute for men.

**History of the Female Body**

There has been no singular, monolithic understanding of the body within western tradition. "Each age seems to have a love-hate relationship with the body" (Synnott 1993, p.11). The key to defining a standard in ideal body image is based on the culture and its availability to produce a measure of comparison. Generally, in history the only means available for the comparison of bodies was art. In general, the history of the female body has been more body-negative than body-positive (Sampson, 1996). Historically, women's social value has been inseparable from their bodies (Brown & Jasper, 1993). "Ideal" body images for women tend to shift with changes in women's social roles. The most notable transformation has been from the round fertile child-bearing look to the lean and taught muscular look of today. This can be explained from a social historical perspective by the shift of a declining emphasis on fertility following industrialization in Western cultures to a non-reproductive thinner look (Brown & Jasper, 1993). The following history of the body in Western culture explains how this transformation took place.

In ancient Greek culture balance was the key to everything (Bordo, 1993). To be extreme or rare was to be imperfect. Fallon (1990) explains, "the perfect female torso was one in which the distance between the breast nipples, the distance from the lower edge of the breast to the navel, and the distance from the navel to the crotch were all of equal lengths" (p.85). However, the construction of beauty included both the outer and inner qualities of the person. The male body was considered more attractive than the female, in part because beauty also included fitness and women did not have social access to
activities that involved sports. Romans, on the other hand, were interested in the rarities of particular faces and persons. They valued thinness and hated obesity. Regurgitation was commonly used to keep weight down because they loved to feast, therefore, bulimic behavior was a legitimate and socially accepted practice (Fallon, 1990).

In the late Middle Ages the "reproductive figure" was the ideal. Womanhood and motherhood were synonymous (Fallon, 1990). Women were desired for their childbearing hips and procreative values. This comfort of reproduction was probably reassuring against the ever-present fear of death that epitomized the time period (Brown & Jasper, 1993). In order to have healthy children one's self must be healthy as well. This included a sufficient amount of body fat for reproduction, which also suggested the privilege of eating in a time of famine.

Complexion was very important due to the many diseases that often made the skin pallid, or scarred. Creamy with a tinge of pink being was considered the ideal. Color was taken as a sign of the body's physical complexion, that is, the body's constitution, a sign of virility and health. A medieval advice book recommended women to smell good and advised, "It is not wise to get too close: In the course of amorous combat do not allow yourself to be embraced, for unpleasant odors are more of a problem when you are overheated" (Regnier-Bohler, 1988, p. 361). Advice books also cite the carrying of oneself as more important than neglected beauty and extra clothes can be used to conceal a too thin body.

At some points in Western history bathing was considered immoral, while other time periods were obsessed with it. Bathing, water, and steam were highly equated with eroticism. Moralists of the time believed that bathing was a prelude to sin, in addition women were the keepers of water in the house, which probably helped contribute to this
belief. At some periods during the renaissance one never fully exposed their body ever. The body was deemed dangerous, because of the temptations of the flesh, particularly the female body. The female body was to be guarded because of its many openings, hence very easy for sin and corruption to enter.

Art before the year 1230 represents a deliberate depiction of the perversity of the nude, depicting almost no nude figure that was not either in the grip of evil or an incitement to evil. After this date we see young, radiant, satisfied nudes. In the Fourteenth century “Medical treatises explained that hair was the condensation of crude vapors and that excess feminine moisture which did not flow naturally was transformed into moss that should be trimmed. To remove hair women used strips of fabric dipped in pitch or destroyed hair follicles with hot needles; powerful depilatories were also used.” (Braunstein, 1988, p. 600). At this point in history moralists stopped warning about bathing because it was so widespread at all levels of society that it could not be stopped.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries even more ample bodies appeared and there was still a variety of body types among men and women although none of them would be considered thin by Western cultural standards. A number of significant social and economic changes occurred after the eighteenth century that affected the change in ideal standards (Seid, 1989). The food supply, which had been previously unstable began to stabilize. An abundance of food afforded more people the opportunity to eat and gain weight. Therefore, to be obese was no longer fashionable because it was something afforded to most individuals rather than a select few. This gave rise to the idea of restraint as refinement. According to Fallon (1990):

It seems at least in western culture, that changes in preference for shape and skin are deviations from the average or natural state and only can be attempted and possibly

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achieved by the rich classes and castes due to the availability of resources (time, money, and supporting lifestyle)...As advances in society and technology enable the lower class to achieve these standards, a distaste for the “ideal” develops (p. 92)

In the emerging industrial society the transfer of property was less important and therefore the number of arranged marriages declined. Women had to “attract” a husband, given that it was her only economic means of survival. It is at this point in time where appearance became more important to women than men. Previously, aristocratic fashions were just as flamboyant for men as women. Corresponding with the need to attract a partner, women embraced a new seductiveness in fashion. Female nudes became overtly more erotic in art whereas male nudes gradually ceased to be a genre in art all together. (Brown & Jasper, 1993).

In the 19th century the “cult of the lady” emerged (Seid, 1989). The idealized female of this century consisted of two polar opposites. The beauty ideal of the 1830’s was manifested in the American “Steel Engraving Lady” by Currier and Ives, which received its name from the steel engravings magazines used to produce images. However, contrary to today’s women, women of the nineteenth century did not expect to look like a magazine engraving. This image was thin, frail, and pallid in appearance. The thin, delicate appearance for women was a mark of gentility and implied that a husband or father had wealth (Seid, 1989). The ideal also emphasized youth and purity, reflecting nineteenth-century romanticization of childhood and simultaneous infantilization of women (Brown & Jasper, 1993). Older women were expected to be larger although a very overweight person was considered unhealthy. With the rise of the early women’s movement a rosier healthy and stronger image was promoted in defiance against the weak, pale figure comprising the steel-engraving look (Seid, 1989). By the 1850’s the
Steel-engraving look was unpopular and the second female ideal emerged. Both shared corseted waistlines, one delicate and frail the other voluptuous and sexy. A woman was obviously unable to work wearing such restrictive clothing. The influx of immigrants to the U.S. ended an era of scarce labor and middle class women were encouraged to stay at home. Women worried about being too thin and doctors confirmed that a plump shape was a sign of health.

During the Victorian era in North America, restrictive women’s fashions were representative of a strict separation of spheres for men and women (Brown & Jasper, 1993). At the turn of the century the very narrow corseted look was in style. Only upper and middle class women were able to wear these as a symbol of their wealth status. It was obviously impossible for a woman to work who was laced up in a corset, therefore it was believed that she (the upper-class woman) was better off at home and out of the workforce. Corsets made it difficult to breathe and eat with ease. Fainting, headaches, and uterine problems were all common complaints. In 1904, a researcher reported that "monkeys laced up in these corsets moped, became excessively irritable and within weeks sickness and died" (Bordo, 1996, p.408).

Medical reasons were also constructed as to why it was healthiest for a woman to remain at home. Interest in female gynecology was developing during this era. It was now acceptable for a doctor to ask questions and perform examinations regarding female reproductive anatomy (Saraceno, 1991). Social historian, Joan Brumberg (1997), states that:

Even among educated medical men, menstruation was a mystery. In the 1870s, Dr. Albert F. King, a professor of medicine at Columbian University in Washington, D.C., actually claimed that menstrual bleeding was something "new." According to King,
women’s natural state was pregnancy, and menstruation became regularized—what he called a ‘fixed habit’—only as a result of higher education, later marriage, and deliberate family limitation, all things he considered ‘cultural interference’ connected to modern life (p. 7).

The consensus of the time believed that girls needed extra guidance and protection because of their biology (Brumberg, 1997). Young women were encouraged to stay at home in order rest their reproductive organs. It was also a commonly held belief that studying took away blood from the reproductive organs and therefore, too much education was considered unhealthy (Bordo, 1993; Ussher, 1989). Many of the women who suffered from “hysteria” were intelligent women, hence the connection between the womb and the brain was inferred (Bordo, 1993, Ussher, 1989).

At the turn of the century American girls were glorified in the portrayal of the “Gibson girl.” She was a representation of American exceptionalism and material progress. However, doctors at the time claimed that girls were increasingly pale, wan, anemic, and weak and in no way prepared for the challenges of womanhood (Brumberg, 1997). Many girls, (and boys) suffered from skin problems such as acne, which was associated with venereal disease hence, “sexual derangement.” A connection began between pimples and sexual desire, of which marriage was considered the only acceptable outlet for sexual expression— and the only cure for acne (Brumberg, 1997).

For urban women thinness was a symbol of freedom from hard labor. Improved standards of living meant that it was no longer necessary for urban middle-class women to be pregnant throughout their lives. Sex became eroticized in popular culture and the emphasis had changed from reproduction to pleasure. Hence, the rounded fertile look gave way to the thin look, which was associated with the pleasure of sexuality. For
complex reasons, including the increased liberation of women during the first wave of the women's movement, our society adopted a clear preference for thinness in women (Bennett & Gurin 1982, in Brown & Jasper, 1993).

Towards the end of the Victorian era women were expected to "adopt the fashion of the day while simultaneously expressing a "unique personality" necessary for romantic love- fashionable beauty became a greater avenue for upward mobility through marriage" (Brown & Jasper, 1993, p.23). According to Wilson (1985), "Appearance became increasingly intertwined with identity in this period. It was as she states, "the beginning of Self as a Work of Art, the 'personality' as something that extended to dress, scent, and surroundings, all of which made an essential contribution to the formation of 'self'- at least for women" (p.123). The pursuit of fashion suggested leisure, pleasure, and self-indulgence, which were all considered status symbols.

In the 1910s a move in social mobility and independence for women helped create the small, boyish, flat-chested, shorter hemline look. Feminist "dress reformers" played a role in influencing the popularity of this fashion, protesting against the restraining long, heavy, and crinolined fashions of the previous era. For the first time, clothing was massed produced in standard sizes and therefore available to all women. However the development of standardized sizes meant that women came across the idea that their bodies were wrong when the standard size did not fit them (Seid, 1989). Early in the century a medical bias against fat developed. The concept of the calorie was used and fat become synonymous with unhealthy. At the same time, doctors in 1911 claimed that it was fashion that was keeping women from losing weight. A large décolleté and neck area were in fashion and of course it is impossible to lose weight in the abdomen and hips without sacrificing the weight around the neck (Chernin, 1981).
In the 1920s fashion began the blur of the private and public self. The expression of the flesh meant exhibitionism of one’s sexuality via fashion. Boyish flat chests and legs were in style and women began using iodine, starvation diets and strenuous exercise to reduce their weight. Brumberg’s (1997) analysis of girl’s diaries shows that in the 1920’s girls’ diaries began to display experimentation in handwriting. This shows that girls were learning how flexible their identity could be. Prior to the 1910’s diary entries of girls focused on improving the self through acts of kindness, and holding one’s tongue, “good works” versus “good looks.” Becoming a better person meant paying less attention to oneself and had no mention of the body as a means of expression. After the 1910s diary entries began to fill with entries regarding dieting and weight loss, and fashion as a means of sexual expression.

During the depression hemlines returned and large bustlines were back in style. In the 1940s the leg surpassed the bust as the new erotic symbol, with shorter hemlines than ever before. In the 1950’s sweater mania was the fad and the bust was back. Training bras were invented for young girls and were deemed medically necessary for healthy development. Brumberg (1997) claims that the training bras of the 1950s, “foreshadowed the ways in which the nation’s entrepreneurs would accommodate, and also encourage, precocious sexuality” (p.119). By dressing little girls in brassieres or bikinis, we imply adult behaviors and unwittingly; we mark them as sexual objects (Brumberg, 1997).

The 1960s were marked by the term “sexually active” replacing the medical and social terminology of ruined, wayward, or promiscuous. In the 1960’s the standards of beauty were challenged for the first time by a variety of racial and ethnic “looks.” At the same time Twiggy (5’7” and 91lbs.) was the fashion icon of the time. “The recommended route to perfecting the female body seemed to be getting rid of it altogether” (Brown &
Widespread communication of a very thin beauty ideal manifested through television. The result was a greater emphasis than ever before on our outer image, both instead of and as a measure of inner worth. During this time in the 1970s an increase in anorexia and bulimia practically exploded onto the scene. Hilde Bruch (1973) was the first to suggest that there was a disturbance of body image in anorexia nervosa. Although she did not give a definition of the term body image, she used it to cover a wide range of bodily cognitions and attitudes.

In the 1980s a new outbreak occurred that involved the advent of healthy eating, aerobic exercise, liposuction, and breast augmentation as viable means to control the body and the self. The advent of dimple free thighs came into existence – you too can achieve perfect thighs through dieting and exercise- in the words of Jane Fonda- “discipline is liberation” (Douglas, 1994, p. 259). This era is what Douglas (1984) refers to as “narcissism as liberation.” By the 1980s advertising agencies figured out how to make feminism and anti-feminism work for them. Douglas (1994) claims “elitism and narcissism merged in a perfect appeal to forget the political already, and get back to the personal, which you might be able to do something about” (p. 247).

The women’s fitness movement was a site of resistance as women broke into many sports that they previously weren’t allowed to compete in. However, along with this break through came a whole other break through of new products women now needed in order to join the fitness craze (Douglas, 1994). Individual competitivism was running rampant. Liberation was achieved through what you could buy to make yourself more attractive, hence, more confident. According to Faludi, (1991) “The formula that has succeeded for more than a century is still in place: undermine a woman’s self-esteem, include high anxiety in respect to a ‘feminine’ appearance- and the product sells itself”
(p. 202). Apparently this formula does work—Americans spend more money on the products and services for beauty and weight control than they do on social services or education (Rodin, 1992).

**Adolescent development**

Both Freud (1923) and Erickson (1968) see the body as so central to personality and social development as to claim that “anatomy is destiny.” However, the body in this context is usually neglected from the narrative of human development (Krueger, 1990). Carol Gilligan (1982) was the first to recognize the neglect of the experience of the onset of menstruation in the experience of female development. Changes in puberty cause a weight gain that is not consistent with cultural norms of female beauty (Striegel-Moore & Cachelin 1999). According to Brumberg (1997), contemporary girls are in trouble because we are experiencing a mismatch between biology and culture. At this moment in our history, young women develop physically earlier than ever before, but they do so within a society that does not protect or nurture them in ways that were once a hallmark of American life (p. 197).

It is during adolescence that the young woman first experiences a split between her body and her self: between her own experience and the archetype she is expected to emulate (Ussher, 1989). Catherine Steiner-Adair (1990) describes the double bind girls face entering adulthood. At puberty both boys and girls face the challenge of entering a body that is biologically different from the one they have been living in. For boys there is a consistency in the body they develop into. Increased muscle, height, and the lowering of the voice are all considered symbols of power and authority. Girls, however develop an increase in body fat which is inconsistent with the qualities they are expected to
demonstrate: self-control, and independence. They feel betrayed by their increase in fat because fat is a cultural symbol for powerlessness, ineffectiveness, and lack of control.

The social repercussions of not fitting in to the prescribed body type can be harsh, even our children are aware of these social messages and stereotypes (Flannery-Schroeder & Chrisler, 1996). There are positive and negative stereotypes that surround those that possess the culturally prescribed features of the beauty. In the now classic study by Dion, Berscheid, & Walster (1982) cited in Cash (1990) the stereotype of “what is beautiful is good” (and conversely, “what is ugly is bad”) was documented through their research. Beautiful people are seen as more confident, outgoing, popular, likable, happy, and well adjusted, whereas ugly people are seen as the converse. At the same time people believe that those who possess beauty are aware of their fortunate aspects and therefore must be self-centered or vain, which represents the scenario of blaming the victims for our own stereotyping of them (Cash, 1984).

While both men and women are subject to the message that being heavy is socially unacceptable, the consequences for women are much greater than for men (Peach 1998). The “perfect body” does not represent a specific gene form that produces the style of body type that is in vogue at a particular moment in history, but rather an outward symbol of control, discipline, and power. It is something that Americans, in particular, believe is attainable to all who put forth effort and discipline required to control the body (Ferron, 1997). Another reason females have more at stake at attaining the perfect body is because the perfect body is a male body: lean, muscular, and low in body fat, and not always healthy for the female body, especially for reproduction purposes. The concept of a slim, controlled body is one that is adopted at an increasingly earlier age, especially for girls.
Furthermore, this is also the developmental age in which girls begin to develop eating disorders.

**Eating disorders**

It was originally thought that eating disorders primarily affected young, upper-class women; however studies are reporting more women of lower economic classes, a wider range of ages, and various ethnicities are having difficulties related to food, weight, shape, and appearance. (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Thompson, 1992). Western women still seem to have a higher risk of developing an eating disorder, but the degree of the westernization women of all backgrounds are exposed to seems to increase their risk of developing eating disorders (Dolan 1991). Anorexia often begins in adolescence with ordinary teenage dieting. Ninety-five percent of all anorexics are female and often, perfectionist, bright, likable girls and develop the disorder early in adolescence. Bulimia is more popular among college women. Some estimates of bulimia run as high as 20% among college females (Brown, 1993; Pipher, 1994). Karen Way (1995) describes a scene from the G. Gordon Liddy Show in 1993, which helps to differentiate the social view of the differences between anorexia and bulimia. A fellow guest on the show who was a recovering bulimic was asked to differentiate between anorexics and bulimics the guest replied:

- Anorexics are hard to miss. They’re skeletal, their skin often becomes yellow, they exercise compulsively, often 5-6 hours a day. Their hair starts to fall out. I mean, the usual description is like a concentration camp victim. And they don’t eat much food.
- Bulimics on the other hand, are 10 to 12 times more common. You’re far more likely to know a bulimic than you are to know anorexic. And bulimics are often the perfectionist, attractive, outgoing achievers, quite often athletes in sports where weight
is considered important (p. 103)

Anorexia is both a result of and a protest against the cultural rule that young women must be beautiful (Pipher, 1994). Turner (1984) believes that anorexia is a "symbolic struggle against forms of authority and an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the female self...This points to the paradoxes and the tensions of the anorexic experience: it is an act of rebellion against parental control, but it ends in physical enslavement of the body" (p. 202). Turner (1984) also suggests that anorexia may "simply be an extreme version of modern narcissism...a neurotic version of a widespread 'mode of living' which is centered on jogging, keep-fit, healthy diet, weight watching and calculating hedonism" (Turner 1984: 202).

Many critiques of the social model regarding eating disorders exist. Social historian Joan Brumberg (1988) attacks the feminist/cultural model, arguing "current cultural models fail to explain why so many individuals do not develop the disease, even though they have been exposed to the same cultural environment" (p. 38). She also claims that:

If the anorexic's food refusal is political in any way, it is a severely limited and infantile form of politics, directed primarily at parents (and self) and without any sense of allegiance to a larger collectivity...The effort to transform them into heroic freedom fighters is a sad commentary on how desperate people are to find in the cultural model some kind of explanatory framework, or comfort, that dignifies this confusing and complex disorder, (Brumberg, 1988, p. 37)

This argument against the feminist/cultural model represents the lack of acknowledgement of how culture is socially constructed and transcribed upon the body. A recent article in Monitor on Psychology (2002) cites new research stating that genetic factors might be involved in the onset of anorexia. Dr. Cynthia Bulik, one of the experts

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cited in the article reaffirms the anti-feminist/social model by stating that, "Socio-cultural factors are only important in that they might elicit an expression of someone's pre-existing genetic predisposition" (p.36). This statement is true in regards to most psychological and physical illnesses; however, it does not recognize how powerful the role of culture is in the onset of anorexia. Culture does not cause an eating disorder, but rather provides the opportunity for one to manifest as a result of over-conformity to cultural norms. For example, eating disorders do not exist in cultures where famine and starvation are rampant or as Dolan (1991) demonstrated, in cultures where they do not have access to television.

Many researchers now refer to body image dissatisfaction as existing on a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Brown, 1993; Haworth-Hoepner, 1999; Hsu & Sobjewitz, 1991). Early studies showed that there was a distinct difference between those that were diagnosed as anorexic and those that were "normal" (Slade and Russell 1973). However, the societal demands on women and appearance have changed, making "fear of fat" a fear for all women in society. The weight pre-occupation continuum includes fear of fatness, denial of appetite, exaggeration of body size, depression, emotional eating, and rigid dieting (Brown, 1993). This continuum is very complex. A thin body does not protect one against negative body image perceptions yet this is the general consensus of the public (Cash, 1994). To say a girl is satisfied with her body might sound healthy, but there is other information that we are not always aware of. For instance, a girl might be satisfied with her body because she is currently at a body weight below her normal average, which is the most likeable body size for a woman to obtain. As a culture we reward weight loss as an outward symbol of a healthy lifestyle and control over the body. According to Brown (1993), "We cannot stigmatize anorexia and bulimia as individual
pathologies or diseases, at the same time that we approve, even praise, the behavior of those women who exercise and diet to attain the culturally prescribed body ideal” (p. 54).

Feminist Theories of Body Size. Many feminists are concerned with their body image, and are embarrassed that something so seemingly trivial is so important to everyday life (Szekely & DeFazio, 1993). Given, the widespread notion that, “weight is something that can be controlled, and exercising such control can, at the same time, satisfy a major social expectation: being sexually attractive. Indeed, it requires a strong sense of self and high self-esteem to resist the social pressure to be thin” (Brown and Jasper, 1993, p. 32). There is no consensus regarding what is appropriate in relation to weight among feminists. Szekely, and DeFazio (1993) provide three broad views among feminists regarding weight.

1.) Some feminists argue that any size is a good size.
2.) Fat is a shell and an armor to keep out the world by essential desexualizing women, hence freedom from patriarchy.
3.) One should be thin for health reasons- should diet and work out reasonably

Regardless of the differences among feminists, thin still remains the privileged form in Western society. Complex reasons surround each women’s and girl’s experience of embodiment, as well as, her perception of her body and the actions she takes regarding those perceptions.

Where body size and shape are crucial to their social value, women learn to focus on appearance. As a result, policing and controlling appearance becomes an imperative for achieving both inner satisfaction and social success (Brown & Jasper, 1993). Women internalize the body image that is in vogue at the time, recognizing that how they appear
affects how they are valued and treated. Self-esteem becomes deeply connected to body size and shape. In continuously scrutinizing and altering themselves, women anticipate being scrutinized and evaluated, and attempt to have some control over the results (Brown & Jasper, 1993).

Summary

In reviewing the history of the female body, theories of development, and eating disorders it is important to understand that it is not a history of some type of "long standing male conspiracy against women" (Bordo, 1993, p. 143). As philosopher Michel Foucault reminds us, that although a perfectly clear system with understandable goals and intentions may characterize historical power relations, it is "often the case that no one was there to have invented" these aims and strategies by individual choice or some type of presiding "headquarters" (Foucault, 1980, p. 95). This does not mean that individuals do not consciously pursue goals that in fact advance their own position. But it does deny that in doing so they are consciously making decisions to shape the overall movement of power relations.

Most women and girls feel they need to lose weight because being slim is a legitimate societal advantage (Bordo, 1993). The pressure to be thin comes from the individual because the individual desires to conform to the appropriate societal norms that will advance her position in society. Thin women are perceived to have better health, work ethic, control, relationships, and overall better lifestyles. To obtain the perfect body is a desire that is envied by many women and girls. The two groups of girls in this study embody the definition of femininity that is engendered within their art or sport, making them privileged groups. Being dancers or cheerleaders requires a slim feminine physique that is admired and envied by members of society. There is little research regarding the
definition of positive body image or on which factors might protect girls from eating disorders. Just because one factor may contribute to a disorder, it’s opposite might not necessarily protect a girl and vice versa (Striegel-Moore & Cachelin 1999). Continuum theories state that most girls and women experience to differing degrees the affective symptoms associated with eating disorders, i.e. fear of fatness, dissatisfaction with body shape and weight, and undue influence of body, weight or shape on self-evaluation (Brown, 1993; Haworth-Hoepner, 1999). This study seeks to discover how the girls in privileged groups interpret their own body image, how they define positive body image, and where they fall on the continuum of eating behaviors.

*Research Questions*

There are three main research questions that this study asks in order to gain a better understanding of what constitutes a positive body image:

1.) Do the groups that embody what the culture would refer to as a positive body image, (i.e. dancers, cheerleaders), perceive themselves as having a positive body image?
2.) How do these groups and individual members define a positive body image and how do they outwardly display this positive body image?
3.) Is having a positive perception of one’s body image an indicator of other aspects of overall health (i.e. self-concept, eating habits, identity)?

These questions embody a wide range of contradictory aspects of our culture. Therefore, it is expected in this study to only scratch at the surface at some of the messages and cultural meanings behind these questions. Chapter 3 discusses the approaches used to answer these questions.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Feminist Research Methods

There is much debate within psychology of what constitutes feminist research and epistemology (Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999; Ussher, 1999). Feminist research is "qualitative research by women 'on' women' with a desire to make sense of women’s lives and experiences; it 'must take women’s oppression as one of its basic assumptions'; it is research informed at every stage by an acknowledged political commitment" (Scott 1989, pp.69-70). Lather (1991) states, "very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry" (p.71). Feminist empirical work is multi-paradigmatic and is usually qualitative in nature due to the methodology surrounding the inquiry of social constructionism. However, there are many examples of innovative and mixed-method research methodologies, as well as, the use of cross-disciplinary inquiry and the integration of historical, political, and economic analyses along with psychological ones (1992; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999; Ussher, 1999).

Views of women’s lives and the assumptions about their subjectivity, and experiences were once seen as universally homogeneous, but many of these views have changed, recognizing the diverse experiences among women of different races and classes (Cole, 1986; DeVault, 1990; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1998). This recognition of diversity has led to a highly reflexive approach to feminist research considering the feminist’s place in
research, the researcher’s relationship to the participants, and the philosophical location
and nature of knowledge (Olesen, 1994). In work that emphasizes reflexivity in method,
“theory is thus built from ‘lived experience,’” and the dualities between ‘theory’ and
‘praxis,’ researcher and researched, subject and object, and so on, are routinely
challenged by feminist methods of ‘knowing’” (Richardson, 1991, p.33). As feminists
concentrate on the “everyday” as the site for the coming together of biography and
history (Balsamo, 1990) a broader picture appears of the importance of lived experience
and the (re)telling of narratives.

One of the major themes in feminist research is the focus on voice as a mode of
producing knowledge. Dialogue among women has historically been omitted from the
larger narratives that describe the production of knowledge. Many feminists (see
DeVault, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Oakley, 1981; Oleson, 1994) claim that language does
not always fit perfectly with experience, an incongruence that generally occurs among
marginal groups outside the dominant paradigm. Therefore, it can be difficult for
women to express themselves clearly in the male dominated paradigm. The lack of fit
between women’s lives and the words available for talking about the experience present
real difficulties for ordinary women’s self-expression in their everyday lives (DeVault,
DeVault (1990) states that, “since the words available often do not fit, women learn to
‘translate’ when they talk about their experiences. As they do so, parts of their lives
‘disappear’ because they are not included in the language of the account” (p. 101).
Consequently, researchers must develop methods for listening around and beyond
words (DeVault, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Oleson, 1994). This study attempts to listen to
girls voices and represent them in the written word as closely as possible to their
original intent, with close attention paid to power relations, voice, and assumptions.

This study utilizes feminist multiple methods in order to link individual behavior with social frameworks. According to Reinharz (1992), "multiple methods work to enhance understanding both by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another" (p. 197). Three types of data collection: individual interviews, group interviews, and observations are used in order to provide an integrative perspective on the subject of study, which is congruent with the goals of feminist research methods.

Sample

The sample in this study consisted of eighteen girls ranging in ages 13 to 18. Eight were from a cheerleading gym and ten were from a dance studio. Thirteen of the girls are White, two are Latina, one is Black, and two are Asian. All girls volunteered their time with no other type of compensation. The majority of girls were middle class; inquiries were not made into the socio-economic status of their parents based on the desire for the participants to gain trust from the researcher, rather than view the researcher as prying too much into the personal lives of the participant’s families. Permission was obtained and granted from the Institutional Review Board for the study of human subjects at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas prior to the initial collection of data. Participants were required to sign a youth assent form as well as have parents sign a consent form. Data collection was divided into three different groups: individual interviews, group interviews, and observations. This method, promoted by Denzin (1994) and Reinharz (1992) is used in order to protect against researcher bias during the individual interviews.

Procedure

Individual interviews were used as the primary data collecting method. Each interview lasted approximately 25-45 minutes and was tape recorded. Interviews were semi-
structured based on Merriam's (2000) four types of interview questions: hypothetical questions, devil's advocate questions, ideal position questions, and interpretive questions. Preset questions were designed, with the intention to be flexible during the interview.

My intent was for the questions to be developed and answered by the informants (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995), but this was not the case in this particular study. In Chapter Four, I provide explanations for why the girls did not provide a lot of dialogue regarding the subject of their bodies in the interviews. The interviews ended up being more structured than not for most of the interviews, even though a reciprocal relationship was encouraged by myself in regards to interviewees and the construction of knowledge; which is consistent with feminist beliefs regarding reflexivity and relationships of power (DeVault, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Oakley, 1981; Oleson, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; Ussher, 1989). See (Appendix A) for a complete listing of questions asked.

Group interviews were also used based on the theory that a group format is congruent with the ways women have been socialized to understand, communicate and construct meaning and observations (Gilligan, 1982). Meaning within a group can be accessed and negotiated and members can co-construct answers based on cues given by other participants (Lather, 1991). Cheerleaders and dancers were interviewed on video in separate groups. There was one group interview per group. The group interviews were used as supporting data because only four of the eight cheerleaders participated in the group interview and one participated in the group interview, but not the individual interview. Ten dancers participated in the group interview, and 6 participated in individual interviews. There were also several instances in the group interview with the dancers where certain voices were overshadowed by more outspoken voices.
Observations were used to complement the interview data. Three observations lasting two hours each were done at the cheer gym. Six observations lasting two to four hours were done at the dance studio. My role as an observer was that of what Merriam (2000) defines as an “observer as participant” (p.103). My existence to the participants was acknowledged, but I did not participate in any of the activities they did. I asked a few questions if the opportunity permitted otherwise. I recorded field notes based on my observations, which included remarks based on Merriam’s (2000) suggestions: the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and my own behavior. Most of the time it was difficult to hear the conversations among the girls. The majority of notes I have collected are based on visual observations and a few comments that were stated by the girls and their coaches or teachers that took place within my hearing range. The purpose of the observations was to give a point of reference to the discussions and interviews.

The audiotapes were transcribed as verbatim as possible. Detailed notes of the video tapes of the group interviews were made, paying special attention to the continuity and discontinuity of themes and ideas. After each interview I recorded ideas and observations that stood out during the interview process, based on a critical interpretation of what was said. I tried to be critical of the social environment from which the girls’ created their meanings, without assuming that the girls were also conscious of this same environment. I proposed new questions to my research as the girls’ answers either fit or clashed with previous research and established paradigms.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Data were analyzed using feminist multiple methods to allow for flexibility in the process of discovery and data analysis (Reinharz, 1992). The construction of knowledge was continual throughout the research process in order to be flexible to the changing understanding of the girl’s narratives and constructions of knowledge (Reinharz, 1992). The particular combination of methods used in this study seeks to integrate individual and social explanations of body image awareness. Four levels of data analysis were used. The levels are presented in a linear fashion, however the actual process of data analysis involved the non-linear creation and re-creation of themes and categories (Reinharz, 1992).

The first level of analysis consisted of extracting significant statements or phrases that directly related to the research questions being asked (Colaizzi, 1978). Statements and phrases from the individual and group interviews were extracted as well as significant observations that were directly related to the research questions (e.g. definitions of body image, belief about personal body image, and how a body image is outwardly displayed). Table 1 demonstrates how the different processes of methodology were represented in connection to the research questions that were answered. The second level of analysis consisted of multiply coding all of the statements and phrases based on the research question they answered as well as other emergent and
experimental codes that did not directly answer the research questions (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). These codes were then created into categories based on frequency and

Table 1  Research Questions Represented by Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Individual interviews</th>
<th>Focus group (Cheerleaders)</th>
<th>Focus group (Dancers)</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.) Do dancers and cheerleaders perceive themselves as having a positive body image</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a.) How do dancers and cheerleaders define a positive body image</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b.) How do dancers and cheerleaders outwardly display a positive body image</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is having a positive body perception of one's body image an indicator of other aspects of overall health</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

regularity of occurrence. Appendix B details the answers each individual gave during the interviews. Fifteen categories are displayed in this table. These are the categories that are best represented in this type of format. Other categories that were not appropriate for this type of display are discussed in Chapter 5. Even though a participant might agree with a certain statement that is represented in the table, her reasons for doing so vary greatly based on her interpretation of the particular concept or statement. These differences will
be discussed later in the chapter. The table is meant only to provide a simplified overview of the individual interview results. A detailed table is not provided for the group interviews due to the multiple voices involved.

Initially I encountered some difficulty in creating categories. The responses the girls gave answered the research questions I had asked, however, their explanations were lacking in understanding. It seemed as if the girls were all referring indirectly to the same socially constructed narrative regarding body image in the groups, but a different interpretation of the narrative for themselves. This is most likely due to the fact that the interviews were about the individual, whereas the groups were talking about girls in general.

Issues regarding what Reinharz (1992) refers to as “believing the interviewee,” a controversial idea relating to the amount of deception that takes place within social interactions are relevant in this study. The girls often made comments in the focus groups that directly contradicted what they said in the interview or vice versa. All efforts were made to construct a representation of the dialogue that includes these contradictions without making the judgment that one dialogue is more “true” than the other.

Another contributing factor to this contradiction is the language they used to describe the socially constructed narrative was difficult to interpret. This was demonstrated by their frequent lack of explanations, but fervent usage of “you knows.” As Carol Gilligan (1981) demonstrated with her research on women’s lives, the phallocentric discourse of our culture often does not lend itself to the language used to describe the everyday lives of women. Marjorie DeVault (1990) discovered the same occurrences with her research on women, stating that the “you knows” in conversation represent the lack of language available to interpret women’s experiences. The “you knows” represent a message of “do
you understand what I am saying? I will explain as much as I can and maybe you can meet me half-way in understanding."

During the third level of analysis, focused coding was used to create themes from the constructed categories (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). The emergent themes were created from the categories based on the answers given during the individual and group interviews. Table 2 provides an outline of the specific themes that were created based on the constructed categories. Four themes are displayed in this table. These themes are all related to how a positive body image is defined.

Table 2  Outline of Themes and Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfectionism</th>
<th>Control Over the Body</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
<th>Cultural Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Rate their body image</td>
<td>-Fear of fatness</td>
<td>-Gaze of Other</td>
<td>-Criticisms of other girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Perceived pressure</td>
<td>-Ideal body</td>
<td>-Strong work ethic towards the body</td>
<td>-Spectacle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be thin</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Eating</td>
<td>-Body talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Working out</td>
<td>-Clothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the fourth level of analysis these themes were viewed as relationships of interdependence in which the broader domain of the mind/body dualism was constructed in order to help describe the "socially constructed narrative" of body image the girls were referring to. A diagram was constructed (see Figure 1) in order to create a web of understanding of the data (Merriam, 2000). This figure displays how the themes relate to one another in creating a definition of positive body image.
The themes constructed can only be inferred from the participants in this study. Further investigation would be required in order to generalize to other populations. This chapter describes in detail how the interviews and observations support this relationship of interdependency and how it is used to create the socially constructed narrative of a positive body image in which the girls refer to in defining what it means to have a positive body image.
When arranging the data for display, I chose quotes that best represented the general consensus of the group and those that directly contradicted the general attitude of the group. All of the reported quotes from the girls have been edited in content, getting rid of the excessive "likes." This was done after much deliberation in adhering to the girls' true voices. In the end I took into consideration comments made by Kvale (1996) and Denzin (1991) stating that people do not talk the same as they write and when the spoken words are on paper they can appear to be intelligible and can be devoid from the true meaning intended. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the nature of the pervasive stereotypes surrounding cheerleaders in particular, I did not want their voices to appear to be ignorant or immature, therefore I made the decision to edit the "like's."

Before I begin the discussion of the results of the data I would like to mention some of the differences I observed and some that were pointed out to me regarding dancers and cheerleaders. The two groups had different reasons for investing in their bodies. The cheerleaders were more concerned with keeping fit and staying in shape. Only a few girls planned on cheering in college, the rest did cheerleading because they enjoyed the socialization and the exercise. Several girls claimed that if they didn't cheer they would probably be fat and cheerleading was an excellent way to keep one physically fit. The dancers were more concerned with their bodies conforming to the physical and aesthetic demands of being a dancer. Almost all of the dancers expressed interest in dancing professionally sometime in the future. Only one dancer exercised outside of dance whereas the majority of the cheerleaders used the gym or other exercise routines frequently. Many of the overall themes and narratives were similar between the two groups. This study does not seek to compare the two groups, but rather look for common
themes of positive body image. Any pertinent differences between the groups are discussed where relevant.

Setting. The cheer gym and the dance studio were both set up similarly in that they both were large rooms with a bare floor and a mirror along one wall which they faced while doing the majority of their exercises. The girls were constantly watching themselves in the mirror, almost at all times. The mirror is there to observe one’s self while dancing and make sure the group formation is accurate. According to Amanda, an 18-year-old dancer, having a mirror in front of you most of the time changes your relationship with your body, she says,

You know you’re looking at yourself and your body and your face all the time and it’s just like weird to me when people are like, or with my boyfriend, I’m like did you look at yourself in the mirror? And he’s like, I don’t really look at myself, and I’m like how can you go through the day without looking at yourself? Like, it’s just like weird how different I am from other people and how I know like everything about my body and like every little thing on my face just cause I look at it all the time.

The cheerleaders wear a uniform of short shorts, tank tops, and tennis shoes when practicing. Their cheer uniforms are long sleeved and cropped to expose the midriff. The skirts are very short and they wear some type of “outside” briefs under their skirts. The dancers wear tights, a leotard, and either flat ballet shoes, pointe shoes, or character shoes. It is important for them to wear their hair secure to their head so that it does not interfere with the movement of the body when dancing. Almost all of the girls had make-up on at every practice and none of the girls ever looked sloppy or unkempt. According to the girls, a neat and clean appearance was a rule at the gym and at the studio. Both the
gym and the studio had a window where parents and others could watch the practices. No parents were allowed inside the gym or studio.

Both settings are very similar. They differ primarily in definition by the material of their floors. The dance studio has a wood floor, which is only suitable for dancing. Gymnastics on a wood floor would be unsafe. The cheer gym has a padded floor, which is safe for tumbling, but would make it difficult to dance on. This is how the two settings separate themselves: the former an art, the latter a sport. The dancers were very clear that dance is an art, and should be treated as such. The cheerleaders were adamant that cheerleading is a sport and should be treated as one. Some dancers were former cheerleaders and vice versa, although no one currently defined themselves as a dancer and a cheerleader. Each girl responded to the questions based on her current identity as a cheerleader or dancer.

Mind/Body Dualism

The relationships of themes that are displayed in Figure 1 are described in detail in this section. The mind/body dualism of Western culture is used to set up the theoretical background of why the girls answered the questions the way they did. The themes of perfectionism, control, and regulation are described as they relate to the forming of the definition of a positive body image.

The detail that stood out the most to me when I first read through the transcriptions was, what was not expressed and not captured through written translation (Rubin, 1983). The distortions created through transcription were more easily identified than locating and understanding what was not expressed. The transcription left a wanting for the emotion or lack there of, the giggling, long pauses and reflections, and embarrassment that was embodied in the original voices. The few girls who felt proud of their bodies
were reduced to fragmented comments that seemed conceited or shallow, rather than expressing the feeling of satisfaction and contentment they originally expressed. As I asked for explanations regarding some of the cultural norms I observed at the gym and studio, I felt as if the girls themselves did not really know the answers as to why they engaged in certain behaviors, nor were they concerned with the contradictions or concerns that surrounded their answers. This in itself is not unusual, but what seemed unusual to me was the almost secrecy that surrounded the girls responses, it was as if they did not want to give out too much information or reveal their secret practices. They seemed to give the impression that talking about your own body was not something that was done, even though I had overheard numerous conversations of them doing so. It was obvious that talking about your body was definitely something you did not talk about in-depth with a stranger. It was this secrecy that I became most interested in as I attempted to weave a web of understanding from their interviews, conversations, and my observations.

The first issue that caught my attention during the interviews was the explanations the girls provided of their bodies. My initial impression was observing how abrupt and distant they described their bodies to me. During observations, I observed the girls constantly watching themselves in the mirror even when they were not dancing or cheering. The cheerleaders spent a lot of time discussing the horrors of their bodies during the break times, so I expected the responses to be just as detailed. Comments such as, “cheesecake is my downfall,” and “no, I don’t own white pants, not with this butt,” were common conversations among the cheerleaders. The dancers did not talk about their bodies as much in range of my hearing. I asked Amanda who had been a cheerleader and a dancer if both groups talked about their bodies often. She said that there was definitely...
more body bashing talk amongst the cheerleaders, however the dancers were also concerned about their bodies, but the atmosphere of dance is more mature than cheerleading so they don't have those types of conversations as often.

When I asked the girls in the interviews to describe their bodies to me I received limiting descriptions of height and body build, i.e. muscular, big boned, petit, or medium or small build. The majority of the girls took long pauses before describing to me approximately how tall they were and they usually laughed when I probed for further relationships in regards to their bodies. These descriptions are not unusual in Western culture given its susceptibility towards obeying the principles of the dualisms that define our culture.

Susan Bordo (1993) discusses the dualistic heritage of Western culture, which views human existence as split into two realms: the bodily or material on the one hand, and the mental or spiritual on the other. Historically, the body is experienced through three broad themes: as alien the “not-self” or “not me,” as confinement and limitation, a “cage” or “prison,” or as the enemy (Bordo, 1993). It is this imbedded and embodied dualism that sets the tone for the girls explanations of their bodies. The mind has throughout history remained supreme, particularly as expressed through reason and man. The body has been associated with women. “Whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it might be” (Bordo, 1993, p.5). Under this context it is no wonder that the girls describe their bodies in such distant and ambivalent terms. The differences between the discussions among the girls and the interviews will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Five.
For these girls, control over the body is the visual representation of health and confidence. The mind is necessary as it is the driving force of the production of motivation and discipline over the body. It is never referred to by the girls with the same vigor and drive for perfectionism that is necessary for upkeep of the body. The majority of the girls have very high grade point averages. But they remain aware that there are not many societal rewards (outside of college scholarships) for being the smartest girl. For example, Becky, a 17-year-old dancer said that working towards improving the mind is important, but if given a choice, she would rather have a perfect body.

During the dancer’s focus groups the girls were discussing how important it is to always improve upon the body, that one can always have a better body. They were going on and on with such enthusiasm about this “perfection” of the body, so I asked them if anyone had ever considered putting this much energy into perfecting the mind. I asked them for their opinion on, why we as girls are always working on our bodies to be better, but not our minds. Amanda, an 18-year-old dancer, replied in her interview in response to the focus group question:

I don’t really know, I guess it would have to do with the media, like I guess it’s important if you can like fit into a size three, you know what I mean? And at my age, I keep talking about high school, cause I don’t know anything else. It’s all about sleeping with the most popular guy at school, so you have to be skinny and you want him to want you, and it doesn’t matter about the conversation. Yeah, I mean. I never really thought about that until you said that. When you said, ‘would you ever want to improve your mind?’ I’m like yeah! you know, I want to be smart, who cares about your body! No, I guess it’s never really presented like, wouldn’t you want to be smart.
For these girls, the mind body dualism is re-inscribed as the mind is useful for the
development of the body. However, as Amanda and the focus group demonstrated, there
is a disregard for the mind as being useful as a social tool or as something that would
provide personal satisfaction as the improvement of the body promises.

**Perfectionism**

Perfectionism is the most common theme among the majority of the girls. It is evident
in their attitudes towards their bodies and in their definitions of body image. "In shape"
was the operative term used to describe the ideal body type. Considering one’s self to be
"in shape" was the highest predictive factor of labeling one’s self as having a positive
body image. All of the girls said that being in shape was what allowed you to feel
positive about your body. I asked Laura, a 16-year-old, dancer if it was possible for a girl
who is overweight to feel good about her body. She said, "yeah, I think so, as long as she
eats, you know healthy, and is active, you know."

The common belief was that one must always work harder at being in shape and
monitor one’s self closely. The girls who worked out and ate healthy had a more positive
body image because they felt they had worked hard for it and earned the right through the
utility of the body. Only one girl said she felt the best about her body when she first
wakes up in the morning, (when she feels the lightest) and one said she feels good about
her body all of the time. However, they all felt they could never be fully satisfied and
comments were often stated such as, "I don’t think it is possible to be too critical really."

By the girl’s definitions, a positive body image was one in which the individual was
generally satisfied with her body, but was aware of things she needed to improve upon,
whether or not she obsessed about her improvements was irrelevant. According to the
girls, to be a perfectionist was considered acceptable and desired, to actually be perfect was not.

I had asked all of the dancers to rate their body image (how they felt on the inside about the external appearance of their body) on a scale from one to five with five being the highest. All of the girls said a three, except for one who said a four. All of the girls talked positively about their bodies, but said they could not rate themselves as fives because, "you always have something that you want to change." The girls constantly contradicted themselves when talking about their own body image and how they perceived how other girls felt about their bodies. For instance, many girls would tell me all of the negative things about their body and then end with the statement, "I am happy with my body" or "I like my body". I asked Tammy, a fifteen-year-old dancer, how she would rate her body image:

Tammy: I'd probably rate myself...because I do work for my body as being a dancer so I'd probably rate my body a three since I don't have like the perfect body, but I mean I don't think there is anything wrong. I am kind of happy, there are some negative things that I don't like, but.

Interviewer: So, why wouldn't you rate yourself a four or five

Tammy: Probably cause...my upper top isn't full enough, like it isn't a full "B" or anything, but other than that I think I'd rate myself a three.

This contradiction is an example of the state of the positive body image. It is a belief about the body that states that positive body image exists in a constant state of improvement. It might be imagined that some girls might not want to change anything about their bodies. It is not known due to the fact that the research literature does not...
discuss instances of girls who do not want to change their bodies. None of the girls in this study expressed a desire to keep their bodies exactly the way they are.

*Control Over the Body and Ideal Body Image.*

Many of the girls had body ideals that were similar to their own body size. Several descriptions of ideals and descriptions regarding their own bodies revolved around height. I hypothesize that this is because height is a static variable and they do not have control over changing it, therefore they can mention height and not feel as though they are threatening their position by bragging or feeling insufficient. However, if one’s height does not correlate with one’s ideal there will most likely be issues of inadequacy. Only the girl who labeled herself as a four described her body in terms of state and trait variables. The girls all had specific things that they would like to change about their bodies, but when asked what difference this would make in how they felt about their bodies, many girls said, “it wouldn’t make a difference.” Susan, a 17-year-old cheerleader said,

> I don’t think anybody would be as confident with themselves because then they’d just be like, everybody would be like. I don’t know, they just wouldn’t be happy. There wouldn’t be anything to work for. Like, you’d just be thin and everybody is thin...I don’t think that’s cool. I don’t think that would be happy at all.

A dancer replied similarly: that if she were to gain 20 lbs. that would be detrimental, but if everyone were to gain 20 lbs. that would be ok.

These comments reflect the desire to find purpose in perfection and a desire to work within a hierarchal system. None of the girls said that they believed the pressure to be thin was a social problem or that they believed life would be possible without the pressure to work towards improving the body. Maria, a 17-year-old, cheerleader said that
girls have probably always wanted to be thinner and improve their looks and they always will. There is no purpose in pursuing perfection if there is not some type of reward (Turner, 1984). The girls describe a hierarchy in which they wish to keep in place. A hierarchy cannot exist if there is no ideal to ascribe to. As history demonstrates, this ideal is contingent upon the economy and the social demands of the culture. The American ideal is a lean, low fat body, which is believed to be attainable to all who put in the effort (Ferron, 1997).

All of the girls expressed concern regarding gaining weight in the future, stating that it was a possibility, but they thought they could control it. In response to this possibility Danielle, a sixteen-year-old cheerleader, stated that, “you know its just the one thing that I do have control over, that I’m able to have control over, and so I think it will always be important to me.” The ability to control the body is a hallmark theme of anorexia along with the fear of fatness and body size overestimation. The informants in this study confirm the concept that disordered eating exists on a continuum. These girls express this desire for control over the body, but they don’t achieve it through starving themselves, they achieve it through “healthy” living, a concept that consists of its own rules and regulations in its own right. For example, I asked Laura, a sixteen-year-old dancer, if it is possible for a girl who might be overweight to feel good about her body. She said, “Yeah, I think so, as long as she eats, you know, healthy and is active.” The belief about healthy eating is that is accessible to everyone, however the ultimate goal is still to be thin, or rather “in shape.”

The Regulation of the Healthy Body

Very high standards regarding healthy eating and exercising were emphasized by the cheerleaders more than the dancers, although not all girls followed these standards. The
majority of the girls had never faced a crisis relating to their body image. The majority are young, probably have a high metabolism, and exercise through dance or cheer. They have not manipulated their body in regard to weight loss into something that is too far from its "normal" state. Several girls claimed they were "chubby" in middle school and had gone on diets to lose weight and were now happier, but would still like to lose more weight.

The discourse of "healthy eating" has replaced the previous discourse of dieting (Chapman, 1999). The girls in this study were all very clear on the differences between dieting and healthy eating. According to the girls, dieting consisted of restricting food intake, which was not healthy. Healthy eating consisted of eating lots of fruits and vegetables, at least three meals a day, and required a permanent lifestyle change that also included regular exercise. According to the girls, dieting was something you did if you needed to lose weight, but the better alternative is to eat healthy and exercise. A united discourse was present among the girls' descriptions of healthy eating. They all discussed the importance of watching what you eat, whether or not they actually did watch what they eat. It was an understood activity that you "should" do. Food was dichotomized into good food and bad food, which directly resulted in the identifying of the self as good or bad. Several girls claimed they felt the best about their bodies when they worked out and "knew [they] had eaten good all day."

I observed a strong work ethic in regards to how the girls observed the rules of healthy living. McDonald (1999) sums up the theory of this new asceticism by stating, "The body of the manager increasingly becomes the symbol of the corporation, to the point where we are witnessing the development of a 'new ethic of managerial athleticism' manifesting a new version of the Protestant ethic - one which has become widely diffused across the
class system" (p.157). Women are under the impression that a lean muscular body equals
the outward expression of power, restraint, and control, and that any other body would be
considered, weak, lazy, and inefficient. Women are not wrong in believing this message,
according to Turner (1984)

We jog, slim and sleep not for their intrinsic enjoyment, but to improve our chances at
sex, work, and longevity. The new asceticism of competitive social relations exists to
create desire which is subordinated to the rationalization of the body as the final
triump of capitalist development. Obesity has become irrational (p.12)

Western culture historically and cross-culturally privileges' vision and visual metaphors
above the other senses (Sampson, 1996). Therefore “healthy living” is inscribed on the
body as a visual metaphor of health.

As mentioned previously, some girls did not follow the prescriptions of healthy eating
although they certainly believed in them. There is no time to rest from the monitoring of
the body, one was always in a state of “watching,” whether it be in the dance mirror or
the food choices one made. Kimberley, a 15-year-old, cheerleader describes how she
feels when eating out with her friends:

Most of my friends eat pretty healthy and they like, you know, they like to work out
all the time and they like to eat healthy all time, and I’m not really like that, I mean, I
work out pretty much when I have to and I eat whatever I want, you know? And so
they’ll be eating, like we go out to dinner and they’ll get like a salad or something, and
I’ll get something like, so, like, you know, fattening, you know, double what they
have and I’m just like, I feel so embarrassed.

Girls have always been subject to the monitoring of their selves. They have been taught
to examine their self from the perspective of someone looking at them.
One might simplify this by saying: *men act and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the she surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (Berger, 1977, p. 46).

The rule for representing women has been to depict them only as objects of sight, existing for the pleasure of an imagined spectator, and aware that to be a spectacle is the domain of their value (Bordo, 1997). Amanda, a dancer, expresses this awareness when she describes why she became a cheerleader.

Cheerleading, ok, cheerleading is a sport, ok, and its um, I mean, now that I look back at it, the reason I went into cheer was basically to dance and perform. But then the other part of it is I get to wear a short little skirt and have guys hit on you all day and like be friends with the football players and like everybody knows you. Its more about like being popular and, and you know like you’re automatically hot- you know, like “I’m dating a cheerleader” and everybody’s like YA! You know, like no matter what, you’re a cheerleader, its about school and being popular and pretty and you know, stuff like that, but cheerleading is a sport and dancing is more of an art.

The girls in this study experience the gaze of men, other women, and themselves. The girls are very aware of the gazes they receive from men, it is this gaze that concerns them the most. They mention this in their talk about how important it is to “impress guys” and in Amanda’s discussion about the importance of sleeping with the most popular guy at school. They are also aware of the gaze of other women. The girls talk about how critical girls are of each other in regards to appearances and how girls look at other girls more than guys look at girls.
They also mention the gaze of the self as a process of monitoring one’s habits and appearance at all times. As dancers and cheerleaders they have to continually monitor themselves in the mirror. These girls are used to being aware of how they appear on the outside probably more than other populations of girls. What they are not consciously aware of is how all three “gazes” are interwoven into the concept of the self. The girls define the gaze they project upon themselves as monitoring the progress of healthy living on the body. The doctrine of healthy eating is based on this surveying of one’s self. The participants always used the word “watch” in congruence with the word “health.” Therefore, it might be inferred that to watch is to be healthy, to be healthy is to follow the rules, to follow the rules is to win.

The majority of the girls felt the best about their bodies when they worked out and worked up a sweat. It takes work and effort to conform the body to “healthy” standards. Americans strongly believe that the ideal body is attainable if one puts in the effort (Ferron, 1997). This belief reflects the cultural ideal of the muscular “fit” body as the ideal body type. When asked to define what it means to be thin, Kimberley, a 15-year-old cheerleader stated the following:

It shows that you take care of yourself, well in certain ways, like if you’re too thin then, you know, like anorexic/bulimic thin, then you don’t take care of yourself because it’s not healthy, but like if you’re thin and you’re like, have a nice body and you’re tone, then it shows that, you know, you take care of yourself and you appreciate yourself.

The cheerleading focus group was very clear in distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy behaviors. They discussed girls that they knew of that had lost weight through diet pills, starvation, or purging, and they all claimed that these behaviors
were unhealthy and therefore, bad. The girls that used these methods to lose weight were not well liked by the girls in the focus groups. They claimed that when people would compliment them on their bodies it drove them further to lose more weight, which is unhealthy. The girls had a very high moral definition of eating healthy, those that did not follow were morally in the wrong. Based on the girls' conversations, the girls, some of whom were other cheerleaders, who lost weight “the unhealthy” way were disliked by other girls and received more attention from the guys.

The girls strongly reinforced the idea of the unhealthy body being a social problem. Those in society that do not follow the prescription of the healthy lifestyle are labeled morally, socially, and physiologically “unfit” (Chapman, 1999; Edgley & Brissett, 1990; Sobal & Maurer, 1999). They were very concerned with the bad habits of other girls that allowed them a social advantage i.e. using diet pills to get thin while others followed the rules. It was never discussed where a girl who was naturally thin fit into this scheme. The majority of the girls interviewed were probably naturally thin or at least “average” but they all based their attitudes towards their bodies based on the fact that they were happy with their bodies because they worked towards improving them. According to the girls, anyone, regardless of size, has a right to feel good about their body if they work out and eat healthy.

Following the Cultural Rules

The one exception to the rule of exercise was Linda, a 14-year-old, dancer. When asked about outside exercise she answered very seriously,

Well, what I would consider outside dieting or exercise, is, cause I have a baby sister and so picking her up and carrying groceries and stuff that would be like outside exercising and dieting.
By defining exercise as something one does without being conscious of it does not fit the model the other girls describe. The other girls define exercise as something you do for yourself that sets you apart from others, making you a better person. It is certainly not defined as something everybody does, even though the girls claim everybody should do it.

Linda claimed she still watched her weight for the purposes of dance. Linda was not overly concerned about her body image. She was the only person who said that she had no ideal body shape, and she had never really thought about it. She says it is more important what a person looks like on the inside, but she didn’t always feel this way:

When I was younger I didn’t because, I was like these people are weird they have something wrong, but as I got older I realized making friends is really hard and just because you don’t have as many friends doesn’t mean anything so I thought about it for like the past three years.

Linda is unique in that she admits to the prejudices she was socialized to accept and found it difficult. Many girls are afraid to break these rules, the social consequences are too much. According to Douglas (1994) this fear is the motto of the 1990’s: “I am not a feminist, but.” “The comma says the speaker is ambivalent, that she is torn between a philosophy that seeks to improve her lot in life and a desire not to have to pay too dearly for endorsing that philosophy” (Douglas, 1994, p.269). The problem for these girls remains in the conflicting message of being afraid of her body because it can let her down, but attempting to control it because it is also her passport to happiness (Ussher 1989).

Cultural Examples. The majority of the girls claimed that feeling good about your body gave you more confidence in all other areas of your life. When asked how would you
recognize a girl who had a positive body image, the girls replied that she would “wear more revealing clothes” (which would ensure her more attention from boys and positive or negative acknowledgment from girls); she would have more confidence, i.e., “talking to boys and people in general,” “become more outgoing,” and “maybe getting up to speak in front of the class,” and she would also “carry herself in a way that showed confidence.” Becky, a 17-year-old dancer expressed this explicitly when she said, “I would probably be a lot more outgoing if I didn’t have big hips.” These girls are not unreasonable in expecting to gain confidence in life through changes in their bodies.

According to Brown (1993), women who lose weight do feel good about themselves, feel more confident, and claim the experience as the key to solving major life problems.

The majority of the girls in this study were comfortable with their bodies being their “passports to happiness” because they felt as if they had more control over this destiny and an advantage over other girls who, unfortunately for them, could not control their bodies. A unique relationship exists among girls and the social problem of weight and their actual concern for other girls. They promote “healthy” eating and exercise as a social problem, stating that, “everyone should just eat healthy and exercise” or “everyone should watch what they eat.” The girls who lost weight in unhealthy ways were viewed almost as cheating, not following the prescribed rules, accused of not being healthy.

Lindsey, a 15-year-old cheerleader states that,

I think if you want to get the body you want, I think you should work for it. Not just have money to buy it, like implants. That’s a foreign object going into you and like so many things cause from it and I just think people are stupid. But like personal trainers I think might be worth it if you actually do what they say and keep following up on it then I don’t think it’s a waste of money.
The girls were not actually concerned about the welfare of these unhealthy girls. They thought the attention the unhealthy girls received was "not right, it just makes them do it more." They were also disgruntled toward girls who complained about their bodies, but did not do anything to change them. The majority of the girls in this study said they complain about their body regularly, however, because they exercised and were working towards correcting those flaws their complaints were valid. The girls who were unhealthy due to dangerous dieting or eating junk food were perceived as at a loss because they did not follow the rules and they would pay for it in the future. An interesting note about health- almost all of the cheerleaders tanned in a salon and this was never mentioned by those that did tan as being a health problem they might have to "pay for" in the future. Two girls were very adamant against tanning because they both had mothers who had had skin cancer. Being tan was stated as being essential to the overall appearance of the "healthy" body.

Perceived pressure to be thin. The girls were very aware of how other girls looked and how guys perceived these girls. Unspoken competition among each other was mentioned among the dancers and the cheerleaders. When asked do you feel any pressure to be thin, Susan, a 17-year-old cheerleader replied:

Not anyone specifically, but like being on my team there's a lot of tiny girls and girls that exercise all the time and girls that are really determined, you know, and I just could care less sometimes, and I like do my own thing and get involved with other stuff, and so I feel sometimes when I go to cheer practice that there's a lot of pressure to be thin, like there's a lot of competition throughout the squad just to be thin and lose weight kind of thing.
Some girls said that they could use the traits they envied in other girls in a positive way to motivate them to work out more. Their conversations reflected a strong essence of competitiveness and dislike towards girls who were skinnier via “unhealthy” methods. A girl that lost weight the “healthy” way was looked favorably upon by the other girls, almost as a role model, whereas a girl who lost weight the “unhealthy” way was viewed as cheating, or not following the rules.

The girls claimed they were not interested in changing the social hierarchy of the body as the means of “getting ahead.” The majority of these girls did not have problems maintaining at least part of the healthy lifestyle, yet they were very critical of those who did not follow. They claimed that MTV could sometimes be problematic because there were too many skinny girls, but as Maria, a 17-year-old cheerleader pointed out, “this can also be positive because it can help motivate you to be in better shape.” To do nothing towards the improvement of your body was considered not healthy. The majority of the girls invest a lot of time and energy into “watching” what they eat and monitoring their bodies, others relish the privilege of high metabolism in which they can dance and eat all they want. The girls enjoy the competition of creating their perfect body, or at least being in a state of perceived progress towards their goal. They do not want things to change.

Summary

The majority of girls are very interested in keeping the hierarchy of weight in order. This makes sense, given that they are at the top of the pecking order. Susan Bordo (1993) claims that,

Preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness are not abnormal. Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of
our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring, and self-‘discipling’ docile bodies sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of these norms (p. 186).

The girls in this study reinforce this belief regarding discipline and the self, even though they are not consciously aware of it. Their explanations of positive body image are expressed through their personal need and desire to be thin and in shape.

The duality of the mind/body sets the premise for the relationship a girl has with her body. Even though the provided explanations of the body seemed to remove the body from the self, the body was used as a measure of self-worth and self-esteem. This was made possible by the perceived amount of control over the body. How much control a girl believed she had was related to her drive for perfectionism. If she believed she needed her body to be the best, she was willing to put in the work required in order to have her ideal body. This is achieved through the monitoring of the self, "watching" what one eats and does. According to the participants, the overall perception of body image is displayed through clothing and increased confidence. The other outward expression of body image is, how the mention of the body is used in conversation. Chapter Five provides insight into this occurrence.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Body image is interwoven into all aspects of a girl's identity and life. The girls talked about many issues throughout the discussion of their interviews and focus groups. In this analysis I have only scraped the surface of most of these discussions. The girls in this study have defined how they interpret a positive body image and all of them claimed that they do feel positive about their bodies most of the time. The girls in this study define a positive body image as one in which an individual feels happy with who she is, eats healthy, takes care of herself, and exercises. The majority of girls in this study said they wanted to improve their body in order to improve their confidence. The dichotomy of the body/mind, which is inherent within patriarchy, is apparent in the ways girls describe their bodies. It is also apparent in their beliefs about their body and health. Continual monitoring, perfection, and control are all considered positive attributes related to the body and the self. These attributes act together in order to create a positive body image. The girls believe that these attributes from the mind contribute to the perfection of the body. There is no mention of any other type of relationship between the body and mind other than a love/hate labor based relationship. The work towards the body gave the girls permission to feel that they had earned the right to feel good about their bodies.

In response to the actual research questions, the cheerleaders and dancers did define themselves as having a positive body image. However, their definitions of a positive body image were based on the concept that the body can always improve and therefore is
never perfect because it is always on display and always being monitored. Most girls answered the question of whether or not they felt positively about their bodies with the some variation of the statement, “I like my body, but I wish I had smaller... or more defined... or less....” The list provided in Figure 2 summarizes some of the feelings the girls expressed as well as the expectations that are inherent within the socially constructed narrative that the majority of girls in this study refer to. Figure 2 displays a list of some of the contradictions that were expressed by the girls.

________________________________________________________________________

I like my body, BUT I would like to have smaller... or more defined...

Thin, BUT not too thin

Muscular, BUT not too muscular

Confident, BUT not conceited

Revealing, BUT not a slut

Healthy, BUT not dieting

Big boned, BUT not offensive

Love your body, BUT only conditionally

Be happy with your body, BUT have a lean body

Like your body, BUT never admit it to others

Work towards perfection, BUT don’t be perfect

________________________________________________________________________

Figure 2   Conditions Regarding Attitude Towards the Body
These contradictions were expressed by all of the girls when they defined what it meant to feel positively about your body. They were also expressed in the creation of the definition of a positive body image displayed in Figure 1. These contradictions are expressed in the themes of perfectionism, control, regulation, and cultural examples. All of these themes relate to each other in order to create the interpretation of the socially constructed narrative of a positive body image.

The majority of the girls all had strong drives towards perfectionism and a desire to be able to control their bodies. These drives are very similar to those experienced by girls with eating disorders, except they are achieved through healthy eating, not starvation. The girls in this study were aware of the harmful effects of anorexia and bulimia, and claimed to not participate in these practices. If eating disorders are at the far end of the continuum of eating disorders, the converse of an eating disorder is certainly not at the other end of the gamut. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction were simultaneously given as examples of how someone feels positively about their body. Overall health was considered to embody healthy eating, exercising, and loving your body. Any type of eating disorder was seen as not loving your body and therefore bad.

A positive body image was culturally displayed by the adherence to the rules of perfection-monitor-control. Confidence was stated as the result of feeling good about one’s body. According to the girls, confidence is expressed by wearing less or “inoffensive” clothing and having more confidence to do more things. This was also evident in the observations, in which the girls were wearing very tight or revealing clothing and said in the interviews that they felt comfortable in this type of clothing most of the time. The girls claimed that their major source of confidence came from their outside appearance. They also stressed the societal value of the body over the mind and
how the mind can be used to improve one's body. This is an example of the body and mind assisting each other in development of identity and self-concept. However, the girls gave no evidence of believing that the body and mind worked together as one.

As mentioned previously, what was unsaid was what seemed the most important to this study. Discussing the body in conversation was one of the most common occurrences I observed; yet the interviews did not provide sufficient answers as to how the conversation is constructed. The girls described their bodies as if they were detached from their actual self, whereas, in reality their body was key to their self-concept and feelings of confidence. They stated that a positive body image was displayed and not talked about, however whether a fellow girl had an attractive body or not was talked about frequently by other girls.

The everyday conversations girls have are key to understanding how body image is used as a means of symbolism among girls. One of the first girls I interviewed, Maria, a cheerleader, seemed to be very happy with the way she looked. She had mentioned several times that she liked her body, even when I had not asked her about it. Later, during the focus group (she was not present) the other girls brought her name up as an example of “skinny people complaining about their bodies.” When I asked the girls why they thought she made these comments they said, “it was probably for attention.”

Another cheerleader, Jen said that when her friends complain about their bodies she tells them not to say the “F” word around her. She says they are all thin and beautiful and she doesn’t want to hear them complain about being fat. Jen was the only girl who said she does not participate in “body bashing” conversation.
In a conversation with 15-year-old Kimberley, she provides an example of the complex ways girls discuss their bodies in conversation. The following example is an excerpt from a conversation regarding Kimberley’s overweight sister:

Kimberley: ...No, she was, um, very skinny actually until about her sophomore year and then like, she quit playing softball and just pretty much sat at home and started gaining a lot of weight and so...

Interviewer: Are you worried about that happening to you?

Kimberley: Yeah, because now like, I’m at the same age that she was when she stared to gain all of her weight so now more than ever I’m like, watching because I don’t want the same thing to happen to me that happened to her.

Interviewer: Right... um, so, you would want to lose weight now if you could?

Kimberley: Right

Interviewer: If you could. And, um, you said, you’d feel, you wouldn’t have to worry about your weight?

Kimberley: Yeah

Interviewer: But, how would it change your conversations with your girlfriends?

Kimberley: Um, I don’t think that it would, because they would still talk about themselves and I would still probably join in and still be like, oh, well, I wish that this was, you know? Still talk about the same things even though I knew that I had lost the weight, you know?

All of the girls said they participated in this type of conversation, whether it was about themselves or about other girls. The majority of the girls say they talk about their bodies in negative ways with their girlfriends, even though they all had “positive” body images.
I observed three main uses of the body in conversation: 1.) As a statement of being aware of one's flaws and not appearing conceited, 2.) As a statement of insecurity, and 3.) As a judging tool used against other girls to determine one's own self-worth. However, I did not have enough data to fully support these observations as being exclusive. There is no way to truly understand the conversations girls have about their bodies without being there, present in the conversation. Further ethnographic research is needed in order to determine how the discussion of the body is used in conversation.

In the focus groups of the cheerleaders and in the interviews of the dancers, they expressed a culture of jealousy and hatred among girls. During the focus group of the cheerleaders, the girls described what it was like to go to a party. They said that guys could hang out with anyone at a party, but girls usually only hang out with the girls they came to the party with. "Hooking up" with a guy is the main goal of a party. If a girl is not talking to a guy she is talking with her girlfriends about every single other girl in the room and what is wrong with her face, hair, clothes, body size, body shape, and weight. The girls said they were in a constant state of competition with other girls. According to Amanda, the goal of high school culture is to sleep with the most popular guy. If this is the case then appearances play an important role in being considered attractive to the most popular guy. The girls did not discuss sexual activity while in my presence. However, it is assumed that regardless of whether or not one actually does "sleep" with any guy, the goal of attracting a guy and having the opportunity is just as important.

The girls in this study have an explicit set of rules that they explain through the telling of a socially constructed narrative about body image based on being "healthy." It is good to know that these girls do not engage in any dangerous eating habits, but yet their pursuit of "healthy" is not too far from the eating disorders on the continuum. According to these
girls a positive body image is one in which one is comfortable with one’s body, but finds
room for improvement.

One area of health that was not mentioned by the girls was a unity of body and mind. Yoga, which literally means “to join” is becoming a trend in popular American culture. Feminist philosophers such as Luce Irigaray (2002) refer to the neglect of the “breath” in Western culture and the lack of perceived unity between spirit, body, and mind. Shroff (1993) also states the necessity of a more united body for women. The mind/body dualism of Western culture discourages a more holistic way of thinking about relationships to the self and others. It is necessary for Western culture to rethink the dichotomies it continually recreates in order to unite the body and mind as one self.

Implications for Further Research

Controversial research has recently been brought to the foreground of the discussion of women and the passive aggressive ways they treat other women (Chesler, 2001). bell hooks (2002) reminds us that sexism is not a dichotomy of men against women. Both women and men have been socialized into the same system of patriarchy and use sexism against their own sex and each other as a means of power. Many of these girls consistently reinforce the structure of patriarchy when they constantly judge each other based on weight. Kimberley provides an extreme example of the ways in which girls judge other girls:

Interviewer: What are guys most attracted to in girls?

Kimberley: Being skinny

Interviewer: And what do you think girls notice most about other girls?

Kimberley: Their weight

Interviewer: Their weight?
Kimberley: Yeah

Interviewer: What about personality?

Kimberley: Um, I think to me it plays a big role because if someone is fat but they have a great personality then they’re like a good friend, you know, then that’s just the way they are, but I think to some other people, if you don’t look good they won’t be your friend, like I know someone who is like that.

Interviewer: Really?

Kimberley: so, I mean she’s said it, she came out and said that if you’re not pretty I don’t want to hang out with you.

These girls are not the only members of society that engage in this behavior, they learn it from the men and women who engage in this behavior and teach it to their children. More research needs to be done examining girls like Jen and Linda who defy some of the dominant narratives of their culture.

Recent research has brought to light the ways women reinforce patriarchy in their relationships with each other, but little research has been done to examine ways women, especially girls can improve their relationships with one another (Chesler, 2001). The cheerleaders mentioned in their focus group how important it is to be secure in yourself because as Debra, a 17 year old, said, “that girl who you think is your best friend will turn her back on you in a heartbeat, so you have to be comfortable with yourself!” The girls in the group also mentioned how boys socialize differently than girls. They said that boys can hang out with anyone and they do a lot of activities together, whereas girls are very selective about who they can hang out with. I do not suggest that all girls should get along because they are girls, but a consciousness needs to be raised about the way girls socialize with each other and the social expectations they have for one another. One of
the most important locations of this socialization is within schools. Research focusing on
the facilitating roles of school counselors, teachers, school culture, and sports on the
development and socialization of girls is necessary as well as an increased social
awareness of the expectations that are placed on girls in Western culture (Pipher, 1994).

The body is central to all of the discussions surrounding adolescent girls and their well
being. More narratives are needed of the everyday experiences and interactions girls face
regarding their bodies. This study seeks to contribute to the literature of the everyday
experiences of women and the development of new feminist theories within psychology.
As bell hooks (1984) reminds us, we can all act as oppressors. Women compare their
bodies to other women to place a value on their own individual body. Women must stop
the belief that they are in continual competition against each other for the prized male
approval. As women, we actually keep the phenomenon of weight control alive each time
we judge other women by their appearance, each time we diet, or complain in
conversation about our bodies (Brown, 1993). Women must learn to love their own
bodies and in turn recognize the beauty and other attributes in themselves and other
women.
APPENDIX A

Examples of Questions Asked

1.) How would you rate your body image on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most positive.

2.) How would you describe your body to me? You may interpret this question any way you like.

3.) What do you like about your body? What would you like to change about your appearance?

4.) What type of pressures do you feel to be thin? Where do these pressures come from?

5.) What kind of pressure does dancing put on the appearance of your body?

6.) Do any dance moves or uniforms make you feel uncomfortable? Which ones?

7.) Do you think it is possible for everyone to obtain the ideal body? Explain.

8.) What types of dieting or exercise do you engage in to maintain or change your body appearance/size?

9.) How do you think most teen girls feel about their bodies?

10.) Describe your first memory of being aware of the need to be thin?

11.) How important is fashion/clothing to you? What kind of clothing do you like to wear?

12.) What types of media do you consume?

13.) How would your life change if you were 20lbs. heavier?

14.) How important is the attention given to you by boys?

15.) Whose opinion is more important to you, what boys think about you or what girls think about you?

16.) What does being thin symbolize to you?
APPENDIX B

Table 2  
Display of creation of categories based on research questions answered.

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Thesis Title: A Descriptive Study of Positive Body Image Among Adolescent Female Dancers and Cheerleaders

Thesis Examination Committee:
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Committee Member, Dr. Peggy Perkins, Ph. D.
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