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**SHAPING UP AND FITTING IN:
A GROUNDED THEORY OF WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University**

Jennifer Hamid

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ABSTRACT

The present study employed a qualitative approach informed by a feminist perspective, specifically the generative, inductive methods of grounded theory to explore women's experiences regarding their body image. Reports of 11 women's experiences were obtained using a semi-structured interview framework. This study aimed to explore the cognitive, behavioural and psychological dimensions of women's body concerns, focusing on weight, shape, size and appearance; how these concerns affect the women; and what the women perceive as having contributed to their concerns. The preliminary grounded theory developed suggests that each of the women, to various degrees, monitor, evaluate, regulate and/or alter their bodies in specific ways, in order to maximise positive feelings about themselves, and minimise negative ones. The model developed in this study is process oriented and suggests that for most of the women, being happy with their bodies, or not feeling *unhappy* with them, is only a transitory part of an ongoing cyclical process of monitoring and regulating. These findings have important implications for education and prevention, and for 'treatment'. They also suggest many worthwhile avenues for future research.

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PREFACE

The present study is situated in the context of a rising incidence of eating disorders, especially among women, and the increasingly widespread nature of both concerns with body image, and potentially harmful 'solutions' for these concerns, such as dieting, cosmetic surgery, and so on. This is considered a very valuable area of research, if only for the fact that body image concerns affect such a large and growing amount of people in Westernised society.

Chapter One outlines some of the psychological, sociological, and feminist literature in the area of women's body image. This is followed by a brief critique of this literature, and a discussion of the aims and relevance of the present study. In Chapter Two the two research frameworks, namely qualitative and feminist approaches, that underpin the present study are considered, together with a critique of the traditional positivist quantitative paradigm. Following this is a consideration of the particular qualitative approach adopted in the present study - the grounded theory approach. Chapter Three outlines the processes by which the present study was carried out, and presents a brief biography of the women who took part in the study.

Chapter Four looks at three contextual factors which provide an important framework to the theory generated in the present study. In Chapter Five, a preliminary grounded theory of women's body image is introduced, then the details of each of the categories in the theory are elaborated in turn. Chapter Six includes some further reflections on relationships between the data and the literature, followed by conclusions and implications of the present study. Finally, limitations of the present research are discussed, and suggestions are given as to useful and interesting areas for future research.

Legitimate Voices

As my awareness of feminist and qualitative methodological issues increased, and I began to question the uses of language in psychology, I found that the use of the 'third person' writing style advocated by the sciences and the pseudo-sciences (positivism) was not necessarily the best way of representing my research process and outcomes.

The use of the third person constructs abstract and depersonalised writing. Its use signals to the world (or academia at least) that this researcher has done his or her best to follow the objective principles of science, avoiding subjectivity and hence cutting out as much bias or distortion of the "truth" as possible. It is also an effective way of removing the 'researcher' from the 'researched', or in other words removing the researcher's 'experience' from the results of their research.

However, in both feminist and qualitative philosophies, subjectivity and meaning go hand in hand - research that has been stripped of its subjectivity and context often loses much of its meaning (see Chapter Two). Subjectivity in these paradigms is part of the research. It is acknowledged as an important influence on the research process and outcome, and on the quality and relevance of the knowledge produced.

Also, the exclusion of subjectivity tends to deny the realities of the research participants, as well as removing their power as 'knowers of their own realities'. If truth is viewed as consensual and context bound, then subjectivity should not be discarded. It becomes an important part of the research process, which needs to be discussed rather than eliminated.

In the positivist paradigm, to which psychology traditionally adheres, writing in the third person is the only legitimate way to disseminate scholarly or academic knowledge. Thus I found that in order to follow qualitative, and in particular

feminist philosophies, and including subjectivity and context, I was left without a 'legitimate voice'.

This is reflected in the uneasy juxtaposition of 'formal academic writing', with 'informal subjective writing' throughout the thesis, and in this way the construction of my thesis mirrors both the development of the research and the development of my own learning process.

My Research

One of the more important tenets of both qualitative and feminist philosophies is the acknowledgement and explicit discussion of the subjectivity inherent in any interpersonal interaction (such as research). Both approaches emphasise the importance of being aware of, and making explicit, one's perceptual frameworks. In my case, my experience as a woman, as one who has experienced concerns about my own body, and one who has experienced the rarity of talking to a woman who does not have any concerns about her body, has undoubtedly influenced my choice of topic. I am a European 'Kiwi' and a university graduate in psychology. I am also what is currently labelled as a 'feminist' although considering the many different meanings attached to that term, a more precise label for myself would be a 'feminist oriented egalitarian'. However, I have done my best to challenge the assumptions that undergird my perspectives, and approach the research 'with an open mind'. Finally, my ontological and epistemological position is that there are multiple realities, knowledges, and 'ways of knowing', and that they are all valid ways of viewing the world.

I approached this study with a desire to learn about women's experiences related to their body image. However, I wanted to find out what women said about their experiences, rather than what they scored on a satisfaction scale, or whether their 'body distortion' was significantly different from someone else's.

While these may be interesting topics in themselves, they have been covered already in the existing literature. My own interest lies in what women have to say about what they think, feel and do in relation to their 'body image'. A qualitative framework provided the most suitable and appropriate way to achieve this aim, and the grounded theory approach enabled me to study what I wanted to study, in the way I wanted to study it, using systematic and rigorous data gathering and analytical methods. These approaches also allowed me to express my inclinations towards a feminist perspective and to honour women's experiences as real and valid.

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