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**A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS
OF WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE: COMPARISONS
BETWEEN NORMAL WEIGHT, OVERWEIGHT,
EATING DISORDERED AND BODY BUILDING
WOMEN**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Psychology
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FOREWORD

A thesis on women's body image? Why? Let me explain from the beginning....

My body, strangely enough, has been with me all my life. As a child I marvelled at how fast I could make it run, how high I could make it jump, and how high up a tree I could get it to climb. Every year it aged, the better it got! I was a satisfied customer until I was eleven. That was when the "Are you thin enough?" department in my consciousness opened for business. It has done a roaring trade ever since. I began to compare my body with other female bodies to see if it was thin enough. It wasn't. I had a normal weight body, but I definitely wanted to exchange it for an underweight model. I had seen these underweight models advertised. They came with happiness and success guaranteed for the lifetime of the product! I was definitely going to get one of those when I grew up.

After I had finished growing, I was horrified to discover that I had been given the wrong model! I had some of the correct pieces, but other pieces didn't fit together right; they were too big. I was annoyed that my model came with a no exchange policy. But there was hope, I was told that all models were adjustable! I certainly wanted to be well-adjusted. So I followed the instructions; I ate less and exercised more well I really tried to. Neither my body nor my attitude towards it changed. Trying to be well-adjusted was just not as much fun as eating chocolate.

I knew there were many other unsatisfied customers. I decided that if I was going to have a fair go, then I would need to fix what was wrong on the inside. Then I could tell the other unsatisfied customers and we could throw away the instructions and enjoy ourselves. So I decided to have a look inside ...

ABSTRACT

This thesis approaches the area of women's body image with the aim of expanding existing knowledge based on traditional male/female comparisons of how women respond to quantitative measures of body image. It does so by distinguishing between some different body-type groups of women. These were mostly Caucasian women aged eighteen and over who lived in the greater Auckland area. They were grouped as: normal weight (n = 43); overweight (n = 37); women with eating disturbances (n = 27); and body builders (n = 17). A pilot study involving ten normal weight women examined the face validity of several established international measures of body image as well as additional ones developed for the main study. The established questionnaires were: the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, the Body Esteem Scale, the Weight Locus of Control Scale, a Figure Rating Scale and a Silhouette Rating scale. The newer measures consisted of modifications made to the Figure Rating Scale and the Silhouette Rating scale. Verbal questions about teasing history were also asked, the intention being to formulate a teasing history questionnaire for the main study. These measures were found to be valid by the women.

In part one of the main study quantitative comparisons between the groups revealed some differences, but also some surprising similarities. Desirable body types of normal weight and muscular physique were described positively in physical and personality terms. The undesirable body types of thin and overweight received negative descriptions irrespective of the women's own group membership. The eating disordered women scored the lowest self-esteem while the other groups did not differ. The body builders scored the highest body-esteem while the normal weight and overweight, and overweight and eating disordered groups did not differ. Correlations between self-esteem and body-esteem were significant for all groups except the body builders. The correlation was strong for the eating disordered group and moderate for the normal weight and overweight groups. In the Figure Rating Scale the body builders chose more muscular ideal figures than the other groups and for all groups the ideal and current figures were usually one figure size different. At least half the women in each group felt their body was the same size as they thought it was. Of those remaining who gave different answers to the think versus feel ratings, nearly all in the eating disordered group reported they felt bigger. In the other groups there was an even split between those who felt bigger and those who

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felt smaller than they thought they were. The women were most united in their selection of the figure they thought men would find most attractive. In approximately a quarter to one third of each group (excluding the body builders due to small numbers) the figure selected as attractive to men was also chosen as the self ideal. Approximately a quarter of each group (excluding body builders) selected the same self ideal and peer ideal, however a considerable percentage of women selected a larger self ideal than peer ideal. All groups reported there should not be an ideal figure at all in society. All groups tended to believe that their weight was under their own control. Most women reported having been teased about their appearance and being affected by this teasing. This was especially noticeable for the eating disordered group, a considerable percentage reporting they still felt adversely affected by it.

Part two of the study introduces feminist poststructuralist theory and the Foucaultian concept of power and discourse analysis as ways to explore body image research. The body image literature introduced in part one is then revisited showing how this area of research can be harmful for women. The presentation of the interviews with 28 women follows, seven women from each body type group. A short form of discourse analysis was used for the women's responses to issues in body building, their explanations of the self-esteem, body-esteem, and the results of the correlation of the two. Issues related to the presence of an ideal figure size in society are also discussed. A longer form of discourse analysis was involved for the readings of the women's accounts of having been teased about their appearance. These readings showed many women located their accounts of teasing within a discourse of trivialisation-of-teasing, indicating that the seemingly trivial practice of teasing is a powerful form of social control, resulting in feelings of vulnerability.

The study concluded with summaries and conclusions from the literature presented in the introductions of both parts one and two. The quantitative and qualitative research methods were compared to see what both could offer body image research. Finally speculations were made about directions which body image research could take at both the individual and cultural level.

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OVERVIEW OF THESIS

This research has been conducted with women of mostly European descent who live in the Auckland area. It is not an attempt to cover women's body image as a universal application to all women.

This thesis on women's body image is divided into two main sections. The first section researches body image through a quantitative analysis; the second section uses a qualitative approach. The introduction to the first part of the study outlines some relevant phenomena concerning women's body image: the changing definitions of physical beauty, the modern decline in weight of the ideal figure and the pressure women experience to conform to the ideal in order to be considered 'normal'. These outlines lead to a discussion of the role of the female body in Western culture, and how women's femininity and value are defined through their bodies. The effects of this pressure in terms of lowering women's confidence and position in society are outlined. The concept of deviance is then introduced whereby the well known example of offenders of legal norms being labelled as deviant is applied to women who commit the 'offence' of not attaining an acceptable body standard. A general introduction to feminism and its influence on social psychological research is made to establish a framework from which the initial aims of this study are developed. A major criticism by feminism of psychological research is the reduction of women into one homogeneous group which is then compared with men. In response to this criticism this research aims to avoid simplistic homogeneity. Therefore in this particular study the experiences of three different groups of women are presented in terms of obesity, eating disorders and weight training. Literature on these groups will be introduced. In addition a fourth group - normal weight women - will be described.

The specific areas of body image being investigated in this study will then be introduced. These include measures of: silhouette rating, self-esteem, body-esteem, the correlation between self-esteem and body-esteem, figure rating, weight locus of control, and the history of being teased about appearance. Various definitions of body image will be mentioned leading to the presentation of each body image area used in part one of this study. Previous research relating to each area will be described and discussed before outlining the proposals of this particular study. At

the conclusion of the areas of investigation is the method section for part one in which the empirical definitions of the groups are presented together with a demographic analysis of the women who took part in the questionnaire phase. A description of the questionnaires is presented here in addition to the process of the questionnaire distribution. The results from the questionnaire responses will present each body image measure separately. Within each measure the method of analysis will be described and then results will be presented. Summaries of these results are deliberately placed at the beginning of the discussion sections to remind readers of the findings before they proceed to the main discussion. Discussions and conclusions of the questionnaire results follow. Part one concludes with a statement of how well the aims of the quantitative section were fulfilled and what the questionnaire results added to knowledge about women's body image.

The second part of this thesis begins outlining how feminist critiques of research have moved beyond demanding the inclusion of women in research to demanding that the research process itself be critically analysed in terms of its unequal power dynamics. Research terms such as method, methodology, epistemology, and qualitative and quantitative research methods as used in feminist discussions of research are then defined. A brief outline is given of how male control over many of these definitions has led to male control over knowledge.

This leads to a description and critique of the scientific method as the predominant form of knowledge acquisition in psychological research. Is this predominant form of knowledge acquisition apt for psychological research? Knowledge gained from this method - highly respected in the biological and physical sciences - was adopted by the social sciences to gain their research similar credibility. Scientific method claims a rational bias free approach to research in which facts are supposedly gained free from distortion by human interference. Criticisms of this method claim: that biases from the researcher and setting are inevitable, that the historical experience of the participants is ignored, that it is male dominated, and therefore it perpetuates power inequalities against women. The feminist preference for qualitative methods is outlined with the acknowledgement that both quantitative and qualitative methods have limitations.

In consideration of these limitations a number of guidelines for feminist research are presented. These suggest that research can be more beneficial to women when it is

used to facilitate improvements to their lives. It is recommended that a variety of methods can be used depending on the research questions and that the limitations of the methods used should be stated. It is suggested that researchers examine the personal values which they bring to their research and that they acknowledge participants as having equal power in the research process.

The concept of poststructuralism and its associated theories of cultural analysis are then introduced along with how feminism has added to these in the form of feminist poststructuralism. These theories question what is assumed to count as knowledge and reject the conception of reality as a single rational truth. The theories accept that many meanings can exist simultaneously and these exist within socially constructed language rather than language reflecting an absolute reality. Regular patterns of statements can combine to form discourses such as those of science religion and psychology. These discourses construct social practices and offer particular subjectivities to individuals. Texts are constructed from the discourses available to the author rather than from her or his free will. Competing discourses such as feminism are marginalised while dominant ones such as patriarchy are seen as commonsense.

The concept of power from the writings of the poststructuralist Foucault is introduced as a valuable tool in the analysis of culture. Power can be used as a disciplinary force of social control. Change in the structure of power is described from the easily identifiable sources of pre-industrial societies to the complex covert structures operating in modern culture. The imagery of the Panopticon prison design is outlined to illustrate how power operates as a form of surveillance and how this surveillance forms an important element in the enforcement of femininity. At this point feminism extends the writings of Foucault who does not distinguish between the disciplines applied to the male body and those applied to the female body. Feminists recognise additional disciplines to which the female body is subjected. The use of power to enforce standards of femininity is outlined along with how feminism has focussed in particular on uses of power against women. Women are subjected to disciplines of diet, exercise, physical appearance and movement restrictions, the underlying theme being a woman's body is not acceptable in its natural form.

Some criticisms of poststructuralism are also mentioned. In light of the new ways of approaching body image research offered by the theories in feminism and poststructuralism, the introduction here revisits the body image literature mentioned in part one. This is to examine assumptions made within the body image measures used in this study, and how these construct a conception of body image that may be detrimental to women. Suggestions are made for how future research could be more empowering for women.

In the method section the procedure for the interviews is outlined along with a description of the method of discourse analysis used in reading the women's talk about issues raised in these interviews. A short form of discourse analysis is used for the readings of the women's accounts of issues in body building, their explanations of the self-esteem, body-esteem and self-esteem/body-esteem correlation results from the questionnaires, and issues related to the existence of an ideal figure size in society. A more detailed form of discourse analysis is used for the reading of the women's accounts of having been teased about their appearance as this is a neglected area in body image research. The focus on teasing is an attempt to show that this seemingly trivial practice is actually an important influence on many women's body image and that this area should receive more attention in research.

Part two finishes with some general conclusions drawn from the study as a whole. Summaries of the main points in the introductions are made along with the aims of both parts of the study. Conclusions are drawn from the quantitative method used in part one and the qualitative method used in part two. The two methods are compared to show how the quantitative findings were extended by the qualitative results, and the implications this has for future body image research. Conclusions are then drawn on whether the two methods can work together in the interests of feminist goals and some speculations are made about possible directions for future body image research. These speculations focus on both the individual and the cultural levels.