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**Reflections in Their Mirrors:
How Adolescent Girls Experience Their Bodies**

Gillian Shadley

**A Thesis
In
The Department
of
Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT**Reflections in Their Mirrors: How Adolescent Girls Experience Their Bodies****Gillian Shadley**

A lot of research supports the theoretical notion that bodies are a site of turmoil for many adolescent girls. Numerous articles state that adolescent girls struggle with their weight and body image and that this discontentment can lead to serious problems such as lower self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders. However, there has been little research that documents how girls themselves talk about, relate to, experience and live in their bodies.

The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of how, at the beginning of the 21st century, a group of adolescent girls in a single sex school experience their bodies. Eleven grade 10 girls, age 15 and 16, volunteered to participate in this study. Data was collected using six in depth group interviews and individual drawings. Although the media does play an important role in the lives of these young women, results indicate that the participants' parents play just as equally critical a role and that they have a tremendous influence on how the girls experience their bodies. Moreover, issues like choosing their clothing, being labelled based on what they wore and the idea of feeling comfortable (both physically and psychologically) in their bodies were examined in order to try and obtain a clearer picture of how these young women experienced their bodies. It was discovered that although they often felt ill at ease with their bodies, it was not a permanent or ever lasting feeling.

Dedication

To the exceptional young women who made this thesis possible. Thank you Alicia, Allison, Brett, Dasey, Dorkus, Falynn, Maria, Michelle, Soupriya, Tracy, and Vicki without you there would only be theories to speculate about instead of real voices and thoughts to express. I will always be grateful that you shared your stories with me. May they inspire others to do the same!

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1.0 Introduction

“Hi Kid, are you in good shape?” I have heard that greeting a thousand times in my life. In fact, it is my father’s first question whenever we speak on the phone. Yet, in all honesty, I still wonder what he really means by those words.

As a child I took his question literally - was I in good shape? Was I physically fit? Luckily for me, I could always answer YES since I was an extremely active, energetic and athletic child. I had been told that I was an “exceptional athlete” - a natural at every sport I tried. I was driven and competitive and simply loved to participate in sports.

Even now I can still feel the exhilaration as I remember hearing my Dad tell the story. He would become filled with pride and get a twinkle in his eyes, a look I rarely saw, as he talked about my lustrous soccer career. When I was a young girl, I was so skilled at soccer that I *had* to play with the boys because I was too good for the girls’ league - too quick, too agile and too strong to compete against girls. I ran circles around the boys as well. I felt strong, powerful and in control. I knew I was great, at least when I was on that field. And so I also believed that this meant that in my father’s eyes, I was in ‘good shape’.

My body and I have always had a tumultuous relationship. Well, maybe not always. In the beginning my body served a purpose. I used it to acquire praise and recognition through my athletic ability. It gave me a sense of power, and I unconsciously built my self-esteem around my body and how well it served me. But as I grew older things began to change.

**Too much weight!
Too much gain!
Too much junk!**

How could those words be describing my eight-year-old body? How could my paediatrician not see that I was simply in “good shape”? I was muscular, strong, and fit. How could I be overweight? I was such a terrific athlete who was always active and never able to sit still! But if my paediatrician said I was too heavy, it must be true, right? I started eating carrots dipped in peanut butter and jam. Bread had somehow become BAD in my mind- it was better to eat peanut butter and jam on a carrot instead. I discovered the art of counting calories, began to classify foods as either good or evil, and realized as quintessential the need to watch what you ate. At the mature age of eight I began to attempt to eliminate carbs from my diet! These were difficult lessons to learn in elementary school.

Had my body begun to betray me? Was this normal? Is this what happens to every girl as she develops? As I matured physically and emotionally and observed those around me, I began to realize that perhaps a girl’s body was not really admired for serving the same purpose as mine did. I discovered that my body was supposed to be slight and feminine rather than strong and athletic. Boys were meant to be fast, agile and competitive. I was now expected to play jump rope, not tackle football, and I was meant to want boys to like me for my hair, clothes and giggle rather than my wit and athletic prowess. I was supposed to dress and feel comfortable in frills and dresses rather than sweatpants and t-shirts.

I remember my mother’s attempts to transform me into the ‘girl’ I was supposed to be. Although, she usually respected my need to be and dress like who I was, every

autumn she would insist I conform. With each fall came the Jewish New Year, a holiday that meant a family celebration, which included large family dinners and the purchasing of a new outfit especially for the occasion. My sister loved this time of year and I dreaded it! I despised shopping for something new to wear and I loathed the whole ritual of dressing up. Consequently, I never felt comfortable in anything we bought for me. My mother knew better than to try and force me into a dress or skirt, but the salespeople tried anyway, despite my groans and complaints. I usually ended up with a shirt with some kind of a frill and a restrictive, suffocating collar that of course had to be tucked into pants that always felt too tight and rigid. As for the colour scheme, they tended to be cutesy, girly pastel colours like pink and purple. Then of course there were the shoes, tiny, little, uncomfortable black things with buckles and no laces to tie. I obviously couldn't run in those and didn't understand the point of owning a pair. I could never figure out why we had to suffer through the whole shopping experience? Why couldn't I simply be me – comfy, camouflaged and safe in my jeans and t-shirts? In my mind, a dinner was just a dinner, so why was I always forced to transform for those family events?

I never felt that I lived through this conversion with much grace, yet I was always told how great, how adorable and cute I looked, regardless of how uncomfortable I felt. I was self-conscious and completely ill at ease in an outfit that I felt was certainly never meant for me. It is no wonder that I began to be confused about my body and its value.

To make matters worse, my mother was thin and beautiful and my sister seemed to love all the *girl* things. She adored dressing up and was comfortable in everything she wore. And then there was my father who still asked if I was “in good shape” but who

also loved to comment, in my presence, on the shape and form of different women's bodies. I began to suspect that his words "in good shape" no longer referred to athletic ability. It is no wonder that I grew up questioning and struggling with the "image" I wanted my body to portray. Was I thin enough, fit enough, female enough? And what was enough? Sometimes I still struggle, not so much about what image I want my body to project, but more about how I feel in my body. I grew up questioning my body's form and purpose and always wondered if it looked like what it was supposed to. I now realize that my body is exactly how it should be, but every so often I still get caught in my old trap that questions my appearance and wishes that I looked like somebody else. How do others deal with the same problem? Why do we sometimes feel fabulous in our bodies, proud and eager to dress it up, yet other times dread the thought of passing a mirror or choosing a shirt to wear? Why can there be such variation in how we feel in and about our bodies?

The topic of woman and their body images fascinates, intrigues and frustrates me. I know so many talented, intelligent women who have many extraordinary qualities yet their self-esteem can be instantly deflated by one look in the mirror. Researchers (See for examples, Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Rosenblum & Lewis 1999; and Wardle & Marsland, 1990) believe that this behaviour begins in early adolescence as our bodies begin to change and develop and as we begin to look at the outside world for guidance and answers to fundamental questions like "Who am I? What is cool? What will help me acquire confirmation and validation?" Children turn to the media, their peers, teachers and family members for direction. The messages they receive are often contradictory, especially when it comes to bodies and the image they should be projecting.

Adolescence is a turbulent time for most girls; not only are they forced to deal with the daily pressures of trying to fit in and be 'cool', they also have to contend with their puberty and the inevitable transformation of their bodies. Moreover, this is the period in a girl's life when she begins to develop a sense of self and define who she is. Often, teenagers feel the need to look outside themselves and focus on the external world, which consists mainly of their surrounding culture (peers, family, media) to help guide them in their search for self-actualization and definition (Erikson, 1968). What they see can often be confusing and painfully difficult to emulate.

Society provides young women with an array of mixed messages and unrealistic images. Gilligan and Brown (1992) state that as girls begin to develop, most of them tend to have confidence and a clear sense of who they are. They can express their opinions with ease and are able to truthfully and clearly articulate their feelings and desires with their peers and family. But, as they mature and enter adolescence; they 'lose their voice' or at least hide it since that is what society implicitly tells them to do. Girls are subjected to societies' unwritten rules about how a woman should be. They learn that it is more prudent to be polite and kind, pretty and proper, and lacking in opinion and strong emotions, than to be truthful and candid with their thoughts and ideas and risk hurting the feelings of others. As a result, Pipher (1994) claims that girls tend to divide themselves in two parts. The inner self who she hides because she experiences socially unacceptable emotions like anger, envy and sexuality, and the outer self who tries to behave as *good* girls should mirroring the responses and characteristics that society expects of young women.

Intertwined with how a woman should behave is the image of how a perfect woman should look. Grogan (1999) states that the ideal body is slim. Not only is this supposed to be more attractive, it is also associated with success, happiness, and self-control. People who are overweight are often seen as lazy, unhappy people who are unwilling to take the time to care for themselves. Of course these stereotypes are absurd, but in the minds of an adolescent, they can be very powerful, especially since today's adolescents are also witness to the fashion industry's latest definition of beauty. Waif-like and skeletally thin models are now the mode and adolescents are supposed to aspire to resemble them or at least purchase clothing that will help them emulate the same style and 'look'.

Furthermore, girls are forced to contend with the multitude of messages that teaches women that they are not naturally beautiful. But according to the multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry, there is hope since women can acquire beauty by purchasing the right cosmetic and beauty products. We are assaulted daily with magazine and television advertisements which tell us how the latest merchandise can improve our lives. And the pitch works. According to Naomi Wolfe (1991), we spend over \$20 billion each year (in the U.S.A) on beauty products. As Friedman (2000) states, "The model of perfection that is held out to girls is one-dimensional. It doesn't account for the sheer messiness, the ups and downs and the insecurities and stresses of real life" (p. 35).

It is therefore no wonder that when so many adolescent girls look around at the outside world in an attempt to define how a (young) woman should look, they find themselves feeling inadequate. They may begin to develop feelings and thoughts about their bodies and themselves that can become both unhealthy and potentially dangerous.

Girls who are dissatisfied with their bodies have a higher risk of reduced levels of psychosocial health and lower self-esteem and are more likely to be depressed (Stephens, Hill, & Hanson, 1994). They may also make attempts to diet and deny themselves the proper nutrients their growing bodies need and may be in danger of developing numerous medical problems like anemia, hypertension, gastro-intestinal, renal and neuromuscular disorders and of course, anorexia and bulimia (Maine, 2000).

It is easy to see why girls in Western culture could be misled to believe that their appearance can become their identity and that beauty can somehow shape and dictate how successful and accomplished one becomes. Girls are continuously bombarded with messages from the media that not only depict thin as beautiful but also as the way one should be (Botta 1999, and Grogan 1999). Television, movies, magazines and advertisements subliminally and overtly encourage girls to accept the idea that women must strive to be skinny regardless of the costs.

1.1 Defining body image

“The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means for self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world” (Brumberg, 1997, 97).

Body image is not a stagnant thing. How we see and what we feel about our bodies is linked to, and hinges on, our life experience. It is therefore constantly being re-evaluated and assessed to suit our changing moods, feelings and social encounters. Schindler (1950) calls body image “elastic” since it appears to be able to fluctuate and quickly change from positive to negative as well as be influenced by our interactions and exchanges with other people. He stated that body image was “the picture of our own

body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves (p. 11).

Slade (1994) expanded on this definition by implying that the feelings that we have about our body and its individual parts can affect our body image. He called body image “the picture that we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies and our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts” (p. 497). He stated that body image is best viewed as a, “loose mental representation of the body’s shape, form, and size’, which is influenced, by a variety of historical, cultural and social, individual and biological factors, which operate over varying time spans” (p. 502).

Body image thus includes how we perceive or see our bodies and how we feel about what we see. Consequently, body image is subjective, multifaceted and emotionally charged since a person’s body image is composed not only of their physical characteristics but also of their personal experience and assessment of their body. There can be a huge discrepancy between one’s physical body and one’s body image because body image is what a person’s “mind does to the body in translating the experience of embodiment into its mental representation” (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997, 45). Moreover, the image of a person’s body can be intertwined with their self-esteem and greatly influenced by societal and cultural norms (Botta, 1999; Grogan, 1999; Myers & Biocca, 1992, and Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997). Body image rarely has any link to one’s actual size, shape or weight but rather is affected by what it means to have that type body within their specific culture (Grogan, 1999, and Fallon, 1990). What factors can and do affect our perceptions of our bodies and what may cause a person to develop a variety of beliefs, judgements, and feelings in relation to their body?

our perceptions of our bodies and what may cause a person to develop a variety of beliefs, judgements, and feelings in relation to their body?

1.2 Factors influencing body image

“Negative body image among females is so common that the average young woman can be said to exist in a state of “normative discontent”.

(Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999, 5)

Since the focus of this study will be on adolescent girls and their relationship, reactions, and feelings towards their bodies, it is imperative to address what is known about adolescent girls and their perceptions of their bodies as well as how they feel about their body image. Adolescence is an especially vulnerable time since a girl’s feelings about her body and her body image can be particularly elastic (meaning that it is susceptible to rapid and frequent change) due to the fact that she is in the throws of puberty (Grogan, 1999; Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989). This is a time, which evokes a variety of emotions because girls are often dealing with the obvious, and often difficult physical changes as well as attempting to sift through the often-entangled web of emotional and psychological changes. Girls are therefore especially vulnerable to outside influences. Their self-esteem is often unstable and can be intertwined with how they assume that others (friends, family etc.) see them as well as how they perceive themselves. Thus, their body image may then fluctuate from positive to negative depending on how they believe they appear as well as how they imagine others think they look.

In view of the fact that adolescents often unconsciously look outside themselves for help and guidance as they make attempts to construct their own identity, they are

obvious prey for the media since their minds are open and eager for suggestions and models of how a woman should look, act and behave. Moreover, during this stage of development, the ability to process information increases due to the growth in cognitive capacities and adolescents are therefore more attuned and aware of what society is suggesting about how one should look (Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Slade, 1994). They may fall victim to our current North American obsession with the 'thin ideal', and be quick to find fault with themselves, thus establishing a poor image of their own developing bodies (Botta 1999; Grogan, 1999). Given an adolescent's newly found ability to be introspective and self critical, it is not difficult to see how they are at risk for becoming disturbed by and preoccupied with their bodies and how they may become susceptible to developing a negative image of themselves (Rosenblum & Lewis 1999). Attie, and Brooks-Gunn (1989) suggest that it is the inevitable weight gain (of an average of 11 kg) and other changes to their physical development that causes girls to become self-conscious of, and sometimes preoccupied and anxious about their body image. Since puberty is a time when girls often gain fat rather than muscle, it is understandable that some girls may begin to feel overweight. Add to that the development of breasts and it is no wonder that many girls become more body conscious (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Rosenblum & Lewis 1999; Wardle & Marsland, 1990).

Girls notice the changes that are occurring to their bodies during puberty. Some girls begin to develop feelings of dissatisfaction, especially since they have no control over how and when the changes take place. Girls do not get to decide what kind of shape they will acquire, where they will gain weight, or how and when their breasts will develop. Instead, they are expected to sit back and passively accept and adore their

changing developing bodies while simultaneously absorbing all the messages and ideals that society churns out about what kind of body is considered desirable, beautiful or even just acceptable.

Moreover, adolescence is a clearly a time of egocentrism (Elkind, 1978; Erikson, 1968; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999) when teens are unmistakably attentive to the observations and judgements (be they real or imagined) that others make about their character and appearance. Thus, teens may begin to compare themselves to their peers, family and personas in the media.

Since girls measure their developing bodies by comparing them with what society dictates is attractive, they are often disillusioned and confused by the contradicting models that society presents as satisfactory. After observing our popular culture, girls conclude that they have only three options; slim, seductive and sexy; sleek, muscular and athletic; or soft and curvaceous which tends only to be acceptable if you are a mother.

1.3 Questions that need answering

In the light of all the pressures described earlier on girls' self-image, how do girls today react to their changing bodies? What kind of relationships do they establish with their own bodies? How do they feel about and cope with their body images? So how do today's adolescents contend with all this information? How do society's unwritten yet evident rules about the way a woman should look and behave influence how girls experience their bodies? What motivates how they choose their clothing or how they develop their style? Do they look to their peers or media for advice? Do adolescent girls dress a certain way to try and belong to a group or to make some kind of statement and what role does the media play in all this? Are girls constantly struggling to measure up to

society's standards of beauty or are they able to see that these ideals are both unhealthy and practically impossible to achieve? In addition to the media, who or what else shapes girls' experiences? Where do their parents fit in? Do they pressure their daughters to try and measure up to a certain set of standards or are they supportive of their children's unique bodies? Do they influence how their teenagers dress, what they wear or the foods they eat? What values are mothers and fathers overtly and covertly instilling in their children?

The above questions were the basis of discussion in the group interviews that form the core of this study. The interviews centred around three themes: 1) *dress and body adornment* - what motivates the participants to dress the way they do; 2) *the role of the media* and how it affects the girls feelings about their bodies; and 3) *parental influence*- is it positive, negative or indifferent? We also spent one session creating drawings that were meant to complement the verbal data generated from the group interviews. This activity allowed the girls to express their thoughts and feelings about their bodies using a different medium and permitted them to express ideas that were otherwise difficult to explain in words. Each participant was asked to create three images; a self-portrait, an illustration of what they would look like if they could make changes to their body, and a picture that explained how they believed their father's perceived them.

2.0 Doing the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore how at the beginning of the 21st century, adolescent girls in a single sex school react and relate to their own bodies. This interest is based on my own personal experiences living as an embodied female. I can recall the struggles that my friends and I experienced throughout adolescence. I have often wondered whether this dissonance and conflict within ones' body is simply a normal phase of adolescence. Would any of the experiences my peers and I had have been different had we been given the opportunity to explore and express our thoughts and feelings relating to this issue? The majority of past research implies that it is girls more than boys who struggle with their bodies and that the average girl loses confidence as she matures while her male contemporaries' self-esteem blossoms. (This 'thin ideal' may be beginning to have more of a direct effect in the lives of adolescent males but its repercussions are still not comparable to those of young women. Boy' struggle with body image are beyond the scope of this study.)

Tiggemann, Gardiner and Slater (2000) state that although there is a vast amount of theoretical and empirical research concerning adolescent girls and their body image, most of these enquiries utilized quantitative methodology. They believe that more qualitative work, such as group interviews, is needed to occur in order to "gain access to adolescent girls' thoughts about their bodies" (Tiggeman, Gardiner & Slater, 2000, p. 645). Oliver and Lalik (2000) assert that much of the research on adolescent girls and body image was gathered in a manner that "limits the knowledge and understanding of girls and further contribute to the structures supporting domination and oppression of female" (p. 17). They state that more data needs to be generated that examines how girls

live in and experience their bodies rather than simply establishing that many girls suffer from negative body image.

2.1 Group interviews

Having worked with adolescents for the past ten years, I concurred with Tiggeman, Gardiner and Slater (2000) thoughts about how to conduct research with adolescents and decided that group interviews would be the best way to document and access the participants' attitudes, opinions and perceptions about how they experience their bodies. I believed, based on my experiences as teacher, student and researcher, that the most effective way to access girls' thoughts and feelings about their experiences would be to discuss these topics during a series of interviews with girls. The question then became how to conduct the interviews. Here again I relied on my personal and professional knowledge as well as my intuition, which told me that teenage girls would be more willing and open to discussing these issues if they were in a group setting rather than being secluded in an individual interview with an unknown adult. I believed that they would take comfort in the presence of their peers since a group situation would probably feel safer to them, more like a classroom discussion or a conversation among friends, than a one on one interview with an unfamiliar adult.

Accordingly, I began to discuss the idea of group interviews with other researchers, professors and peers. I was met with a variety of responses. Many felt that this type of group interview would prove quite risky and hold potential problems in terms of confidentiality. Several people questioned the need to gather such personal information from girls in a group setting and believed that it would be preferable to discuss delicate issues, such as body image, in private where a girl would supposedly feel

more secure. A few people were concerned with the ethical implications of girls exposing their inner thoughts and feelings to a group of their peers and strongly suggested that I change my methodology.

I found this reaction strange and quite frustrating, and wondered why people assumed that adolescent girls would be uncomfortable discussing their bodies among peers. I understood that for many this could be a private issue, but wasn't it a very public one as well? Isn't it common for women (young and old) to gather together and discuss why they wear certain clothing, how they feel in and about their bodies, what foods they enjoy eating and how the media affects their self-perception? Do we not often seek the company and feedback of our peers when we are looking for reassurance (or sometimes a fresh point of view) about issues that we deem important. Moreover, only the girls who wished to participate in the project would be subjected to these group discussions since the participants would all be volunteering to partake in the group interviews.

I was relieved to learn that not everyone was opposed to the methodological choice. Many researchers and teachers understood my desire to gather data in a group setting rather than individually. They realized that it was a common occurrence for girls to gather together and chat about personal issues such as clothing, food and their perception of their bodies and supporting my inclination to conduct a group study. To better inform my decision about conducting group interviews, I conducted a thorough review of the research literature on group interviews (sometimes also called focus groups.)

Group interviews are slowly but surely becoming a legitimate form of data collection in the fields of psychology and education. Some authors even argue that they

have several advantages over the more traditional form for individual interviews. For example, Hess (1968) stated that group interviews could be more beneficial than individual interviews for several reasons. To begin with, they create *synergy* and allow a wider bank of data to emerge through the group interaction. They create an ambiance where *snowballing* can occur, thus allowing the statements of one participant to initiate a chain reaction of additional comments. They *stimulate* group discussion which tends to generate excitement about a topic while providing a feeling of *security* that provides a comfort that encourages candid responses all the while promoting *spontaneity* because participants are not required to answer every question, thus making their responses more spontaneous and genuine.

Moreover, according to Brotherson (1994), group interviews are beneficial to the fields of education and psychology because individuals involved in such research are invited to participate in a meeting where diverse opinions and perspective are desired. As well, interactions between the moderator and the participants, as well as the communications amongst the participants, are recognized as having the ability to add depth and insight to the knowledge gained. Furthermore, such interactive discussions can elicit a greater, more thorough understanding of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from various points of view while at the same time documents the context from which those understandings originated.

Byers and Wilcox (1988) and Morgan (1996) believe that group interviews encourage a relaxed group setting where participant feel their opinions and experiences are valued, thus permitting discussions that are more conducive to disclosure. This ambiance enhances rather than hinders openness and allows for a more open and honest

conversation to flow. Hillbrant (1979) concurs and suggests that the group interview format facilitates more candid and reflective responses, where as Beck and Al (1986) feel that group interviews allow greater anonymity and therefore help individuals relate more freely. As well, Beck and Al suggest that the support of peers may reduce the need to impress the interviewer, thus stimulating more genuine participation and eliciting more sincere and truthful answers since participants are not required to answer each and every question. Indeed, this proved to be the case for this research project. For example, one of the participants commented:

I know you would never want to do this, but if it was one on one I would also feel as though it was kind of bombarding me. (Maria, Alicia, Brett agree) I know you wouldn't want to do that, but just cause I don't know you that well and like I don't know, I would feel kind of attacked. Allison, 15-year-old participant.

But why use group interviews to examine how adolescents experience their bodies? They should be used because group interviews are an excellent way to obtain information that may not be accessible through other research techniques. Both Oliver (1999) and Sparks (1997) propose that we need to search for a better understanding of how girls, by use of cultural stories, socially construct their bodies and identities. These stories can then be contested, disputed and, over time, changed. Brumberg (2000) states that it is crucial that we “engage girls in meaningful, intergenerational dialogue about what it means to come of age in a society where authentic self-expression for women is far more complicated than choosing whether you like Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. Such work is important to understanding society: adolescents mirror the deep preoccupations of a culture. We are them, and they are us” (p. B10).

Yet, some argue that since group interviews involve group discussion, relevant and important data may be lost and that the researcher may only hear the thoughts and

ideas of one or two domineering personalities. Wilkinson (1998) argues that group interviews allow for participants to talk to one another rather than to a researcher and that this conversation is far more realistic and close to daily discussions than one to one interviews. "They are not primarily concerned with providing explanations to a researcher who is 'other' to them, as is often the case in interviews. The relatively free flow of discussion and debate between members of a group interview offers an excellent opportunity for hearing 'the language and vernacular used by the respondent.'" (p. 335).

Others argue that group interviews are not an appropriate way to collect data about sensitive issues from teenagers. Yet, in the past, group interviews have proved quite successful in studies that were geared specifically toward adolescents (See for example Houghton, Durkin, & Carroll, 1995 on children and adolescents awareness of the physical and mental risks of tattooing; Kisker, 1985 on teenage sex, pregnancy and contraception; Kissling, 1996 on adolescent girls and menstruation; Kline, Kline, & Oken, 1992 on minority women and sexual choice; Lupton & Tulloch, 1996 on sex education and the promotion of safer-sex and HIV-AIDS prevention; Okonofua, 1995 on prevention of teenage pregnancy, and Tiggemann, Gardiner & Slater, 2001 on adolescent girls' desire to be thinner).

Since adolescents often look to others for a sense of who they are, it is important that they have the opportunity to make collective sense of their individual issues and beliefs. Group interviews provide a safe place where girls can share and express information, compare and contrast experiences, challenge, debate, and pool their individual knowledge all in an attempt to realize that they are not the only ones who feel a certain way or believe in a certain idea. Therefore, this positive interaction can

a certain way or believe in a certain idea. Therefore, this positive interaction can encourage participants to share experiences and acknowledge and discover group commonalities about issues and ideas that had previously been considered personal or individual struggles. This concept proved true for this project as one member of the group interview stated:

I would rather it in a group just because um, I find that if you are in a group and let's say that you would ask a question and a bunch of people would have the same opinion it would make me feel less insecure about feeling one way about something because I know that other people feel the same way. Maria, 16 year-old participant.

Group interviews allow the participants to discuss issues using their own language and ideas and consequently become “particularly sensitive to cultural and sub-cultural values, especially relevant for adolescents who clearly use very different language than that of adult researchers and constructors of surveys. (Tiggeman, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000, 646). Moreover, Kitzinger (1995) and Wilkinson (1998) suggest that group interviews allow the researcher to observe how participants construct meaning and how each person builds on the knowledge of her peers as well as contributes to their thoughts and ideas. Morgan (1996) believes that group discussions provide an ambiance that enhances rather than hinders openness and disclosure and that girls may be relieved to discover that they are not the only ones who believe or feel a certain way.

2.2 Drawings

Drawings were utilized during one of the group interviews as another method to help the participants convey their feelings and attitudes about their experiences of their bodies. Drawings were also a way to complement the group process with individual input. Each girl did her own drawing or wrote. The use of illustrations and art often allows people to express ideas, beliefs, and messages that they would otherwise be unable

to articulate through words or writing. Weber and Mitchell (1995) believe that “drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not put into words: the effable, the elusive, the not yet-thought-through, the sub-conscious” (p. 34). McNiff (1981) explains that through drawing, we can integrate our life experiences and express ideas and feelings that may otherwise be too difficult to articulate verbally. Art therapists make use of drawings and art to help children (and adults) express ideas that are often too complex or painful to describe in words. Researchers are beginning to use the same techniques. Derry (2001) incorporated drawings into her research on peer rejection and bullying. Moreover, she found that “drawing and words united to give the audience a multi-layered look at childhood bullying and rejection” (Derry, 2002, 2). As well, drawings can be used not only to demonstrate how we see ourselves but also to help describe the how we believe others observe us. Mitchell and Weber (1999) used drawings to help pre service teachers examine their stereotypes of teachers and Richards (1998) used self-portraits to assess her own teaching practices. Richards also contends “self-portraits have the capacity to reveal our self-perceptions and constructions of reality” (p. 34).

It is my hope that the combination of these two methods of expression allowed each of the participants to find a comfortable and safe way to express their thoughts and opinions.

2.3 Population studied

Eleven grade ten girls, between the ages of 15 and 16, participated in the group interviews. The girls were volunteers enrolled in a private all girls’ school and come from approximately the same upper-middle class socio-economic background. I

specifically chose an all girls' school because girls in a single sex school may be less inhibited and more prone to sharing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, since they have more opportunities and experience doing so. Research shows that girls in all girls' schools receive more airtime with teachers, are more forthcoming about their ideas and beliefs, and have more occasions to express them (Mael 1998; Jones; 1990, and Rowe, 1988). Mael (1998) found that the absence of males in the school provides girls with an environment that allows them to focus on building their self-esteem and learning to be valued for their abilities and intelligences rather than their looks, clothes or popularity.

2.4 Choosing the site

Female obsession with body weight and body image problems began as white middle and upper class phenomena, problems which research demonstrates have now filtered down via the media and popular culture to most social classes and minority subcultures in Western society. A recent study for example, has discovered a direct correlation between the rise of African American girls' desire for thinness and the increase of female African American television characters who are thin (Botta, 2000). Nasser (1997) illustrates how this problem is spreading among minorities who in the past seemed less affected and influenced by the western views of beauty. He states that as developing countries become westernized, young women began to feel pressure to adhere to the Western 'culture of thinness', causing conflict and confusion for many woman who had been raised with the notion to equate thinness with illness, malnutrition and poverty! This dilemma is also quite real for many young women who live in North America but come from culturally diverse backgrounds. They are constantly confronted with the pressure and desire to fit into to a society that idealizes an unhealthy and unrealistic body

image. Even though their heritage culture may not approve or endorse this model, many young women believe that they have no choice but to accept this culture of skinniness in order to feel like they are properly integrated into their new culture

It seems fitting then, to study a segment of the population that has supposedly had the most time and experience dealing with these phenomena to see if a more positive picture is emerging, to see how they are coping. Knowing how the most privileged and articulate girls are now relating to their bodies in the context of increased health and media education can point to strategies that might be helpful for the larger population if similar pedagogical strategies were made available.

Because gaining access to a school site is crucial, I decided to return to my former high school, that I shall re-name here as Gracelyn Academy, to find a group of girls who would be willing to participate in the interviews. “Gracelyn Academy” is a small private all girls high school, located in a large city in Eastern Canada. It is mandated to foster the growth and development of self-esteem in young women. Girls are encouraged to acquire and express their own ideas and opinions while becoming critical thinkers who challenge the status quo. I specifically chose this school since Gracelyn is reputed to “produce” intelligent, insightful, competent young women. I wanted to investigate how girls, from this elite environment, experienced their bodies. Would their superior education help make them more secure and immune to powerful outside opinion?

The school has a total population of 220 students attending grades seven through eleven. It caters to a population of girls who come from a mix of upper and middle class homes yet for a private school; its population is quite diverse. Gracelyn Academy does have a high tuition (actually the tuition is the lowest among the non-religious, private, all

girls school in the city) but 26% of the students are financial aid recipients. The school is quite ethnically diverse as its student body represents many nationalities and its students come from homes where over 20 mother tongues are spoken. Since the school has no religious affiliation there exists a variation in the girls' religious backgrounds. The population is roughly 60% Christian, 30% Jewish, and 10% Eastern religions. I chose to draw my volunteers from the grade ten class, which has 45 students. Eleven decided to volunteer to participate in the group interview.

One could assume that the girls would be open to discussing matters concerning their bodies and body image since they have previously been exposed to such topics in school. Prior to the group interview discussions, the girls had taken mandatory courses such as Family Life Education and Moral Religious Education, both of which focus on a variety of topics that are related to health. They have, for example, had group discussions on topics such as healthy eating and exercise habits, strategies to help them live a healthy lifestyle as well as their information on their growing and changing bodies. Moreover, they have also participated in media classes that have often focused on how women are portrayed in the media as well as how advertising and media can affect women's perception of their bodies. The school has also paid tribute to eating awareness day by having guest speakers share their personal struggles with eating disorders as well as providing girls with an overview of the potential dangers and medical complications that can result. The girls were therefore accustomed to engaging in group discussions and had all had some prior introduction to conversing about their bodies.

Since the girls who participated in the group interview were there on a purely volunteer basis, they were willing and eager to engage in discussions that would

concentrate on their feelings and beliefs concerning their experiences growing up female in today's society. We would be speaking at length about how the media, fashion industry, parents, and peers all affect how they experience their bodies as well as exploring some of the challenges and dilemmas that they faced.

As a former student, I was familiar with the school environment (its extra-curricular activities, curriculum and sports program) and I understood what it was like to attend that particular school. I recalled some of the struggles as well as the pleasures I experienced having been a member of that community for five years. I had maintained contact with both the Head of Students and the Headmaster and I hoped that they would be open to me conducting research with their students. After discussing my project with the school counsellor and the school administrators, it was decided that I would be able to ask the grade ten students if they would be willing to participate in the group interviews. During the students' homeroom period, I presented and explained my project, distributed consent forms and waited. Shortly thereafter, I received eleven forms and set a date with the participants to begin the group interviews.

Prior to meeting the girls, I had to receive ethical clearance from my university in order to conduct the research project. I had to guarantee the committee that the identity of the girls would be protected and that they would be able to withdraw from the project at anytime. I had to convince the ethics committee that the project was in the best interests of the participants and that I would take the appropriate steps to ensure that the participants would not be put in any situation that was in any way risky or unethical. After much debate about the appropriateness of conducting group interviews to discuss how adolescents experienced their bodies, I finally was given permission to seek out a

group of volunteers. However, the committee still requested that the school counsellor screen each of the volunteers to ensure that no girl was considered at risk by the school's standards. None of the volunteers were considered to be at risk and therefore everyone who wished to participate in the group did participate. As well, each volunteer was asked to obtain permission from a parent or guardian (something that is not required when participants are over the age of fourteen) again to reduce any potential danger or harm to the volunteers. Once this was complete and I had the group together, I began collecting my data.

2.5 Data collection

The group met during the students' lunch hour for six 45-minute sessions which took place over a period of two months. Each session was audio taped and then transcribed by me within three to four days. This process of listening and transcribing helped me become very familiar with the data and allowed me to formulate questions and guide the next group interviews so that they were based on what the participants had said. Each week we met in a vacant classroom, re-arranged the furniture so that we could all sit around a table to talk and eat our lunches as we chatted. Before each session, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they had the choice to leave at any time. This did not happen. All the participants stayed in the group for the six sessions, although one or two girls did miss a meeting due to illness. The participants were also reminded that they had the right to refrain from discussing any topics or answering any questions that made them feel awkward or uncomfortable. I began each group meeting with a set of leading questions, but the conversations that followed were derived from, and a consequence of, where the girls themselves wanted the dialogue to

of discussion to depend on the ideas that the participants, as a group, choose to discuss. As we met week after week, the topic of discussion flowed from the girls' own thoughts and ideas rather than from any agenda I had previously created. Thus, although I set up the groups to respond to the questions that I wanted answered, the questions I asked and wanted answered were based on the dialogue that the girls had created in the previous groups.

2.6 The girls

Although the eleven girls got along very well and were extremely open to hearing and listening to each other ideas and opinions, I sensed that they all did not necessarily hang out socially in the same group. The girls were very friendly towards one another and at ease about sharing their experiences with each other, but I realized that they were not necessarily from the same clique. In other words, the views girls expressed were not only representative of a single social clique. The girls seemed to enjoy sharing their ideas and found it refreshing to discuss these issues with girls who were not necessarily their closest friends. Perhaps they were pleased to hear a different perspective or were relieved to know that even girls who they were not friendly with were able to share the same feelings as them.

At the beginning of the group interviews, each girl chose a pseudonym with the understanding that this name rather than her own would appear in the thesis.

Soupriya is a fifteen-year-old girl who began Gracelyn Academy in 1999, a year later than most of her peers. She is the youngest of three children and loves to rock climb. Both her parents are professional artists and she attended a Fine Arts school before beginning Gracelyn Academy. She says she does not mind attending an all girls' school

and that it makes “no difference to her”. She chose this particular school for its “comfort and safety”. Ironically, when asked what she liked and disliked about Gracelyn Academy she replied “comfort and safety”. Soupriya is a very extroverted and confident young woman who seems at ease in giving her opinions and discussing her personal experiences.

Vicki is the older of two siblings. She is fifteen and has one younger brother. She has been attending Gracelyn Academy since 1998 and was at a public elementary school prior to that. Her parents are both professionals and she enjoys sports and drawing. She decided to attend this school because her mother wanted her to go to a private school and Gracelyn offered her both a scholarship and financial aid. She enjoys the small classes and arts program but dislikes the sports teams. She appreciates going to an all girls school since it allows her to focus on her education and knows she will have time for a big social life later. In the beginning Vicki was more reserved with her thoughts, but as the groups progressed she became more open to verbalizing her opinions.

Alicia began Gracelyn Academy in 1998 and chose this school because it was a happy, bright, spirited school. She is 15 and has one younger sister and enjoys playing sports and watching TV. Her mother is a stay at home mom and her father is in real estate. She is content to be at an all girls’ school but wishes Gracelyn had a cafeteria where she could buy her lunch. Prior to Gracelyn, she attended a public elementary school. Alicia was quite open to all our discussions and was not afraid to voice an idea that differed from her peers.

Falynn is a fifteen year old. She has one younger brother and enjoys drawing and writing poetry. Both her parents are professionals and they chose to send her to Gracelyn

Academy in 1998 after she completed grade school at a local public school. She enjoys the small classes that the school offers but dislikes the pressure and “school girl image”. As for the all girls thing, she says she is conflicted since “there are some advantages but she does not always enjoy being segregated.” Falyynn was absent for two of the groups due to illness and was slightly quieter than others. Yet when she did speak, she had quite a bit to say and articulated her feelings and opinions with confidence and ease.

Maria is 16 and began Gracleyn Academy in 1998 after attending a private elementary school. She chose this school because she got a scholarship. She enjoys the good teachers and nice people but finds that an all girl environment can get catty and that the atmosphere is very competitive. She finds that “it is getting tiring not having guys around because girls have gotten catty”. She is the older of two sisters and both her parents are professionals. Maria spoke with assurance and confidence and was very eager to express her feelings and views about all topics in a very genuine manner.

Allison, 15, is the younger of two girls and both her parents are professionals. After finishing elementary at a local public school, she decided to begin Gracelyn Academy in 1998 because her sister was going there. She dislikes the heavy workload but really likes her teachers. She likes to draw and play music and is indifferent to the all girls setting. However, if she had to do it again, she says she would not choose it. Allison missed the first group and was a little quiet when she did arrive. However, she warmed up quickly and spoke often throughout the remaining five interviews.

Michelle is the 4th youngest in a family of five. She is 15 years old and began attending Gracelyn in 2001. Prior to that she had attended a variety of other co-ed private schools. She enjoys going out with her friends and is not too sure why she chose this school. She

dislikes the people and when asked what she likes about it she said, "Going home". Her mother does not work outside the home and she did not say what her father does. When asked about how she felt attending an all girls' school she said "Whatever". At times Michelle tended to have differing views from the others but she did not hesitate to discuss them and was very open about her opinions.

Dasey is fifteen and the youngest of four siblings. Both her parents are professionals and she began Gracelyn Academy in 1998 and graduating from a local elementary school. She is not sure why she chose to attend this school and enjoys "Going home" the most. She does not mind the all girls' atmosphere but when asked what she dislikes the most about the school she says "The people". Her favourite hobby or past time is being with friends. Throughout all the sessions Dasey listened far more than she spoke and she was somewhat more reserved about discussing her beliefs and was more eager to discuss certain topics than others.

Brett is fifteen years old and has one older brother. Both her parents are professionals and she enjoys listening to music. After finishing grade school at a local elementary school in 1998, she began attending Gracelyn Academy because she had a good friend who was already there. She dislikes all the work and the all girls atmosphere but really likes her teachers. Brett is very expressive and able to communicate her ideas and experiences in an honest and open way.

Dorkus is the younger of two sisters. Both her parents are university professors and she enjoys playing hockey and soccer. After completing elementary school in another city, she chose to attend Gracelyn Academy in 1998, because a friend was going and she wanted to live in a new city. (She had the option of moving with her father and attending

Gracelyn or staying in Saint John with her mother). She enjoys Gracelyn Academy because she feels that at Gracelyn her behaviour (which she describes as sometimes being goofy and with attitude) is considered cool whereas at another school, she would get beaten up for acting that way. She dislikes some students “mentality towards money” and doesn’t mind the fact that the school is all girls. She is a very funny and outspoken person who enjoys challenging her peers’ ideas (in a non-confrontational way) and is keen to share her opinions and views.

Tracy is 16 years old and the older of two girls. She began Gracelyn Academy after completing elementary school at local public school. Her mother is a University librarian and her father is a stay-at-home dad. She says she chose to attend Gracelyn because “my parents made me” and doesn’t mind the fact that it is an all girls’ school. Tracy is not fond of the heavy workload at Gracelyn, but enjoys that the school is divided into houses. (The student body is divided into 5 groups or houses that compete at a variety of activities throughout the school year). Tracy was the quietest of all the group members. She seemed to enjoy listening to what everyone else to say and didn’t make too many comments during each group. However, she still managed to express her opinions and feelings when she wanted to.

2.7 Interpretation

All the taped discussions were transcribed. The transcripts, tapes, and drawings provided the basis for my analysis as I searched for common themes and links in the girls’ experiences. Interpretation was ongoing and an integral part of data collection. After each session I listened to the tapes, reviewed my notes and transcribed the tape. Before beginning the next session, I read the transcriptions and searched for common

themes. Each group interview generated more data and I was constantly re-reading the material in an attempt to understand how the participants' experiences were linked together. As I collected my data, I used Corbin and Strauss' (1990) coding procedures. As they suggest, I began by developing groups of information, also known as open coding. Then I proceeded to interconnect, or axial code, the categories. I subsequently created a story relating all the categories (selective coding) and discussed how these themes related or differed from the information that I discovered in my literature review.

2.8 Note about quotations

Although I have attempted to remain true to all of the participants dialogue, it must be noted that certain quotations have been slightly refined in order to make them more comprehensible to the reader. In addition to this, I should also mention that the participants frequently began their dialogue by stating, "I don't know" and then consequently articulated exactly what they did know. I found this quite interesting since they were all very capable of clearly expressing their thoughts, opinions and feelings. I am not certain whether this is simply a poor habit that they have acquired or if they truly doubt their own knowledge. Regardless, if I have eliminated some but not all of these expressions from their quotations, it is only to avoid any confusion and to make it easier to understand their ideas. Weber (1986) suggests when we transcribe data from interviews verbatim we often "transform that oral language, robbing it at times of its power, clarity, and depth, even its meaning. Verbatim transcription makes little accommodation for tone of voice and emphasis, and little accommodation for the difference in style, words, and form that exists between oral and written modes of communication (p. 71).

3.0 You Are What You Wear?

3.1 Dress and the Body

One way that I studied how the participants experience their bodies was to focus on the topic of their clothes. I thought that this might be a good way to open our discussions since I believed that the girls would feel that it was a relatively safe topic. Discussing their choice of clothing or sense of style might not seem as directly related to how they actually feel about their bodies. My hope was that they could discuss why they wore certain clothing without directly revealing their sentiments about their bodies. It also seemed to be an interesting place to start since the girls spent a tremendous amount of time dressed in their school uniforms. I was therefore curious to know how they dressed when they were not in school. Did clothes have a symbolic meaning to them? Did they believe that their clothing helped define who they were and where they came from or were clothes less illustrative than that? Did the participants use clothes to make statements about themselves or did they simply serve a more obvious and practical purpose.

We spoke at length about clothing; the idea of dressing a particular way for comfort's sake rather than to be "in style", the concept of being labelled and judged because of what they wore, how the media influences their choices of clothing as well as how the girls believe that they choose to wear certain labels or clothing simply because they like them and not because they are trying to make any kind of statement.

3.2 Clothing and Comfort

The participants discussed the concept of feeling comfortable in the clothing that they wear. The girls implied that this idea of comfort is twofold. It not only entails

feeling physically comfortable in your clothes, and liking how your clothing actually fits your bodies, it also involves feeling emotionally comfortable in your attire. By emotionally comfortable I mean that in order for the girls to be comfortable in their clothing, they had to feel good about how they looked. When the girls thought they looked great in an outfit, they subsequently felt comfortable. They implied that when they put on an outfit, the most important issue for them was whether or not they thought they looked good. As long as they were happy with their appearance, they felt comfortable. I was intrigued by this idea of needing to feel comfortable in your body and decided to probe further. Thus, I asked the participants when they felt good in their bodies. Their answers varied, but again, they all seemed to focus around this notion of comfort.

Gillian: When do you feel good in your body?

Maria: After I take a bath and everything I find I am very relaxed and I am always really flushed and like cheerful and in a better mood.

Alicia: Mine is really weird, but when I feel better physically is after I wax my legs cause I just feel lighter. (giggles)

Soupriya: No, I know what you mean. When I shave and take a shower, put on cream and body spray and put my pyjama pants on, I feel so fresh.

Michelle: When I am alone (pause) when I am just sitting, everyone is gone and it's quiet in my house.

Tracy: After I meditate, or during, or when I'm falling asleep.

Allison: I like being in a snowsuit cause you are just like all "plomp."

Alicia: Lying down in the snow, sinking into it.

Allison: And it likes envelopes you...

The predominant emerging theme is that the girls equate comfort with feeling cozy, relaxed, and one could almost say, safe, in their bodies. The girls are not really

participating in any particular activity that makes them feel good. Rather it is more like a sensation of just being at ease in their skin, content with their state of being rather than doing. Does this then make their feelings of comfort a physical or mental phenomenon? Can you be physically comfortable in your body without being mentally at ease with it? Probably not, but it is possible to feel mentally comfortable even if you are not feeling physically comfortable. A person may find a snowsuit bulky, tight, and physically confining to the body but if you are lying down and relaxing in the snow one may feel comfortable regardless of the physical body restriction. This duality reinforces the idea that feeling comfortable in one's body is really a combination of both the physical and mental.

A couple of girls did relate feeling good in their bodies to a specific physical activity. Dasey discusses how she enjoys the sensation she feels after she exercises, a feeling that is often an odd combination of physical fatigue and energy mixed with mental sensations of accomplishment. Vicki revels in playing sports because she feels both a surge of physical and mental power, "*When I am playing sports I feel like I can do ANYTHING!*" Brett states that she feels really good when she dances but couldn't pinpoint exactly why she feels that way. Perhaps she feels a sense of freedom in her body, and enjoys the sensation of moving with the flow of the music. She may completely forget about the external world and move to the beat of music thus becoming both energized and relaxed. This generated an interesting conversation since many of the other girls often feel extremely self-conscious when they dance. Soupriya thinks it is cool that Brett enjoys dancing because her experience with dancing is somewhat different. She has this to say:

I am a really bad dancer (nervous laugh) it depends where I am, like if I'm at a club or around people ... it depends what kind of music too. I don't know, other than that I get very (lowers her voice) self-conscious when I am dancing...

She seems to be implying that she sometimes feels okay when she dances with a group of people. Perhaps dancing in a group makes her feel less self-conscious and more secure, because when her friends surround her she doesn't feel like the centre of attention. It is interesting that Soupriya admits that dancing makes her feel self-conscious of her body because she normally feels very confident and comfortable in her body.

Allison mentions that dancing is the type of activity that you can almost lose yourself in or at least lose the feelings of discomfort and insecurity. However, she also mentions that the feelings of comfort can be somewhat fleeting and once they are gone, you find yourself feeling self-conscious again.

Sometimes you get like really into it and forget. But then it comes back to you. Five minutes later you're like, wait a minute what am I doing?

Still curious about this idea of comfort and of feeling at ease with oneself, I decided to approach it from another angle. I asked the girls if certain clothing made them feel more or less comfortable in their bodies. They responded by saying that this notion of comfort is linked to their moods. If they were happy or in good spirits, they would generally feel comfortable in most outfits that they chose to wear. Feeling at ease emotionally leads to feeling at ease in their clothes and this is then translated into feeling comfortable in their bodies. However, if they were not in a good mood, if they were feeling depressed or upset, their feelings of unhappiness tended to trickle down into all aspects of their lives and cause them to feel uneasy in their bodies. Allison explained it this way:

It depends what kind of mood I am in. If I am in a really happy mood, not much will bring me down, but if I am not in the best mood then I will be easily brought down.

Michelle agrees with Allison's idea and added this.

I could live in Pyjama pants; I could definitely live in them. Even in jeans, if I feel like I look good or just like feel comfortable...

After briefly discussing what makes them feel comfortable, our conversation quickly shifted to clothing that made them feel uncomfortable or self-conscious. Soupriya mentioned that she felt uncomfortable in tight clothes.

For me it's tight stuff. I just, not that I feel super self-conscious because... I think have a nice body. But I don't, I don't know I just tend...

She was interrupted by Alicia who said, "Because everything is showing..."

Soupriya: I remember wearing a really tight shirt and pretty tight pants ... and I remember that's when I just bought the pants and I remember realizing that they weren't the pants for me because I kept looking at my reflection any where I could, like every two minutes. And I was like, I can't stand this, no way!

It is difficult to tell from the dialogue whether Soupriya was uncomfortable because of the way she looked in the clothe, perhaps she did feel that they were too revealing and drew too much attention to her body. Or maybe Soupriya was unhappy in the clothing because it made her more conscious of her body. She mentions that whenever she had the chance, she kept gazing at herself in a mirror to check how she looked. It could be that she was annoyed with her own behaviour since she gives the impression that she is not the type of person who constantly verifies her appearance. It is possible that she has decided that tight clothes make her become too preoccupied with her body and therefore make her uncomfortable.

Alicia mentioned how uncomfortable and outraged she feels when older men objectify her by "checking her out".

Well I am not comfortable when I am on the bus or something and there are these older guys checking me out. Or if I am walking on the street and then these 30 year old ugly people are honking at me and it's SO DIGUSTING. It repulses me it's so disgusting.

This led to an explosion of dialogue as the participants went on a tirade about their school uniforms stating that they often feel both physical and mental stress when they wear them.

3.3 School Uniforms: Danger and Discomfort

Gracelyn's mandatory uniform is a kilt, worn with a white shirt and a tie, or white turtleneck, blue blazer, and knee socks or tights. Most of the girls choose to wear socks. They apparently also have the option to wear a certain style of pant, which they describe as "hideous and disgusting."

In theory, uniforms are meant to make students feel more secure and equal. It is quite standard for most private schools to have a fairly strict school uniform somewhat similar to Gracelyn's, and many public schools are also starting to make school uniforms mandatory. However, it is important to note that most public school uniforms are not as formal as the private schools and they do not usually consist of kilts and ties for the female students. Public schools tend to impose a certain dress code rather than a specific uniform in order to try and maintain some continuity in the way their students dress. Many principals, faculty and parents committees are convinced that if students' attire is controlled and orderly, their behaviour and attitude will manifest in a similar way thus enhancing and improving their students' lives and education. Micah Holmquist (2000) shrewdly notes that, "the voice of youth is notably missing from most discussion of uniforms. A number of surveys have looked at the attitudes of parents and adults towards uniforms but no comparable research has examined what young people think" (p. 2).

Although very little empirical research has been done in this area, school principals and parents are advocating this change in dress because they believe it can bring about an improvement in academic performance, level the playing field between the rich and the poor, reduce gang related school violence and increase school pride. Perhaps these factors hold true when students are safe within the boundaries of their schools. But what happens when the students leave the premises, clad in their uniforms? According to the girls at Gracelyn, wearing a school uniform beyond the safety of their school walls has many more negative rather than positive aspects.

The participants' complaints about their uniform were threefold; the first and most unanimous grievance is that they feel sexually objectified when wearing their uniforms. Second, they find that they are continuously judged and scorned by peers and adults when they wear their uniform, and lastly, they find their uniform physically uncomfortable.

The girls expressed serious feelings of uneasiness when wearing their uniforms out in public. They had all had experiences of unwanted attention from men. The participants explained how they had each been harassed by older men who the girls felt were turned on by the "school girl look". Alicia shares how she felt walking home one day in an area that was supposed to feel safe.

I was walking on QueenMary, like on QueenMary and this guy like sticks his head out the window and he was like "yeah baby" ...It's so disgusting it makes me sick."

Allison points out that their uniform is associated with a "school girl look" that appears to generate a sexual response from certain men. She finds this extremely offensive since she knows that when she (and her peers) get dressed for school, they are

not soliciting or expecting this kind of attention. All they are doing is complying with the school's dress code and yet this is how some people respond to their attire.

There's something about this type of high school girl outfit that is supposed to be like, I don't know provocative and like that is not what we are trying to do here.

Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan explores the issue of schoolgirls as sex objects in his film Exotica. As naked women dance in the background for men in a strip club the disc jockey asks his captivated audience, "What is it that gives a school girl her special innocence? Is it her sweet fragrance, her young inviting flesh or the way she can gaze at you?" He then asks the spectators to welcome "a sassy bit of jailbait to our stage". Out walks a very young woman dressed in a typical private school girl uniform - white button-down shirt, tie, kilt, black tights and shoes. The idea that men have fantasies about girls in school uniforms is not unique to Egoyan as any visit to an X-rated video rental shop will attest. Perhaps it is therefore not surprising to hear that how Soupriya sometimes feels when she is wearing her school uniform.

I feel like I am a little object or like one of those (pause) classic fuck me toys, and it's really dirty.

This kind of unwanted attention makes the girls very uncomfortable in their bodies. These feelings are especially justified given the context. They are walking down the street, riding the bus, or taking the metro to and from school, situations that normally should be considered safe and non-hostile. Yet it is here that strangers, because of their clothing, are objectifying them. To make matters worse, they have no choice but to wear these clothes. It is not as if they have made a conscious decision to portray that image or that they have specifically selected that outfit to wear as they go out with friends for the evening. Rather, they are wearing their mandatory school uniform, an outfit that is

supposed to make their lives less complicated and more comfortable. This is clearly not the case. Moreover, the girls found this uninvited attention even more difficult to deal with since it usually came from men who tended to be older than them. The girls interpreted the men's interest to be a part of some sort of fantasy that the men had. A fantasy that seems quite prevalent according to Egoyan. Alicia wisely, yet with revulsion, notes, "*It's older men mostly cause they know they can't get us.*"

However some girls remarked that even guys in their late teens or early twenties seem turned on by the "school girl look". Brett talks about the attitudes and glances she has to put up with when gets off the bus.

When I pass International (a school), I always get out of the bus and they like mob it. Then I get out and they always make stupid comments about our uniform.

The second problem with having to wear school uniforms is that the girls constantly feel judged. Again, this is ironic since many schools claim that having their students wear uniforms removes all the pressure of having to dress in a certain manner. Uniforms are supposed to make students feel equal to another because in theory they remove any concern about class distinction and wealth. Students don't have to worry about wearing that the latest style of jean or displaying the coolest logos because they are required to wear the same identical outfit. One would assume that no one could tell your socio economic status if you are in a uniform, right? Well, perhaps this is true while you are safe within the confines of your school but once you walk out those doors, the opposite often becomes true.

Wearing a uniform, like Gracelyn's, automatically exposes you to judgment and labelling. The girls feel that they are instantly labelled, rich, snobby, elite, and arrogant simply because they are wearing a kilt and tie. They feel as if the world assumes that they

belong to a certain echelon of society, an assumption made solely on the basis of a kilt and white shirt, and that they also have contempt for the rest of the world. Vicki has this to say:

Well, I don't really come from a very rich family, but I feel with the kilt I get looks that, that people think I am what I'm not; that I am super rich and I go to an all girls school cause I can afford it not because it is a good education or anything like that.

Soupriya frames it this way:

I find like when I am wearing my uniform it gives off like this kind of snobby vibe, well like obviously it's not but lots of people judge like it is. And they will look at you and be like "uh, she's not cool" or...you get like a LOOK. It's like people think there's a type of personality that goes with the uniform.

In addition to the dirty looks and critical glances from peers, some participants feel that many adults also draw conclusions and assumptions about their character based on their appearance. This leads them to feel anxiety in situations that, again, should not be degrading. Maria explains how riding the bus in her uniform becomes a demeaning experience.

When I get on the bus a lot of the bus drivers are really mean. If I am in my uniform, they give me crap about it. Like if I ask where a stop is, you know "can you let me know when this stop is" or whatever, they look you over and give you a dirty look. And I've had times where... bus drivers will not even tell me and just be really rude.

Moreover, some participants often feel guilty when dressed in their uniforms because they sense that the rest of the world has a false image of them. Vicki explains how the experience of passing a homeless person is different if she is wearing her uniform:

When we got to the train we pass by a couple of homeless guys and I think I feel more guilty with my kilt on because they are asking for money and the skirt gives the idea that you have a lot of money and yet you won't give any... I think I feel more guilty with the kilt on then I would if I was just wearing every day clothes.

As a final complaint, the girls feel that their uniforms were physically uncomfortable. They find their blazers confining and bulky and that they constantly have to readjust their kilts. As Soupriya points out, *“The kilts ride up when you run for the bus, then people stare when you readjust them.”* Again the girls seem to draw unwanted attention and stares when they try to rearrange their clothing. Once more the girls’ uniforms fail to make their lives simpler, since they find themselves feeling uncomfortable performing a simple, everyday activity.

Further probing found that the group members generally feel masculine in their blazers, which raises an interesting point about their uniforms. Why are young women expected to wear white shirts with ties, a blazer and a kilt? Are they supposed to feel like young men from the waist up and then like women from the waist down? Is there some sort of subliminal message that implies that they should dress and think like men yet still be cute and sexy young women? I doubt that this is the school’s intention, but have the administrators ever considered how the uniform makes students feel? One participant states that she likes the blazer because it made everyone equal.

I find it makes people more equal, like whatever I find the blazer makes ever body look kind of bulky (laughter) so it’s not like ‘she looks so GOOD in a blazer’ everybody kind of looks crappy in their blazer so it puts everybody on the same level.

Perhaps they do make children’s lives better because they eliminate some stress and competition among peers but generally speaking, the uniforms did more harm than good. The participants seem to feel that the negative aspects outweigh the positive. A simple solution would be to permit the students to travel to and from school in street clothing and allow them to change into their uniform once they arrive on the school premises. This would alleviate a lot of unnecessary stress and probably make the girls

feel more secure about themselves. Unfortunately, I don't think this change will ever occur. Part of the allure of uniforms is that the school takes pride in the image that its students project when they are not actually on school premises. The administration feels reassurance knowing that its 200 students are all walking around the city in a neat and demure fashion. If they only knew how their students feel or how some people really respond to the Gracelyn uniform, perhaps that would change their minds.

3.4 Choosing Clothes

Are you what you wear? But you choose what you wear according to who you are right?

(Dorkus, 15-year-old participant.)

We have all heard the old saying "you are what you wear". This implies that it is correct that people can and should be judged by what they wear. In theory, by wearing a certain style of clothing, we present to the world who we are, where we come from and what beliefs and values we adhere to. *Hippies, Grunge, Preppies, Goth, Punk*, these names all represent groups of people who are labelled and categorized primarily by what they wear. McCracken (1988) points out that clothing is the material of the visual representation of one's worth. Our clothing can help project an image from which can one can deduce such things as our class, age and so on. In other words, clothing is a cultural category. According to Abbott and Sapsford (2001) adolescents use clothing as a proclamation. Teens purchase and wear clothing to create a certain look, sometimes to fit into the dominant culture and other times to rebel against it. People assume that the person dressed as "Preppy" longs to fit into the upper stratum of society and can't wait to be ensconced in its world of cocktail parties and tennis matches. Where as the "Punks"

or “Skaters” want nothing to do with the mainstream world’s activities, standards, or ideals.

Maria is offended by the fact that many adults assume that teenagers are always doing things to make a statement.

I mean we are talking about how clothing is a statement and now the belly button getting pierced is statement. I don't think everything is a statement. I think that the things we buy, yes we are influenced by the media but they are the ones who expose us to certain things. That's how you hear about certain brand names. So I'd see it in a magazine and I would like it. Like it is my own opinion! I like certain things and it just happens to sometimes be what everyone else likes.

Brett agrees with Maria’s point of view and adds:

For sure some people are trying to rebel or try to look different but I think that some of them just think they look really nice. ... But then some people are like “They are conforming”, but maybe they aren't conforming, they just really like what they are wearing.

Dorkus too concurs and finds it quite frustrating that everyone is so caught up in analysing who wears what and why. She has this to say:

I get annoyed when everyone, everything is always statement. I think people need to relax a bit, like who cares in the end just... you don't have to put something on and it be like “This represents everything that I am!” (Laughter) It's a shirt (laughter) it's a piece of cotton (pause) who cares ... If you wear it you like it (sounds of agreement from the other participants in the background), if you don't wear it, you don't like it. Who cares!

Many girls are quite insistent about why they wear certain clothing. They state that they choose to wear certain articles of clothing because they believe they look good in them not because they have a certain brand name or specific logo or because they are trying to fit into some group. They implied that if the brand is popular it is just a coincidence, what really matters to them is their comfort level in the clothes. Alicia, spoke quite candidly about why she purchases certain name brands.

I care about what I think. If I look in the mirror and I see something that doesn't look good to me than I won't buy it and I have the Diesel boots not because I think they are

the most drop dead gorgeous boots but because I am already tall enough and I don't want to wear chunks this high (gestures) and I don't want to be like sliding down a hill. (Lots of laughter) So, that's why I bought those boots. And I wear Paresuco jeans not because my bum is hanging out of them, my bum isn't. And I'm not going to buy the ones that our very low, I'm going to buy the ones that fit me nicely and the ones that make me look good in them. I am not going to buy Miss Sixty jeans if they don't fit me nicely, I tried on a pair and they didn't fit me so I didn't buy them.

Whatever the girls maintain, however, the fact remains that to wear a particular brand or label of clothing often leads others to assume that you are associated with a particular group, perhaps a specific group linked with certain characteristics or behaviours. This can lead to stereotyping and name-calling. One of the participants, for example, does not enjoy being labelled a “JAP”, (a Jewish American Princess), simply because she wears a particular brand of jean. Brett frames like this:

I wear Miss Sixty's. I think they are nicer than other kinds of jeans on the market. (Pause) And then I'm always being judged because I'm wearing Miss Sixty's and Space F .D. I'm automatically a JAP. I'm automatically an airhead and I have to follow everyone else because I have no originality just because I like wearing that. In reality, I do have a lot of self-confidence and I just like how those clothes look on me. So I don't think that's fair.

She is challenged by another member of the group who acknowledges that regardless of whether or not we think it is fair, the majority of people are going to judge others based on what they wear.

*Dorkus: But when you do dress like that, you have to, you are **aware** that you are going to be seen that way?*

Brett: But it's not only people like me, people do it to people who dress like punks and skaters and whatever.

In our society, it has become natural for people to categorize others based on their appearance. Whether we intend to or not, most people have at one time or another, made an assumption about another person's personality and character that was based solely on her appearance. Although the girls are adamant about the fact that this type of pre-

judging is wrong, some of the girls' dialogue expresses just how difficult it is for them to practice what they preach. Alicia's remarks reflect this difficulty:

You shouldn't judge somebody by looking at them; you should be judging them on how they behave. So if you're asking people to judge you on the way you dress than you not asking for the right thing and I know if I walk down the street and I see somebody with blue spiked hair or something obviously I am going to classify them and if I see somebody else... I am being honest. I am going to judge somebody if I see them but (pause) I think you all do.

Alicia openly admits that she sometimes judges people based on their looks, even though she states that people should not be making assumptions or drawing conclusions about an individual's personality that is based solely on their appearance. Moreover, she challenges her peers to be honest enough to admit that they do the same thing, regardless of whether or not they intend to. Alicia's comments are very important since they express an inner conflict that is probably more common than people wish to admit. People frequently make involuntary and unconscious judgements, based solely on a stranger's appearance. Adults frequently label and categorize people based on their material possessions and external appearance and choose to wear clothes to create a positive impression. So why should adolescents' behaviour be any different?

Vicki is the only participant to raise a point of view that differs from her peers. She actually concurs with McCracken (1988) since she infers that clothing can be one of the initial things that we see when we meet someone. She states that people may use clothing to declare who they are to the world since most people don't get a feel for your personality when they first see you. She thinks that people can then proceed to make assumptions about your character based on your clothes.

But I think clothes are sort of meant to help you show people what you can be because you can't see into their soul when you see them for the first time. You can't see what they

are made of so... the only thing you can see is what they are wearing and it is sort of a form of expression.

However this view of reality is exactly what the other participants dislike. They don't want to be judged based on their clothing, yet they have to contend with the fact that they know that they will be and, they also have to cope with knowing that they are sometimes guilty of doing the same thing. The problem becomes amplified since everyone knows that certain brands are more expensive than others and therefore, exclusive. Assumptions are often made accordingly about the people who wear certain brands. We assume that people who wear certain styles come from a specific socio-economic background or that if they don't come from that particular environment; they dress the way they do to create the image that they do belong to that echelon of society. We assume that a woman in a Versaci suit, matching shoes and a Louis Vitton purse comes from a higher stratum of society than a woman wearing a pair of Kmart slacks, a polyester blouse and cheap high heeled shoes.

Soupriya discusses how money can play a significant role and be a deciding factor in how people select the kind of clothing they wear.

Nobody I know of the lower class can buy Miss Sixty jeans, or Tiffany bracelets and necklaces. No way. And also if you want to be accepted into that type of group I find lots of time, it is really hard not to be 'in' unless you have THOSE clothes and THAT style. And... when you do have those clothes ... it kind of changes. I don't know if it's sub conscious or what but I remember I got, I never ever wear Paresuco, I'm not a "Paresuco girl", whatever. I got a pair of Paresuco jeans and I kind of ...felt different, felt like I should to be trying to be somebody else. Not that I felt like I should be somebody else other than who I actually was but I was kind of acting very different than I normally do and. I just, ah whatever (annoyed kind of laugh). It pissed me off!

Soupriya examines the dilemma of wanting to be accepted into a certain group but at the same time needing to maintain her own identity. She discusses how not being able to afford a certain brand name can interfere with friendships. She implies that some girls

may not allow you into their “group” if you don’t sport the right style and that these friendships are therefore out of reach for many less privileged people. However, she also acknowledges that she cannot change who she is in order to please or be accepted by other people and that when she does dress to conform to other people’s ideals or choice of clothing, she becomes uncomfortable. Soupriya doesn’t like that she began to act differently when she was wearing a ritzy style of clothing and realized that the best way to stay true to herself was to maintain her own style and identity. She explains:

But I find that if... I try to be original, and I just try to step away from what’s “in style”... I find that if you do have an original style, you actually end up feeling a lot more secure than you think you would. (Little laugh) It’s just taking that step.

Brett recognizes that both she and Soupriya have the same goal in mind. They just want to be able to wear what they want without having to explain or justify their choices to anyone. She sums it up this way:

As long as you think you look good it should be fine. No one should be judging you. I don’t judge people so they shouldn’t judge me. (To Soupriya) I mean you like being original and I like wearing Miss Sixty’s, we’re both happy, so people shouldn’t judge us.

The girls discuss and address this quandary further and establish that people are going to be judged and categorized regardless of what style they decide to adopt. People seem to label and pigeonhole all styles of dress making it impossible to escape a label of some kind. The girls resent this fact and know that it is impossible to please everyone all the time. Maria expresses her frustration like this:

You buy something that is not Miss Sixty’s or not brand name or something, obviously some people are going to judge you for not buying that brand name. And then if someone is wearing Miss Sixty, people are going to say to them, (mean tone) “Oh, you’re such a JAP” Or if you’re wearing the Roots sweatpants or whatever. YOU CAN’T WIN!

Brett reiterates that feeling comfortable in your own skin should be enough. It shouldn’t matter what style you wear or what label you have on, people should be

allowed the freedom to dress in what they want without having to worry about being judged.

Because if you aren't wearing anything then oh, you're just trying to be original. If you're wearing that, oh, she's trying to conform. You always lose. (Agreement in the background) Some people think that if they're wearing Miss Sixty's they look really good and some people think that if they are wearing no name brand corduroys that they look really good.

Thus, in the interview, the problem for these girls is not whether they feel that their clothing is “in style”. They seem to be more concerned with the fact that they do not feel that they have the liberty to wear what they want without being criticized or mocked. So, having the freedom to dress a particular way is important to them, and feeling comfortable in those clothes is also essential. But what, if anything, makes them choose a type of style?

As we probed further, the following week, the girls articulated how they are affected by the norms and rules that the fashion industry and society impose on them. Falynn mentions how she purposely tries to avoid buying brand names because she prefers not to purchase what is considered popular. But sometimes she can't avoid it.

I don't really buy a lot of clothes... usually because I can't afford them. But if I see something I like, I'll buy it. But then I'll get angry with myself if it's a brand name because I have problems with brand names (pause.) I mean you can't escape them. I really don't like the idea of wearing them because I just think I am advertising for this company. I think it is important not to succumb to the pressure of buying what is popular because everyone is an individual, and I think if we all dressed how we really truly wanted to we would all be different.

Falynn also introduces the idea of not wanting to serve as an advertisement for any company. She doesn't seem to like being used by companies and she realizes that it is difficult to remain true to yourself and not get conned into buying something just for the label. She acknowledges that when it comes to buying clothes, adolescents face a

certain amount of pressure, from both their peers and society, and that simply dressing “how you want”, may be easier said than done.

Some girls state that they purposely try and go against what is considered fashionable and acknowledge that this behaviour is simply conforming to the “anti conformists”. Dorkus explains:

*I don't know, I think on some level I care. I mean everything I own is (pause) some form of a brand name. I don't own anything that is Miss Sixty or anything but I have Levi's and its still in there. I kind of think that everyone was lying to themselves last week, that we were all like “... it is just my soul that makes me buy what I want to buy, (laughter). But I'm sorry, everybody, **everybody** is affected by the media. Its self-conscious probably, and you probably don't realize how much you are affected, but even people who say that they're not they're anti-conformist, like people who say “I'm NOT going to wear this stuff” - well that's still being affected by it because you're still realizing that it is there.*

Maria responds to Dorkus' statement adding:

The way I am affected by conformity or brand names... well, for me I try and buy things that I know people haven't been wearing so much. I looked for boots a while ago and I saw the Diesel boots that a lot of people have now. I looked at them and I liked them. Then I remembered that a lot of people were getting them and that made me NOT buy them, because I didn't want to look, you know, the same as other people.

As Dorkus astutely notes, “*But it is still having an effect on you.*” She is absolutely right. The media seems to be having a reverse effect on Maria since she is trying not to buy what everyone else has. Yet as Dorkus pointed out earlier, this behaviour could be interpreted as conforming to the non-conformists.

As we continued to discuss the idea of self-expression and the desire to differ from the norm, Falyynn spoke about what can happen when more than one person decides to dress or accessorize in a manner that is different from what is considered mainstream.

They are just doing that for the sake of not conforming, but what they don't realize is that they are still creating a group for themselves, which they all conform to. And they are usually being categorized and still feel they have to dress a certain way. So there is no escaping it really.

3.5 Media Influence on Dressing

Some girls admit that they do try to adopt the same style as their peers. Vicki discusses how the media and her peers influence her choice of clothing and how she tries to create a balance between the “conformists” and the “non-conformists.”

I think I'm influenced by the media to a certain extent. It's not that much but I can still feel it. (Pause) How are you introduced to Paresuco anyway? Billboards, your friends...and where did they see it? The billboards... So I go to the store and see them and I say, "Hey, the latest fad, why not get a pair?" I don't own that many; I own one pair I think. But still, that's how I bought them - cause my friends liked it, so I bought a pair. And (pause) I guess I try to be accepted by the people who consider themselves popular, but at the same time, I don't want to anger people who are against the whole, you know, being like everybody else those who are the anti-conformists sort of. I try to be in the middle, so I can go both ways.

Allison recognizes the fact her primary goal is to be comfortable in what she is wearing but she also admits that she values other people's opinions about how apparel look on her. However, she does maintain her need to be an individual and states that she is not willing to buy certain products just because everyone else does.

I'll buy pants because I'm comfortable in them and I think they look good and maybe my sister will say, "Oh, they look good on you." So I take people's advice on things. I am not going to go out and buy a pair of grungy pants, well I mean I might and then if people are like "Oh Allison, they look terrible on you" I might maybe not wear them anymore just because they told me that. But I don't think I'm going to base my (pause) spending just on what everyone else is wearing.

Regardless of the girls interest in attempting to be true to themselves and their desire to dress in a way that makes them feel good about themselves, they do acknowledge that the media does influence them. The media does not necessarily dictate what they should wear, or convince them that they should look a certain way, but it does touch them in a variety of ways. Dasey expresses feelings of vulnerability when it comes to the images that the media depicts. She makes references to two kinds of people, those

who are strong enough to resist the standards that the media projects and those who cannot.

(In a soft spoken tone) I think that there's two types of people. One person doesn't let things get to them, like if someone criticizes the way they look or whatever, they don't care. And I know a lot of people are like that, and that's amazing. But in all reality most of us do care about what we look like. And as much as like Dorkus said we are going to sit here pretending we don't buy certain clothes for this reason or we will buy something for that reason. (Pause) ... Everyone is affected by magazines and television, what you want to be, (Pause) the people you see on television. (Lowers her voice) I think, (Raises it) I think as much as we can sit here debating this, I think the truth of the matter is (pause) ah (lowers her voice) most of us are affected.

Dasey's simple statement sums up what both researchers and this study suggest is likely to be true.

4.0 Media Influence- Influence- It Doesn't Bother Me But...

So, how exactly does the media affect the participants? The way media is manifested can best be described as “It doesn't bother me but...” The girls seem to be trapped in a paradoxical state that consists of knowing that the media and fashion worlds' idea of beauty is absurd yet every now and then finding themselves being pulled into that world. The unfortunate consequence is that they feel they are inadequate and that they do not measure up to society's ideals. This result seems inevitable; since girls are continuously bombarded with messages from the media that not only depict thin as beautiful but also as the way one should be (Botta 1999, and Grogan 1999).

4.1 Thin is beautiful

Television, movies, magazines and advertisements subliminally and overtly encourage girls to accept the concept that women must strive to be skinny regardless of the costs. Television, magazines and advertisements bombard adolescents with images of what is beautiful and then provide them with ways to try and attain this beauty. Downs and Harrison's (1985) study of 4, 294 television commercials examined the number of ‘attractiveness based messages’ and discovered several things. To begin with, they found that one out of every 3.8 commercials illustrated one of these messages and estimated that people are therefore exposed to approximately 5,260 “attractiveness” ads per year, which equates to about 14 messages per day. Moreover, roughly 1, 850 of the messages are directly linked to beauty (Myers & Biocca, 1992). When the focus shifted to actual characters on 33 television shows, the study revealed that only 69.1% of the female roles were played by women who were considered thin, a figure that is three times larger than the 17.5%, of the male characters who had the same body description. To make matters

worse, only 5% of the women's roles were occupied by females who were considered heavy compared to the 25.5% of men who were labelled with the same physique (Grogan, 1999, and Myers & Biocca, 1992). And when a comparison was made between four women's and four men's magazines, researchers discovered 63 ads for diet foods in the women's publication compared to only one in the men's and 96 ads for 'figure enhancing' merchandise for women readers compared to 10 for the men (Myers & Biocca, 1992).

In addition, it is extremely difficult for adolescent girls to hide from the enormous billboard images of waif-like, runway beauties who cannot possibly have the 23% body fat that a woman needs in order to maintain her menstrual cycles. No one bothers to mention that these models of female "perfection" weigh about 20-25% less than today's average woman or that this ideal body type is unattainable by most women, even if they choose to starve themselves (Kilbourn, 1994). Nor does the media explain to young people that models' bodies have frequently been surgically and photographically altered, as well as airbrushed to feign perfection.

Models and other members of the fashion industry collaborate to ensure that the quest for thinness continues. Take for example the fashion industry's latest scheme, size zero, for those who are lost in size one clothes. Size zero is a perfect example of how the fashion industry creates new and unattainable (not to mention unhealthy) goals for women. What does it say about our culture when we as a gender secretly wish to be *nothing* (0) and fit into to nothing (0)? Must we feel self-recrimination for being *something* (too large for a size zero) since isn't that what size zero means- *nothing*

(Payne, 2000). No wonder the girls in the group interview often feel conflicted about their bodies.

It is interesting to note however, that the girls in the group interview are quite aware that this conflict exists. Maria explains it this way:

I find when I walk into a store and I look at something on a "hanger", it always looks great on the hanger. And I try it on and, I am NOT a hanger so it looks disgusting on me. It bothers me yes, but it doesn't affect me as much as it would maybe somebody else. I mean I'll go into a store and I'll try something on and it will be too small and I'll think back to the magazine that I saw it in and the model who was like this (holds up one finger)... So, I don't want to look like that. And if I need to look like that, to fit into this, then I don't really care.

The clothing Maria selects is not supposed to fit her the same way it fits the "hanger" considering that the "waif- like heroin addict is the look that dominates most of the young women's display" (Bentley 1999, 210). Moreover, most mannequins' measurements are completely unrealistic and unattainable and they are intentionally created this way. Mannequins are made so that, "the clothes fit right and look the way they are supposed to" (Bentley 1999, 210), which means that designers are producing their clothes to fit mannequins, who have unhealthy and unrealistic frames, rather than to fit normal looking bodies.

Although Maria is able to grasp and rationalize the situation, she has still been affected, perhaps for only a fleeting moment, but a moment nonetheless. The participants realize and understand that the media is spinning an image that is unrealistic, yet they still react when they do not measure up to that image. Maria is a wonderful example since she later mentions how unhappy shopping can sometimes make her feel.

I always get really disappointed whenever I go shopping and I have something in mind that I WANT to get. I'll go to certain stores and I'll get really disappointed and like

every store I go into, I'll try something on and it'll be too small, or too tight, or make me look fat or something.

Dorkus realizes that fashion designers should be allowed to design clothing the way they want to but she thinks it is completely inappropriate for them to force their beliefs on the rest of society.

It is their artistic 'whatever' so they can do whatever they want but I just don't like the way that it is imposed on the rest of society. They are allowed to find a hanger attractive... but when you start telling everyone else that you have to look that way... I don't know you shouldn't impose a certain kind of appearance on an entire society.

Like Maria, Dorkus comprehends that she shouldn't feel inadequate about her appearance but when she shops she still has difficulty dealing with the fact that she doesn't measure up to society's vision of beauty. She therefore creates a system that helps her deal with these feelings of insufficiency.

I hate shopping. It's the most sad thing in the world. But the only thing that makes me do it is I always try on sizes that I know are too big for me, so I feel like WooHoo, Ya! I tried on the super extra large like man's size and it's too big. I just try on those sizes so I can feel good and go get the smaller size.

Dorkus seems to anticipate that she will not fit into the size of clothing that she wants, so she protects herself and tries on oversized clothing so she can feel good about herself when they are too big. Although Dorkus seems to be very aware that the media has created this impossible standard to live up to, she still reacts to it. In her mind, rather than thinking that there is something wrong with the way clothes are made or sized, she reasons that the problem lies with her since she can't fit into the small women's sizes.

This kind of experience can occur on a regular basis for many girls since our popular culture blatantly excludes the marketing of normal, healthy looking bodies. Clothes are made for waif-like models whose (often) unattainable and unhealthy bodies' can cause adolescent girls to perceive that their bodies are the problem since they are

unable to live up to the false and impossible standard. When girls cannot find a glimpse of who they are represented within the popular culture, this not only makes them feel invisible, but it may lead them to believe that they are the ones who are inadequate. Girls may then interpret this to mean “there is something wrong with me” rather than realize that the problem lies with who and what is being represented as popular culture. Since only 5 % of women actually possess a body type that is capable of resembling the image and model of women represented in the media, the average teenage girl is in danger of becoming disillusioned with her own body and runs the risk of developing a negative body image (Kilbourne, 1994; and Phelps & Rizzo, 1999).

Falynn: I just think body size is definitely... a whole different kind of pressure. I think everyone is so affected by it. I think I am affected by it to a certain extent, but I just think it is important to always be true to yourself and know that those standards are really not realistic. I think a lot of people's perception of reality really gets sort of clouded just by being bombarded by the images all the time. But I don't know, it depends on how much self-confidence you have.

Falynn recognizes that the media is unrealistic and that its images and models are out of reach for the majority of the females, but she is still bothered by the fact she does not measure up. When asked how she feels about shopping she has this to say.

I just hate shopping when I go... I remember enjoying it when I was in grade six and was like size zero or something ridiculous like that. But, now I just don't bother.

Falynn knows she should know better. She should feel good about herself on her own terms and always be “true to yourself”, but like her peers she somehow seems to be lured into the trap that the media so cleverly sets.

Dasey too, recognizes that shopping often makes her feel like she is stuck in a vicious and uncontrollable cycle that tends to cause her grief.

I don't like shopping because it is depressing. When you don't fit into something you feel really bad about it, but you don't do anything about it. And then the next time you go, it

just happens again. Some people go on diets and then that stops, and you go back to the store and grab clothes and it's just a whole big (pause) routine and (pause) it's annoying after a while, but there's nothing you can really do about it.

Dasey expresses feelings of helplessness, frustration and anger since she, like Falynn, feels she gets ensnared in this trap that she cannot control. She wants to appear a certain way and fit into a specific mould because that is what society and the media are telling her she should do. Yet she realises that it is an unrealistic desire and that the chances of her actually reaching that goal is quite improbable. If the fashion industry designs clothing to fit a certain type of body, how do they expect girls to feel when they try on clothing and it doesn't fit them the same way?

Here again the participants realize that the fashion industry, like the media, sets them up for disappointment and self-deprecation. They can conceptualize the scheme but they cannot avoid having an emotional reaction. Brett mentions this:

A lot of designers make ... they stop at sizes. I am talking about big designers and I think it makes people think like "Oh he doesn't even make clothes for my size. I must be so fat; I must be so" ... it is kind of depressing.

Alicia agrees with Brett and has this to add. *Ya, the European designers, they only make sizes 1, 2 and 3.*

The girls are learning the hard way what it means to have their actual size, shape or weight in our culture (Grogan, 1999, and Fallon, 1990). The participants discussed how frustrating it is to go shopping and not be able to find clothes that fit them properly because the stores all seem to be stocking outfits made for one particular body type, which of course is not a prevalent one. Vicki describes her feelings as she tries to find a pair of pants.

Because I'm short and also have larger hips but then I have a small waist (pause) ... it's SO hard to find a pair of pants that fit properly... Either I can't get them on, so I go and

get a size larger size and then there's like a BIG ring around my stomach (laughter) and I need like five belts to put it on (laughs/ laughter). I can see why it bothers people, because you go there and you see that your size is not on the rack and then you go, "Ah crap does that mean I have to go on a diet?!"

It appears as though Vicki automatically assumes the worst. Instead of thinking that her size is common and therefore out of stock, Vicki believes that the lack of clothing in her size means that her body type is so big that they do not make or carry her size.

Alicia understands and empathizes with Vicki, since she has had similar experiences when she shops:

Ya, that's true. I saw this pair of jeans and they only had the small sizes, and I REALLY wanted them. They were the only jeans that I wanted, but they didn't have my size (pause) - but I know I am not going to go on a diet. Whenever I go and try on clothes I'm like "Oh, I'm so fat," but I never do anything about it. I gained 10 lbs in December when I was in Mexico and I haven't lost a pound because I can't go on a diet. I like eating too much.

Both Vicki and Alicia question their body size and shape because they cannot find clothing that fits them properly. Vicki ponders the idea of dieting whereas Alicia acknowledges that she could never diet even if she wanted to. I believe that both participants recognize that they are not really at fault here, yet they respond and react as if they are. Some girls internalize their anger and become upset and disappointed with themselves for not measuring up to the "norm", while others project their anger outward.

Soupriya takes the latter approach to this dilemma. She still becomes angry and frustrated when she shops, but she says it has nothing to do with her body size. Rather she states that she is angry at the system because it makes people feel negatively about themselves.

I mean it doesn't really bother me when something doesn't fit me, I'm just like whatever, but I can see how it really pisses people off. That's why I don't like the way they make it look so much better on mannequins, because I know it affects lots of people. But I really

HATE the fact that I can't get any jeans that FIT me (Laughs) because they all come up to my knees (Laughter) they're like Bermuda shorts (laughter) and it's so annoying!

4.2 Whose Fault Is It? Media Influence and Social Comparison

The girls are conscious of the fact that it isn't just the media or fashion industry that frequently makes them feel uncomfortable in their bodies. There is another factor that influences them. The girls are aware that they tend to feel self-conscious about their appearance when they are surrounded by people who they deem to be more attractive than them. Alicia mentions how she sometimes feels when she is shopping with her friends.

Sometimes I go shopping with my friends and a lot of my friends are skinnier and shorter than me. So, they try on the size small and I try on the size large and then I feel really I don't know, (pause) but I know that I can't change. Because if I was still my height and I weighed 30 pounds less, which is what they weigh, then I'd be DISGUSTING.

Alicia is aware and comprehends that she cannot change her body to look like that of her friends, but she still feels uncomfortable and self-conscious if they are smaller than her.

Theories of social comparison have been put forth by many researchers (Graham, Eich, Kephart & Peterson, 1999; Harrison, 1997; Harrison and Cantor, 1997; and Mckinley & Hyde, 1996) in order to explain how young women react, interpret and internalize the societal messages, ideals and models that dictate what image and body a Western woman should aspire to have. Their theory attempts to explain how girls get trapped into believing that the slim, slender body type is the ideal body for all women. When girls continuously observe and compare themselves to models that they consider to be beautiful and normal, they become convinced that this is "the perfect look" and therefore the look that they should aspire to attain. This motivates and stimulates their

drive for thinness and pushes them to try and alter their bodies to fit the new form (Harrison, 1997, & Mckinley, & Hyde).

However, as the participants mention, it is not just the media images that the girls compare themselves to, their self-assessment is also based on how they think they compare to their peers.

Dasey: I don't think I am uncomfortable because of the media; I think I would be uncomfortable anyway. It depends how I feel about myself and what I don't like about myself.

Soupriya: When do you feel uncomfortable about yourself, when you have a lot of pimples?

Dasey: No, when I am around people who are stick skinny and I am like o.k... That's uncomfortable.

As the girls grappled with this issue, they realized that it was not necessarily an either or situation. They described it as a “chicken and egg” scenario and they couldn't decide which idea influenced the other. Were they dissatisfied with their bodies, because the media told them to be? Or were they just uncomfortable because they looked different from the people around them? Dorkus tried to make sense of it this way.

But the reason why you think that is a problem, Dasey, is because you have been indoctrinated to believe that that is bad. Theoretically if you were around a whole bunch of skinny people you could say “ Hey I am the hottest one here because they are all disgustingly skinny” if that was the way people saw things.

Alicia: Ya, if that was the way the media portrayed things.

Dorkus: The reason that you see it that way is because that is what society has told us. Despite the fact that it may be an individual problem, I still think the media has a lot to do with it because they create the image and that image is an unhealthy one. I mean if they created a healthy image it wouldn't be so bad to say “Oh I should look like that.” I mean I don't think people should strive to look a certain way in the first place, but to strive to look something that is unhealthy, that is clearly wrong.

Dasey heard Dorkus' words and understood them but still had a different opinion.

If I like to eat all unhealthy, and I feel really gross, it's going to be because of what I am putting into my system. I don't like what I am eating so therefore eat healthier, exercise. It's not just that I want to look like THEM, there's more than that to it. There's feeling uncomfortable with what you eat, there's feeling uncomfortable with... stuff like that. I really don't think it has everything to do with "I want to look like them" People have a mind of their own and sometimes they just don't like the way they look, they're not happy in their own skin.

Like the need to be comfortable in what you wear, Dasey mentions that you have to also feel comfortable in your body. She is implying that your size or shape doesn't really matter it's how you feel about being that size and shape. Alicia still wasn't convinced that it was that simple.

But maybe it's just to try and look sort of normal. If the T.V. was telling us that being bigger was in style, and all the models were bigger than if there were 20 "stick people" and one bigger person then that one person would think they were the better looking one because the media is portraying that bigger is better.

Maria was also conflicted about this issue. She realized that the media played a definite role but she also knew that there were other factors that come into play. She discusses how she felt when she was younger.

I agree to a certain extent that you feel badly about how you look because of the media but I remember when I was younger, I really didn't look through magazines but I'd feel uncomfortable if I was around other people because I was really tall and I was always very developed for my age. So if I was around people who were like tiny and flat as boards I'd feel uncomfortable and it wasn't because of the media it was because of who I was around. So I mean yes, I agree to a certain extent the media does affect me but people who are around me affect me also.

Alicia raised the issue of feeling different. She explained that it often didn't matter what media was professing, if a person found themselves surrounded by a group of people who looked different than them, this often made them uncomfortable.

It's still feeling awkward around other people. If you are 10 "stick people" and then one person who is a bit bigger, it is awkward, it really is. And no matter what the media is portraying it is still awkward if you are different than who you are with.

I was always taller than everyone else and when we were younger, we would all walk with our arms around each other and it would be so weird because my head would be sticking out! (Laughter) and it was so awkward.

Allison discusses how difficult it can be when you are smaller and skinnier than everyone else. She remembers when she was younger how her peers wouldn't let her play sports like football because she was too small.

I would ask to play and people would be like "No, you can't play football you're TOO skinny." ... That hurt my feelings so much. And I knew it wasn't my fault, I tried to eat a lot more (laughs, peers laugh too) but I couldn't do it. I just wouldn't gain weight (laughs). I guess it is kind of the opposite of what most girls (pause, lowers her voice) feel but I guess there has to be a certain amount of girls who feel the same way.

The girls realized that when it came their bodies they did not want to look different from their peers. I found this very interesting, considering that when it came to dressing their bodies, they wanted the right to be able to dress in their own individualistic way. They wanted to be seen as secure individuals who didn't have to conform to any one else's standards. But when it came to their physical appearance and body image, individuality (and security) went out the window because, all of a sudden, they felt that there was something wrong with them if they didn't look like everyone else.

The girls obviously feel a pressure to look a certain way, and they constantly compare themselves to their peers even though they believe that their peers are always very supportive and encouraging. Soupriya feels that her friends are very positive and that they, "*make me feel really good about myself.*" Alicia agrees that her friends are usually a positive influence even though she doesn't always believe what they have to say.

Ya they sort of bullshit (laughter) you, like they tell you you're so skinny but they are really two sizes smaller. I don't think your friends can make you want to be skinny. They wouldn't be like "Oh you're fat" because I don't think one of my friends would tell me

that. But I don't know, I guess we spoke about it before, if you go shopping and you're a size 10 and your friend's a size two, then I'm sure you feel it.

Dorkus understands what Alicia means and adds:

It's not so much by what they say as just by what they are and if all your friends are prettier than you, you can't help but feel it all the time, know what I mean? They all say nice things to you, but you still feel like if you were somewhere with a group of friends there is no way anyone would ever come up to talk to you because you are surrounded by these people.

And Maria reiterates what both girls were saying by stating:

It's not because people are saying anything it is just your perception of the people who are around you. It's just like Wow, I am not the same as these people and it is freaking me out.

The idea of being or looking different was briefly explored and the girls came to this conclusion.

Alicia: Different isn't portrayed as good.

Michelle: It's not bad, it's just different.

Dorkus: We know that but we don't live it. We know discriminating is bad, we shouldn't judge people but we all do it anyways and we all feel uncomfortable in those situations. You will feel uncomfortable if the whole world is doing something different than you.

So how do they deal with all this? How do the girls make sense of all these contradicting emotions and beliefs? What can they do when intellectually they know and understand one thing, yet emotionally feel and react differently? How do they cope with these ambiguous and inconsistent feelings?

A few girls make the conscious decision to do nothing. They presume that if they don't do anything to change their appearance, they can always fall back on the idea that the only reason they don't measure up to others is because they purposely try not to.

Dorkus seems to be an expert at this ploy. She describes it this way:

I think I approach differently than a lot of people. I just think, "Yeah well I don't really think I look that great but I don't care and I'm not going to waste my time trying to like make it look better." (Ploop) (Laughter) I don't care. I'll eat whatever I want, I'll do whatever I want, if I don't look good, I don't look good. That's about it. I mean it's not like I do what I want because I have high confidence, I do what I want because I have low confidence, but screw it.

Alison: I feel exactly like that.

Dorkus: If I try... how annoying would it be if you tried really hard and didn't succeed?!

Gillian: But do you think you can ever succeed?

Dorkus: No but I can always have my illusions that if I did try... The only reason I don't look as good as them is because I don't do all those things. And that way I can be like (laughs) let's go illusions.

Others feel that even if they are unhappy about the way they look, they just don't have the ability or desire to change it. As Vicki said:

I think most of us are unhappy about our image only we just don't (pause) I don't know, we are just too lazy I guess to do anything about it. Like to go so far as to be anorexic.

Alicia is of the same mind as Vicki. She realizes that she may sometimes be unhappy about her body but despite those feelings she could never diet.

Even though if I feel fat or something I don't really have, like I don't have the, I can't do it. Like I have to eat.

Interestingly enough both these girls describe their mothers as having the same attitude. Neither mother is prepared to be satisfied with her own body, but as the girls say, they are too lazy to bring about any change. So where does that leave the participants? Are they constantly unhappy with their bodies and body image as the literature suggests or do they simply deal with these issues when they arise as part of their daily lives and then let their feelings of dissatisfaction go rather than clinging to them and allowing them to rule their emotions?

5.0 Parental Influence-The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly...

Dorkus: *My mother makes really not nice comments*

Soupriya: *Yeah she does*

Dorkus: *She'll be like talking to me and my friends and like she'll say, "Oh you have a belly button ring, I guess you have to be **skinny** to have one of those."*

The above excerpt draws our attention to the role parents can play concerning girls' self-images. Does Dorkus' mother realize what she is saying and how her daughter and her daughter's friends hear her? Do parents understand the impact they can have on their children's self-image? Do they remember the comments that they make? Are they conscious of the fact that, even when they pretend not to listen, their kids hear each word they utter, positive or negative?

Parents have an influence on how their daughters experience their bodies, and, indeed, on many other aspects of their children's' lives as well. It is from watching parents' behaviour and listening to their conversations and exchanges that children begin to develop their own code of ethics and morality. Parents teach children the difference between right and wrong, try to instil decent values and raise them to be respectable people. But a parent's role goes even further. As Usmani & Daniluk (1997) explain,

When making the transition from girls to women, mothers appear to serve as significant role models and sources of information and guidance for adolescent girls, regarding who they are as women, how they should feel and behave, and how their bodies measure up" (p.3).

In other words, most young girls are, either unconsciously or consciously, taught by their mothers about a woman's role in society. Whether by example, deed, or word, mothers show their daughters how a woman should behave, how she should look, act and dress as well as how she should expect to be treated by men and how she should treat them.

Michelle Stacey (2000) states that one way that girls develop body image is through identification with a same sex parent. This development of standards can occur in two ways: a girl may identify with her mother's behaviour and actions and learn from her often covert messages, and/or she may be overtly told by her mother that her body does not measure up to her standards and expectations.

Mothers frequently convey their values and opinions about how women should look in very subtle ways. For example, discussing the latest fad diet, checking fat content in foods, or trying on a variety of outfits none of which fit "properly", are all ways that mothers covertly teach their daughters to be concerned with their food intake, shape and size. Of course these lessons also occur in a far less subtle manner. Children are often blatantly told that their bodies are not the correct size. They may hear that "that outfit is not made for your body type" or that they should avoid eating certain foods because they will make them fat. Both methods are equally powerful and can prove to be detrimental to a young woman's level of self-esteem. Moreover, McKinley (1999) observed that a young woman's experiences with her body, her feelings about herself and the actions she demonstrates, are not only affected by statements made to her by her family members but also by how both her mother and her mother's partner feel about her body.

But we cannot blame mothers alone... Fathers play an equally decisive role in the lives of their daughters. From their fathers, girls learn how a woman should be treated and what attributes men find attractive and acceptable. Maine (1991) contends that adolescent girls need to feel that their fathers find them attractive and feminine, and they like to feel that they live up to their father's standards of beauty. Fatherly approval helps them come to terms with their developing bodies, boosts their self-esteem, and gives

them confidence around members of the opposite sex. In contrast, when girls feel that their fathers consider them unattractive and lacking in feminine beauty, the lack of fatherly support can sometimes lead to depression, self-doubt and self-condemnation.

Moreover, Serbin et al (1990) state that fathers play a key role in a child's performance in school. A supportive and caring father not only enables a child to be academically successful, but girls who feel that their fathers are more encouraging and present in their lives tend also to be more adept at making friends and have more successful interaction with their peers.

Billar (1993) and Friedman (1997) assert that girls who have nurturing a father are more likely to develop a high level of self-esteem and have a greater chance of feeling accepted as a female. Girls with a positive male role model tend to feel more confident, secure, and at ease in their relationships with both men and women. They may also develop more self-discipline and better ethical judgement, which might lead to them being more able to withstand peer pressure. Conversely, girls who are deprived of a strong, positive male role model often struggle to fill this void. They may have difficulty dealing with members of the opposite sex since they are often searching for the 'perfect man'. Other girls tend to suffer from low self-esteem, and rarely see themselves as capable or self-sufficient. This can lead to promiscuity, eating disorders or aggressive behaviour.

Moreover, the relationship between their parents is usually the first model that children receive concerning how men and women should behave both as individuals, and in relationships. It is through observing their parents that children first piece together what behaviour makes a couple content (or miserable). Children watch, as their parents define for them, the female/male role and the mother/father role and children internalize

what kind of behaviours each person displays. They learn how these actions are necessary in order to keep this couple functioning in a happy, cohesive manner (or in a distant, dysfunctional way).

Yet, these roles can be difficult for parents since, according to Maine (1991) parents may be “struggling with old roles and definitions of masculinity and femininity that no longer fit and that confuse their daughters, who are trying to consolidate their sense of self and find a way to live in today’s society” (p. 85). This can become quite confusing for young women who are struggling to find their own identities in a world that is somewhat different than the one in which her parents were raised. On the one hand, girls may consciously and unconsciously be learning what it takes to keep their parents’ relationship functioning but may not agree with it on an intellectual level. They may for example, not like the role that their mother has to play in order to keep their father happy. On the other hand, girls may not be conscious of any of their parents’ behaviour nor do they realize that they are learning lessons about how male/ female relationships function. In either case, girls are subjected to these teachings, and internalize them whether their parents intend to teach them or not, and regardless of whether or not the girls are aware that they are learning anything. Adolescents plod along and struggle with the task of defining who they are and making sense of all the experiences that their parents expose them to.

So how are the participants in this group affected by the words and actions of their parents? Do the girls feel that they are provided with support and encouragement when it comes to their bodies and self-image, or do they feel that their parents are critical and judgmental about their appearance?

When asked if their parents have any effect or influence on how they feel about their bodies, the girls had plenty to say. The majority of girls feel that when it comes to feedback and influence, their parents, mothers especially, have a negative impact. Their mothers tend to be critical of their daughters' bodies and often make unsupportive or negative comments about their daughters' choice of clothing.

Many mothers seem to have expectations about how their children should look, the size of clothing they should wear, and the exercise routines they should follow. The girls in the group seem to be very aware that their mothers were not helping build their self-esteem. They are quite candid about the fact that their mothers' comments often made them feel, not only inadequate, but also angry. Maria explains how her mother's behaviour often made her feel extremely insufficient when they shopped together.

I can't go shopping with her anymore because... she expects me to be... because I am a certain height; she wants me to be a certain weight! And so when I go shopping with her, she expects me to always be a size small, let's say, in a shirt, and a size 27 or 28 in pants - and I'm NOT, so she, she has this kind of disapproving kind of look on her face when I try on a bigger size because she expects me to be something else. I just don't go shopping with her anymore because it just does not do anything for my self-esteem.

Maria's mother makes her feel so badly about herself that she is no longer capable of shopping with her. She realizes that she needs to protect herself from her mother's judgments and so she comes up with a solution that seems to work for her-she doesn't go shopping with her mother.

Sometimes a mother's criticism is harder to evade. Dorkus feels that her mother is so negative that she would rather avoid her all together. She often dreads speaking with her for fear of what her mother might say about her body.

With my mom it's more physical things, but she, never compliments me and it's always like something negative, (nervous laugh). I don't know, I dread, I don't really like being

around my mother just cause I feel like (pause) "Ug, what are you going to say, I don't want to be here, just go away, leave me alone." I don't like it.

So what it is about their daughters' appearance that prods these mothers to speak this way? Researchers like Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love (1998) found that some mothers urged their daughters to lose weight even if their daughters were already at a weight that was considered healthy. Like their daughters, mothers may be equally ensconced in and affected by Western society's current idea that thin is beautiful. In their own minds at least, they may be trying to help their daughters. Perhaps they believe that being a certain size or shape would somehow prove to be helpful to their daughters in the future. Maybe their life experience has taught them that being thin and fit makes their life easier so they are trying to impose these ideals on their children. But regardless of their reasons, it is clear that some mothers are striving to impose their values and standards about their own bodies on their daughters. If the girls I interviewed are any indication, what mothers do not seem to realize is that their attempts to "help" are often quite harmful to their daughters. Some mothers, like Michelle's, for example, want their daughters to follow the same type of exercise regiment as they do. They try to encourage their daughters to become more physically active. But what is their underlying goal? Do they want their daughters to be more physically fit because it is healthy, or do they want their children's bodies to simply have a shape different than the one they currently possess? Do they not find their daughters are beautiful as they are? Or do they want them to meet society's ridiculously limited definition of beauty – a beauty based on being either thin and waif like or thin and muscular. Perhaps mothers wish for their daughters to be slender and beautiful to emulate what they once imagined they were in their youth. Or, through their daughters, they wish to re-visit the fantasy of what they wished they had been when they

were adolescents. Then again, some mothers may simply want their daughters to fit into society's narrow definition of beauty because they believe that as a woman, life is much easier if you are considered beautiful. Michelle has this to say about her mother:

My mom is really thin and she goes to the gym all the time and she's always saying things like, "Go to the gym do this class, do that class". And then she says things like, "If you go this time, I'll pay for a trainer and you can do this or you can do that." So I'm, she's very body conscious.

Perhaps Michelle's mother is attempting to be supportive or helpful, but she is also implying that Michelle is not good enough the way she is. Crook (1991) states that this type of behaviour is common since many parents

look at the weight prejudices around them and want their daughters to escape the censure of others, so they urge them to conform. Most parents accept the social axiom that life will be easier if women are slim...and are therefore anxious that their daughters have all the advantages that they can get for them, including a slim body (p. 21).

Michelle knows that her mother is body conscious and that she has some kind of image of what an ideal body should be. Michelle is not happy with her weight and says that it is "*my main (pause) I don't know, thing that I freak out about.*" She probably realizes that she does not live up to her mother's standards and desperately wants to. Yet her mother's prodding may not be helping Michelle build her self-esteem and body image. It may instead be reinforcing the fact that she is not acceptable the way she is and may also be teaching her that how she looks is more important than who she is.

Michelle and her mother are not unique. Benedikt, Wertheim & Love (1998) found that daughters who tried to control their food intake and exercise to lose weight had mothers who wanted them to be slimmer and actively encouraged them to lose weight. Mckinley (1999) concurs that when a mother watches her body and monitors her food intake and exercise routines, she teaches her daughter to do the same. Moreover,

when mothers are accepting of their own bodies, their daughters may learn to be more accepting and satisfied with theirs. Unfortunately, the reverse is true as well. If mothers demonstrate high levels of body shame, they teach their daughters to feel badly about their bodies and themselves.

Tracy's mother found a different way to "help" her daughter. Rather than impose her philosophy about exercise on Tracy, the way Michelle's mother does, she takes a different route and chooses to focus on her daughters' eating habits. Tracy recalls how her mother's attitude about food changed a few years ago. In the quote below, she relates how frustrated she becomes when her mother tells her what foods she should or shouldn't be eating.

My mom started to diet a few years ago and ever since then, it's like "Oh why are you eating that, that's not good for you, you should eat some more of this and that and the other." Like, I wish she would shut up about it!

Tracy obviously finds this type of comment aggravating. These adolescents know what foods are considered healthy. They are taught nutrition in school. They feel they are old enough to decide whether or not they should eat certain kinds of food and they need the space develop their own eating habits and learn what kinds of food work best for them. Of course parents need to provide their children with a healthy example, but imposing your latest diet fad on your children is not necessarily the best way, especially if your children perceive your change in eating habits to be about weight and appearance rather than health. Waterson (1997) points out that this kind of behaviour runs the risk of being more destructive rather than being beneficial.

With today's many societal pressures for thinness, the mother-daughter connection now goes far beyond genetics and family history to include deep-rooted food and body issues. As a result, mothers unwittingly end up passing

along a legacy of unhealthy dieting behaviours and body dissatisfaction to their daughters (p. 1).

5.1 Mother's Expectations

Many of the girls said that their mothers have specific expectations and desires about how they should look or dress. This puts a certain pressure on the girls, a pressure that the girls respond to in different ways. Vicki, for example, strives to put these pressures in perspective as she shares her thoughts with us.

My mom says stuff like that I'm gaining weight or something. But I don't not like her, or resent her for that... I think she might be like that because after she had my brother she gained a lot of weight. And I don't know, she doesn't like it. So she doesn't want me to turn out that way or something. So I can't really say anything to that.

Vicki is able to justify her mother's criticism since she believes her mother is trying to protect her from ending up like her. Since Vicki's mother feels unhappy about her own weight, she assumes that Vicki would feel the same way if she were to gain a few pounds. Her mother may believe that pointing out the weight gain to Vicki may prove to be beneficial to her in the future. Perhaps Vicki will begin to take "preventative measures," like eating less for example, so she won't end up duplicating her mother's errors. However, Vicki's mother doesn't realize that she is likely doing more harm than good. For starters, it was clear from her comments in the interview, that overall, Vicki does not feel unhappy about her appearance nor does she worry about needing to lose weight. Vicki is quite conscious that she eats a lot but also realizes that she does a lot of exercise. *"I am not fat or anything but I eat A LOT and I think that I am only that way because I am active."* The danger is that her mother's comments may cause Vicki to stop trusting her own judgment and opinions about her body. This may lead her to begin

to question her appearance and can potentially lead to a drop in her self-esteem and confidence level.

Vicki was not the only one who felt that her parents had certain expectations of her. Many girls felt that their parents had standards concerning their daughters' bodies that were unnecessary and impossible to achieve. These expectations were expressed in a variety of ways: commenting on how they wished their daughters would dress, what kind of clothing they should purchase and which body parts, stomach especially, should or should not be exposed to the public. Mothers often wanted their girls to wear clothes that they deemed appropriate, often insinuating through their choice of words, that their daughters' styles were not feminine enough. According to most of the girls, their mothers try to get them to conform to their personal style of dress and seemed preoccupied with the idea that their daughters should dress in a way that corresponded to society's stereotypical views of how young women should dress. For example, Brett describes her mothers' preoccupation with shoes.

Everyday my mom is like (She mimics her tone) "Get shoes with a little heel" (Other girls laugh) and I'm like No! "Stop wearing running shoes" No! Everyday she's asking "Can we please go shopping for a decent pair of shoes?!" and I don't want to. Why should I, I don't like heels.

Allison's mother takes a different approach. She also wants to add to her daughter's wardrobe, which implies that she thinks something is lacking or wrong with what Allison deems sufficient.

Allison: My mom is always telling me that I need to buy a new dress and I'm like "Mom I don't want a dress. Where am I going to go in a dress?"

Brett: My mom too, she always says, "Just to have". (Others laugh)

Allison: She's like if you have it then you will have somewhere to go in it. And I'm like no, no (more laughter) it will just sit there all alone by itself.

Allison seems to feel that she has no need for a dress especially since she doesn't have any occasion that merits wearing one. Her mother suggests that if she had a dress the appropriate situation would arise, but Allison is not convinced. Occasion or not, Allison doesn't seem to want to buy or wear a dress. Her mothers' prodding seems to only aggravate Allison and makes her wonder why her mother is so preoccupied with her owning a new outfit.

Vicki shares with us her mother's need for her to dress in a fashionable manner. This means that Vicki is supposed to conform to her mothers' style rather than follow her own fashion sense. Again, this probably causes Vicki to feel frustrated because rather than supporting her choices, opinion and sense of style, her mother is imposing her own beliefs and values on her daughter.

My mom again she, I think she wants me to fit in more than I want to fit in. She wants me to be accepted by everybody and she is also very narrow-minded so she wants me to dress like her and her friends dressed. I will give you an example. I went to, a friend's house for New Years and you know we always dress very casually - jeans, regular shirt. She wanted me to wear a nice short skirt that is very sparkly, a black shirt that reveals some cleavage that I don't have (Laughs, other laugh too) and I said, "Mom, can I just wear normal clothes please?" And she's like no! When I went to my friends' house we were all dressed up and it was fancy fancy" (Laughter) and I was like my friends and I, we just like it casual. And she said, " Well you and your friends are WEIRD!"

Vicki is being told to dress like something she is not, to portray an image that makes her feel uncomfortable. When she doesn't comply, her mother insults her style. This sort of comment is not likely to make Vicki feel positive about herself.

Moreover, when it comes to purchasing clothing or wearing clothing a certain way, the girls say that their mothers impose their values and beliefs on their daughters. Mothers make rules that they expect their children to comply with even if their daughters have differing opinions. The girls are supposed to adopt their mothers' standards of what

is considered acceptable and appropriate. They complain that they are not given the space to develop their own taste or sense of what should be considered a suitable way to dress.

In addition, it seems that their mothers forbid them to wear certain styles of clothing because they believed that those outfits wouldn't enhance their daughter's figures since, in their minds, their daughters' bodies are not the proper size or shape for those particular garments. This again leaves the child with the sensation that they do not measure up and that they are incapable of knowing whether a piece of clothing fits them in a manner that is flattering. Maria, for example, describes how she felt when her mother told her she wouldn't look good in a shirt that she wanted to purchase.

My mom just tells me that I can't wear it. Like, umm, there was this top that I saw. It was cool, and I had never seen anything like it before. It was... long sleeved or something and it went, it crossed like this (over her chest) and it showed a little bit of your stomach and then it went long in the back. I thought it was really cool and I tried it on and I really liked it, but she said, "You can't wear it, it shows your stomach, you don't have the stomach for that!"

There is no confusion there, no room for Maria to misinterpret. Her mother obviously has clear ideas of who can and can't wear certain styles and Maria (who is thin in my opinion) does not meet up to her mother's expectations. As Maria mentioned earlier, she no longer shops with her mother because she knows it does not enhance her self-esteem.

There were yet other tactics reportedly used by mothers:

Michelle: My mom says, "It's not flattering" that's her words

Maria: Ya, my mom too.

Brett: My mom just says pull your shirt down because she thinks it's unladylike.

Alicia: My Mom usually tells me to get a bigger size.

5.2 Being Compared and Receiving Mixed Messages

There are still other ways that parents can make their daughters feel deficient. The girls discussed how it feels when they are compared to other relatives. Parents sometimes compare their daughters to other girls often, inadvertently, making them feel inadequate. Falynn talked about how she felt when her parents compared her to her cousins.

It's sort of hard, especially when I am around other relatives like cousins and stuff who are mostly thinner than me. They make comments... not really intentionally but sort of subtly and you know what they mean—like "Oh, you are so athletic. Falynn why don't you learn from her example and everything?" And... I can't really be like that and it's a little bit, (pause) a little bit strange and it seems like they have certain expectations.

Here again we see how unintentional and subtle commentary can be painfully effective. Falynn did not enjoy knowing that she did not always measure up to her parents' wishes. She wonders why who she is isn't considered good enough and if she is good enough, then why would her parents make the comparison?

Sending mixed messages was another way in which mothers can sometimes cause their daughters to doubt themselves. According to the girls, some mothers tend to be inconsistent with their comments, and often allow their moods to dictate what kind of feedback and observations they share with their children. Sometimes they complement their daughters on their appearance and achievements, while at other moments, they seem to project their own insecurities on their children and make remarks that are not only harmful but also unmerited. Maria, for example, explains how her parents' contradictory statements often confuse her.

I think it depends on my parents' moods for what they say about me. I mean, my Mom... a lot of the time she will say something like, " Maria maybe you should go work out a little more or um (pause) "I think you need a bigger size—you are definitely growing out of that." And... that stuff makes me feel self-conscious whereas sometimes she'll say...

“Um you’re such a beautiful girl, I’m so proud of you (pause).” So you never... I don’t really know what to expect from my parents. My Dad is pretty consistent and he is always, you know, complimenting me because I’m (pause) well not just how I look but about how, what I am achieving and stuff. I mean I’m sort of doing a lot of the things he never could so (pause), he’s sort of very proud of me for that. He’s complimenting me all the time. But my mom is very “ein” (negative sounding word)

Maria recognizes that her mother is extremely inconsistent. Perhaps this is a reflection of how Maria’s mother feels about herself rather than how she sees her daughter. At least Maria’s father is more dependable. Maria notes that he often praises the things she does rather than how she looks. This kind of approval, according to Friedman (2000), is exactly what teenage girls need. They need to be validated for the feats they accomplish rather than the way they look. Parents, fathers especially, should avoid focusing their complements on aspects of their children’s bodies that can be altered- like their body size and weight.

Other participants also received conflicting messages. Dasey explains that her mother is only able to compliment her if and when someone else does. She also feels that she has to be dressed up for a special occasion in order to receive praise. Her everyday style is apparently not good enough to merit a flattering remark. However, Dasey seems to have a much clearer picture about how she thinks her father sees her.

My dad would rather choke then compliment me and my mom compliments me when someone else compliments me. She’ll compliment me and everything but (pause) if someone says like, “ Oh you have such a beautiful daughter”, she’ll say thank you, I know.” But she’ll never be like (pause) unless like I’m all dressed up and I look really good... when I go to... an affair or whatever. Then she’ll be like you look very pretty. But my dad would never (pause) say that and he won’t ever.

How are daughters’ supposed to deal with their mothers’ mixed messages?

Confusion and self-doubt may ensue for young women since they never really know which statements to believe. They wonder, “When is my mother speaking the truth?”

Which statements are accurate? Am I beautiful and capable the way I am or do I need to improve myself and get dressed up because this isn't good enough?"

Despite the fact that most of the participants feel that their mothers do more harm than good, there are a couple of girls who *do* feel supported by their mothers. They feel that their mothers make them feel better about themselves and constantly remind them that they are beautiful – both inside and out.

Brett, for example feels very supported by her family. (Despite her mothers attempt to buy her high-heeled shoes.) She has this to say about her family's influence.

I don't know I have a really close family and I think I'm really lucky and there isn't a day that goes by when they don't tell me (pause) I'm beautiful and that they love me. And they've never ever criticized me.

Soupriya also feels that her family is very encouraging. She reveals this about her parents:

My mom makes me feel really good about myself. My parents are really cool they don't ... they're really cool. They never, I don't know, they always compliment me. "Oh you're so beautiful and healthy, you have a wonderful body and everything." Both of them actually. I remember when I was younger and I did gymnastics, they told me I had to lose weight and everything. But I was like whatever. I was only six years old or something. My mom tried to sue them! (Laughter) So whatever, she really stood up for me and my mom makes me feel really good about myself.

One could presume that Soupriya's mother is comfortable with her own body and body image and wishes to instil the same feelings of self- confidence in her daughter. This is concurrent with Mckinley's (1999) study which discovered that mothers who were happy with their bodies and body image taught their daughters to be more accepting of their own maturing bodies, regardless of their size or shape. This seems to be working for Soupriya since she often says that she displays quite a high level of self-confidence and is very comfortable with her body. She acknowledges that there are aspects of

herself that she does not like but even if she could change them, she wouldn't because she accepts that they are simply part of who she is.

5.3 Father's Influence

Although most girls feel that their mothers have a negative impact on their body image, their fathers tend to be more supportive with their comments. However, a couple of girls do feel that their fathers often have a negative impact. Vicki explains that her father sometimes makes nice comments to her but that he usually remains silent. She interprets this silence in a positive way since she feels that the absence of praise is better than the presence of insults.

I think my dad's very positive. He doesn't say anything except if he compliments me but that is not very often. So, well that's not a problem either because it's better then saying, "Oh you're ugly today." (She laughs and others do too.)

Michelle has experienced both positive and negative feedback from father figures. Her father, whom she no longer sees, often insulted her and made cruel comments about her size and body. Luckily for her, her stepfather is much kinder. She describes him like this:

My stepfather, he's always saying really positive things to me about how I look. Where as my father would say pretty mean things like... "You have to lose weight." My stepfather always says... very good things. He thinks I have beautiful eyes, and tells me that I am a "smiley girl." He also notices and comments when I cut my hair.

Michelle is fortunate to receive positive reinforcement from her stepfather. Although it may not erase the pain that her father causes, at least it may act as some form of a counterbalance.

When Alicia speaks about her father's influence, she discusses his ability to be honest. She knows that she can always expect the truth from her father. She realizes that

sometimes this means that he is not always complimentary but at least she feels that when he does say something positive, he means it.

My dad (pause) he's really, really honest and sometimes it's not that good. Like I had my hair in pigtail braids the other day and he told me I looked like 'Helga the milk maid' from (Laughter) from Heidi or something. He's very honest and he'll tell me if he thinks what I do isn't good. But then, if he does compliment me, I know he means it.

She also acknowledges the fact that it may be difficult for parents, especially fathers to accept that their daughters are growing up. She thinks that perhaps her father pretends not to notice certain changes, like a hair cut for example, because he is not ready or willing to recognize that his little girl is maturing.

I think it's hard for fathers to actually compliment their daughter. I'm sure they notice, and, like I don't think my father notices, but I know... He notices every little detail, but he doesn't say it. I think it is hard for parents to realize that their children are actually growing up.

It is possible that many fathers refrain from commenting because they are uncomfortable with their daughters' changing bodies. Perhaps they understand that they "walk a fine line between objectifying girls and validating their femininity" (Friedman, 2000, 91). Rather than risking saying something painful or inappropriate, they choose (like Vicki's father) to remain silent.

However, with some girls, this is not the case. Their fathers have just as many expectations as their mothers; they simply present them in a different manner. Dorkus finds that when it comes to her physical fitness and athletic ability, she cannot live up to her father's expectations.

I think it's funny like my dad and my mom do it in different ways... My dad never says anything about the way I look but sometimes... like after a hockey game or something, he'll be like "I don't know --you're not in great shape. You should be able to just go and go and go" and I'm like "Go and go and go?!" ... In a different kind of way, it's still, your not, it's criticism but not the same thing as what my mother does.

Dorkus understands that the content and context may be different, but the message is still the same. You can be better; you just have to try harder. Change who you are and how you function and then you will be fine.

5.4 Food For Thought

A few girls state that their houses contain many foods that are considered low fat, not because their mothers are concerned with their health, but because their mothers weight are their primary concern.

Dasey: My house is all like health food stuff but if there is anything sweet it will be low fat. I like good muffins, they are really good. But then when I don't have chocolate for a long time, I stuff my face. My mom always experiments with, she watches herself so I guess she experiments with all the low fat things.

Maria: There's a lot of diabetes and heart disease that runs in my family so my dad is really conscious about that because it is on his side and that's why he eats that way. But my mom and my sister are very like weight conscious and like you have to look a certain way so you have to buy all these low fat foods and do your exercise every night. I'm like, all right, some chocolate and some TV and thank you very much (laughter).

Waterson (1997) cautions mothers to be more conscious of their behaviour.

Even if you have never dieted with your daughter or supported her dieting effort, you still maybe encouraging her by your example. As your daughter struggles to identify with you and form her female identity, your dieting practices, eating behaviours, and body image will likely become hers (p.31).

Consequently, many girls are learning to categorize their food as good or bad, healthy or fattening, acceptable or not acceptable. Their mothers are teaching them that certain foods are allowed to be eaten and that others must always be avoided. Other girls note that although their mothers are concerned about their weight, they choose not to do anything about it. As Alicia said:

Well my house isn't like low fat or anything. My Dad has diabetes but he doesn't watch his weight (pause) and my mom would like to be skinnier but she doesn't do anything about it.

Alicia consequently has a rather healthy attitude.

Well, I don't look at something and say I can't eat that it is too much fat for me or I can't eat this. Like I don't do that. If I feel fat or something I don't really have, like I don't have the, I can't do it. I just can't do it because I have to eat.

Interestingly enough, the girls do not always follow their mothers' rules. They tend to eat what they want, like chocolate for example, regardless of what their mothers preach. However, I believe that it is possible that when some of them eat these forbidden foods, they feel some form of guilt for indulging. They have been indoctrinated to believe that eating poorly can have a detrimental effect on their appearance, and they most likely feel badly about themselves when they do eat something "bad".

If the experiences of these girls are any indication, parents, mothers in particular, seem to play a decisive role in the way young women experience their bodies. Their comments and actions make a distinct impression on their daughters and often leave them feeling confused and inadequate. Although some girls can and do rationalize their parents' negative behaviour, it does not take away from their feelings of insufficiency. Parents need to realize that their children do hear what they tell them and that this information is processed and internalized. Not only are girls directly affected by their parents words, it appears that they are also influenced by their parents' actions. Teenagers are at a stage in their lives when they are constantly watching and analysing other peoples' behaviour. They look to their peers, teachers, friends, and parents for guidance on how to behave in certain situations and eating and dieting are no exception. In our conversations, the girls realized that their mothers' desire to be thinner has a trickle down effect on their lives.

6.0 Picture This

6.1 Why Use Drawings at All?

In addition to using group interviews to collect my data, I decided to use drawings as another way to elicit information from the participants. Some critiques of group interviews have stated that this method of data collection can unintentionally silence shyer participants or allow more domineering participants to monopolize the discussions. I thought that drawings would ensure that each girl had the opportunity to express her own opinion. The use of illustrations and art often allows people to express ideas, beliefs, and messages that they would otherwise be unable to articulate through words or writing. Weber and Mitchell (1995) state that “drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not put into words: the effable, the elusive, the not yet-thought-through, the sub-conscious” (p. 34). And Piaget states that, “To understand himself or herself and his or her environment, the child makes drawings that serve as models for how things might be. Thus the drawings provide a means for constructions, testing, and prophesying what can be” (p. 34).

McNiff (1981) explains that through drawing, we can assimilate events that have occurred throughout our lives and communicate ideas and feelings that may otherwise be too intricate or complex to articulate verbally. Drawings and art are often used by art therapists to help children (and adults) express ideas that are often too difficult and painful to describe in words. Researchers are beginning to use the same techniques. Derry (2001), for example, incorporated drawings into her research on peer rejection and bullying. She discovered that drawing a picture to first describe an incident from her past

helped her to later find words to properly express her feelings about that experience. She contends that had she not first undergone the process of creating an image, she may not have been able to coherently articulate her thoughts about that event. She found that “drawing and words united to give the audience a multi-layered look at childhood bullying and rejection” (p. 2). Moreover, drawing can be used to not only demonstrate how we see ourselves but also to help describe how we believe others perceive us. Mitchell and Weber (1999) used drawings to help pre service teachers examine their stereotypes of teachers and Richards (1998) used self-portraits to assess her own teaching practices. Richards contends that, “Self-portraits have the capacity to reveal our self-perceptions and constructions of reality” (p. 34).

Asking the participants to draw pictures of themselves elicited variety of reactions; some were eager to draw and felt very comfortable doing this activity while others were concerned that their drawings would not be precise reflections of their self-image because they didn't feel that they were talented artists. Alicia said this:

I don't think these are accurate though because if you can't draw properly than you can't see how I think.

I reassured them that anything they drew would be suitable and that they should simply do the best that they could. I mentioned that if they really didn't want to draw, they had the option of just responding to the questions in written form. I wrote the following instructions on the blackboard.

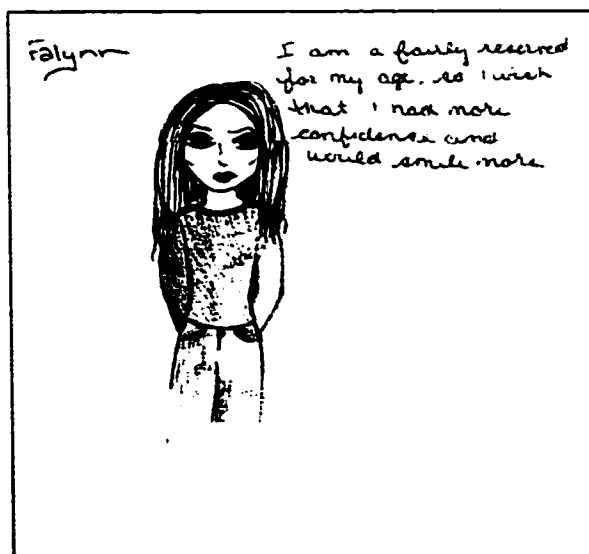
1. Draw a picture of yourself.
2. If you could wave a magic wand, what might you change about yourself? Draw how you would look if you chose to change something. Also, could you write what you would change and why on the back.
3. Draw how you think your dad sees you.

I was curious to see how the girls saw themselves and what, if any, changes the girls would want to make to their bodies. To date, their attitudes about their bodies and appearances had been quite positive. I wondered if this was because they really liked and accepted how they looked or if they were responding more as a group and not revealing their true feelings because they were each following the tone set in the group interview. I was therefore interested to see how they would react individually to this question and hoped that it would disclose how they truly felt about themselves. As for the last question, I thought it would be interesting for the girls to describe how they felt their fathers' saw them. We had previously discussed their mothers' views of their bodies and within those conversations we had briefly touched on their fathers' opinions. I thought it would be insightful to explore this area further.

According to Friedman (2000), adolescent girls often rely on their fathers for validation of their self-worth. This frequently becomes difficult since many fathers struggle to remain an active part of their daughters' lives once their daughters reach adolescence. Fathers may have difficulty dealing with the fact that their daughters are not only maturing physically, but that they are also becoming strong, independent people with minds of their own. Some men may not know how to reassure their daughters that they are beautiful without putting all the emphasis on their size and shape. Others may slowly (and unconsciously) withdraw from their daughters lives because they do not realise that even though their daughters may no longer seek their approval or opinions about things, girls still need to be reassured by their fathers that who they are and what they do is acceptable.

6.2 Falynn

We can see from her drawings that Falynn is quite adept at drawing and creates a very realistic image of herself. Interestingly enough, she is the only participant who describes her personality traits exclusively rather than discussing her physical features. In her first drawing (F-1) she portrays herself as distant and almost unapproachable with her arms behind her back. Her facial features seem tight and rigid and she appears to have an angry look on her face. Falynn says that she is lacking in confidence and if she could alter something, she wishes she could be more forthcoming and at ease with others. Her second picture (F-2) shows her smiling, with open arms and her eyes almost seem to be twinkling. Her body language is completely different and she seems to be beckoning people towards her. Although she was definitely one of the more reticent participants, Falynn was quite capable of articulating her thoughts and feelings and when doing so shared her ideas openly and with confidence.



Falynn's Self-Portrait (F-1)



Falynn Figure 2 (F-2)

Her final drawing (F-3) represents how she thinks her father sees her. She is clad in her school uniform. Although, her hands are behind her back like in her first picture, her body does not seem nearly as self-protected or defensive. Perhaps this is because her face seems much more relaxed, she is smiling and her eyes sparkling. She explains that she doesn't necessarily think that her father sees her as innocent, but she feels that perhaps he finds her naïve and unaware that the world is filled with unpleasant things. Maybe that is why she drew herself dressed in her school uniform - schoolgirls are stereotypically sweet and innocent and ignorant of the realities of the adult world. Falynn believes that it is this frequently difficult adult world that her father would like to protect her from.

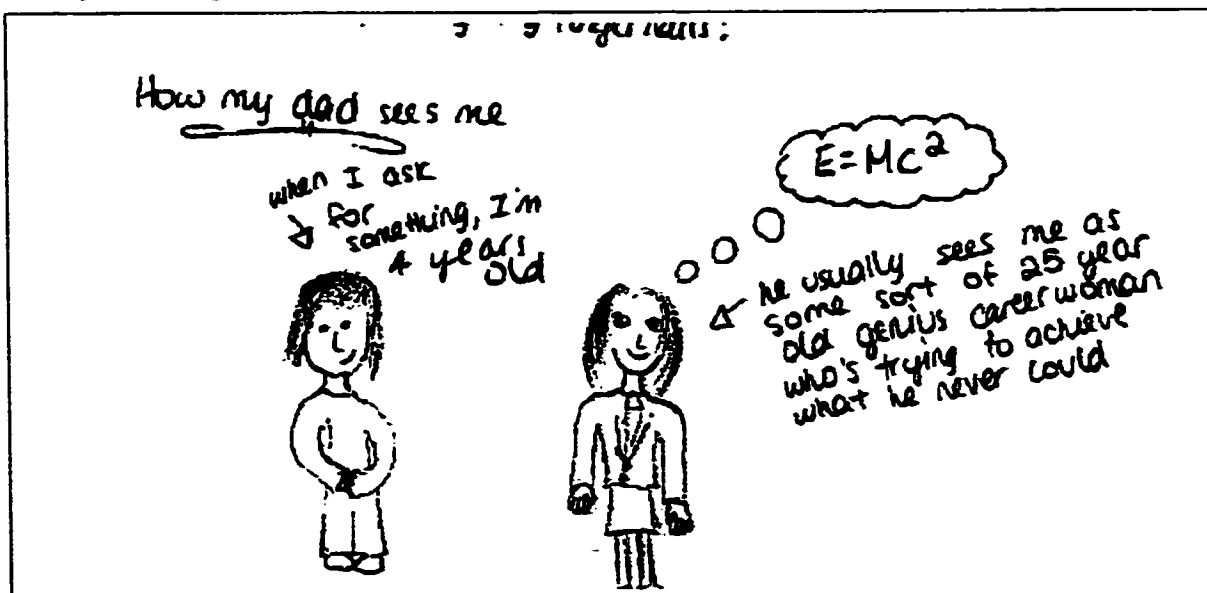
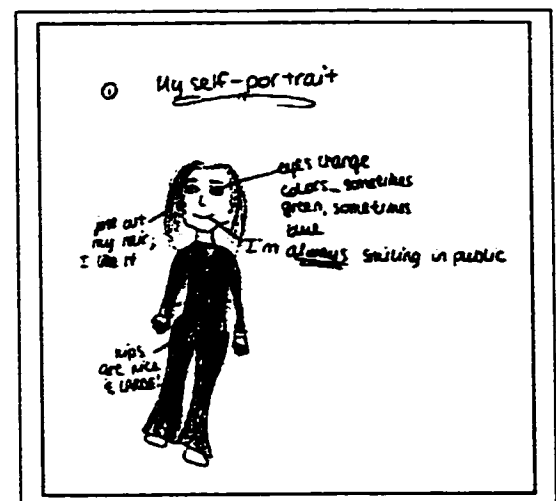


Falynn Figure 3 (F-3)

6.3 Maria

Maria also creates very vivid pictures. Her self-portrait (figure M-1) describes both her body and her personality and notes that she always smiles in public insinuating that perhaps she tends to put on a happy face for the world although she does not always feel as content as she appears. She comments that her hips are nice and large, something that she would like to change and she also describes her eyes and hair. Maria only notes a couple of modifications that she wants to make to herself. Aside from wanting to reduce the size of her hips; she doesn't want to make any changes to her body or shape. What she wants in fact to change is that she bites her fingernails. Figure M-2, a description of how she thinks her father sees her, is very revealing. She feels he sees her as two completely different people.

Maria Self Portrait (M-1)



Maria Figure 2 (M-2)

One is a capable mature young woman and the other a helpless child. When it comes to her intelligence or academic performance, Maria feels that her father has tremendous confidence in her abilities. He sees her as very adult-like and able to accomplish goals that he was not able to attain in his youth. However, when the time comes to ask her father for something, (perhaps permission to go out with friends or borrow the car), Maria feels that he sees her as a young child. Suddenly, she is no longer a mature, capable, and independent young woman. Instead, she is viewed as reliant and needy and perhaps even vulnerable. It is possible that her father can accept that his daughter is intellectually mature, but doesn't want to admit that she is physically and emotionally mature as well. Realizing your daughter is smart is one thing, but admitting that your little girl is growing up appears to be a whole different story.

Maria is not alone; many of the girls seem to feel this way. Several girls feel that their fathers give them mixed messages about what they think of them. Many imply that when it comes to their intellect, their fathers are able to accept that they are young women, capable of excelling at school and having ideas of their own. But when it comes to their bodies and emotional state, they are still perceived as little girls.

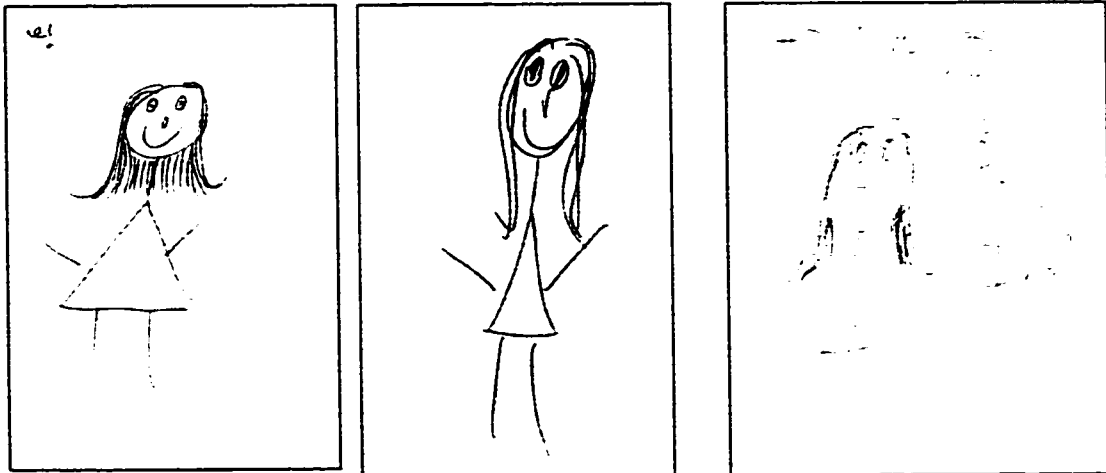
Biller (1993) point outs that parents, fathers in particular, may be over protective of their daughters and not encourage their daughters to be autonomous for fear of their safety. They worry that their daughters may be intimidated or sexual abused by stronger males and tend to coddle them rather than teach them to be assertive and self-confident.

What many fathers overlook is the fact that if a girl is

Encouraged by her father to be independent in making decisions, and at the same time knows that she can count on him for love and support, she will probably develop very positive relationships with other males later in her life (p.144).

6.4 Michelle

In contrast to most of the other drawings, Michelle's images are very childlike. She is the only participant who initially seemed reluctant to draw. Although she didn't really seem to want to do it, she ultimately decided to complete the assignment and was quick to finish her pictures. Michelle is also the only participant to blatantly state that she wants to be skinnier (see figure Mi-2) because she thinks she is fat. Michelle never actually verbalized this in our conversations; she never says she is overweight or that she



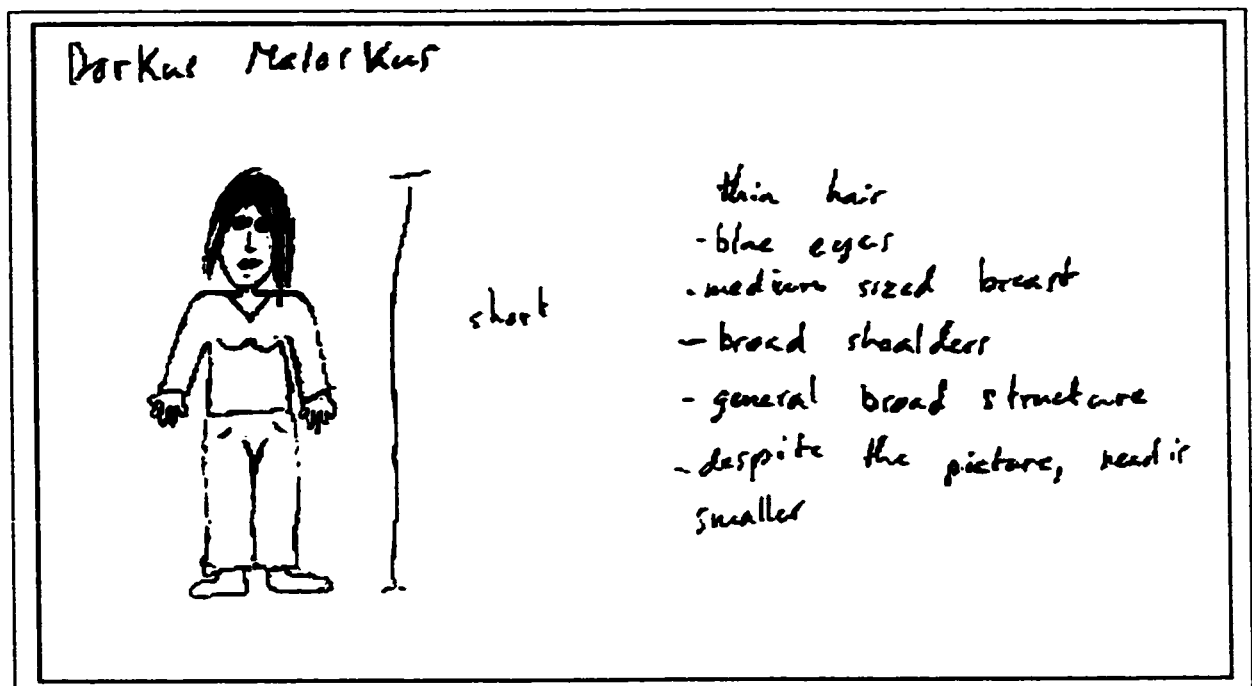
Michelle Self-Portrait (Mi-1) Michelle Figure 2 (Mi-2) Michelle Figure 3 (Mi-3)

wants to be skinnier. She alludes to the fact that she is sensitive about her weight by saying that when her siblings want to upset her, they call her fat. When it comes to drawing how her father sees her, she left the page blank stating, "*He doesn't see me anymore*". (Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother and stepfather.) She previously mentioned that her father had the habit of saying "*not nice things about me*" which I believe focused a lot on her body. She is much happier to draw how she thinks her stepfather sees her, (Mi-3) and commented that he thinks she has nice hair and eyes

and that she is always smiling. I imagine this makes her feel more confident and helps build her self-esteem, yet she is obviously still conscious of her plump body size.

6.5 Dorkus

Dorkus' self-portrait was quite lifelike. She gave a general description of her body, which focused mainly on her broad structure and build. (See figure D-1). When



Dorkus Self-Portrait (D-1)

Dorkus addressed the concept of altering her body; she had a different desire from her peers. Like them she also wants to fine-tune her body, but she takes a different approach.

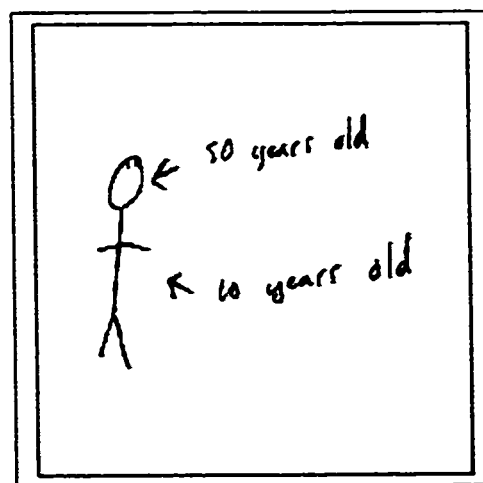
She frames it this way:

I would like to have less fat and more defined muscles. Not so much the way I look, I just feel I could be in better shape.

Dorkus is not really talking about changing any of her specific body parts, rather she wishes to alter her body's composition, making it more firm and defined rather than flabby. You may recall that Dorkus felt that her father often criticized her, not about her

body shape, but about her physical fitness level. He wanted her to be able to “go and go and go” when she played sports and was often disappointed with her athletic performance. It is therefore conceivable that Dorkus has internalized his message and realizes that one way to increase her level of performance at sports, and thus please her father is for her to reshape her body through the drawing activity. This transformation of fat into muscle will make her look in “shape”. When it comes to their children’s athletic performance, Biller (1993) warns fathers to be careful not to impose unrealistic expectations on their children. Rather than being critical and negative, fathers should concentrate on encouraging their children’s athletic ability since it can help nurture their daughters’ self-image rather than hinder it. That said it is interesting to note that, Dorkus’ drawing about how her father sees her (Figure D-2) does not really focus on the shape of her body. Her drawing regarding how she thinks her father sees her is very simple, yet it is extremely powerful. Dorkus clearly feels that her father is incapable of accepting the fact that her body is developing and that she is no longer a young child. Like Maria’s father, Dorkus’ dad seems able to recognize that

Dorkus is intellectually mature, yet he refuses to acknowledge that her body is maturing as well. This is not uncommon for fathers who often have difficulty dealing with their daughters as their bodies develop sexually. As Maine (1991) suggests, fathers tend to withdraw their attention from their daughters when they begin puberty because they become increasingly uncomfortable with their daughter’s



Dorkus Figure 2 (D-2)

budding sexuality.

6.6 Dasey

Dasey's self portrait (See figure Da-1) is somewhat androgynous. We can see from the drawing that she doesn't really give her body any shape or form, but at least she has a smile on her face, which could imply that she is happy. Her second portrait (Figure Da-2) definitely appears to have a smaller frame than the first but she never indicated that she wished to reduce the size of her entire body. Her main concern is that she feels her bum is too large and out of proportion with the rest of her body. She



Dasey' Self-Portrait (Da-1)



Dasey Figure 2 (Da-2)



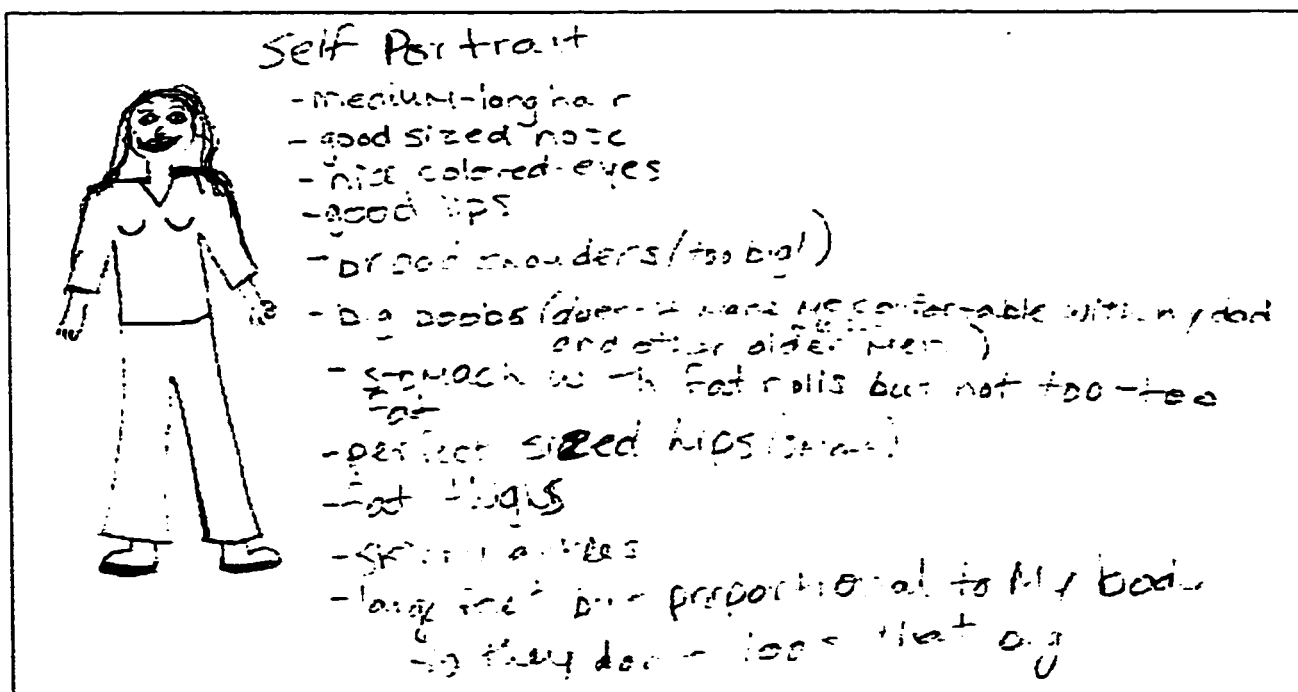
Dasey Figure 3 (Da-3)

says that it makes her “*very uncomfortable.*” This could very well be directly linked to how she feels her father views her. (See Figure Da-3) She says her father thinks she is “*very large.*” Whether Dasey's father has really given her this message is not relevant. What is important is that she has internalized this idea and now wishes to be smaller. In her words, her father would rather “*choke than compliment her*”. If her drawings are any

indication, this has had a considerable effect on her level self-esteem and perception of body. She may wish to be smaller to please him or she may believe (since that is what her father has inferred) that a woman's self-worth is connected to her body size and that someone who is large cannot be beautiful.

6.7 Alicia

As I mentioned earlier, Alicia was concerned that her drawings wouldn't accurately depict how she sees herself, so she decided instead to describe herself in writing next to her drawing in order not to be misinterpreted. The drawing in figure A-1, suggests that although Alicia appears to be self-critical, she does acknowledge that she likes some of her features. For example, she is happy with her lips, nose, eyes and perfect sized (small) hips. However, she finds her thighs too big, her shoulders too broad and her breasts too big.



Self-Portrait (Figure A-1)

When it came to altering her body, rather than opting to draw a picture, Alicia simply makes a list of the things she would change about herself. Her list is a combination of desires; she wants to alter her body as well as her physical features. She says she wants straighter hair, no pimples, blackheads or dry skin and a perpetual tan. She would also like to transform certain parts of her body. She would prefer to have smaller shoulders and thighs (*“so that when I sat down in a bathing suit they wouldn’t widen as much”*), *“no ripples on my stomach, I don’t want it to curve inwards, just flat”* and *“a bit smaller boobs, not too much smaller.”*

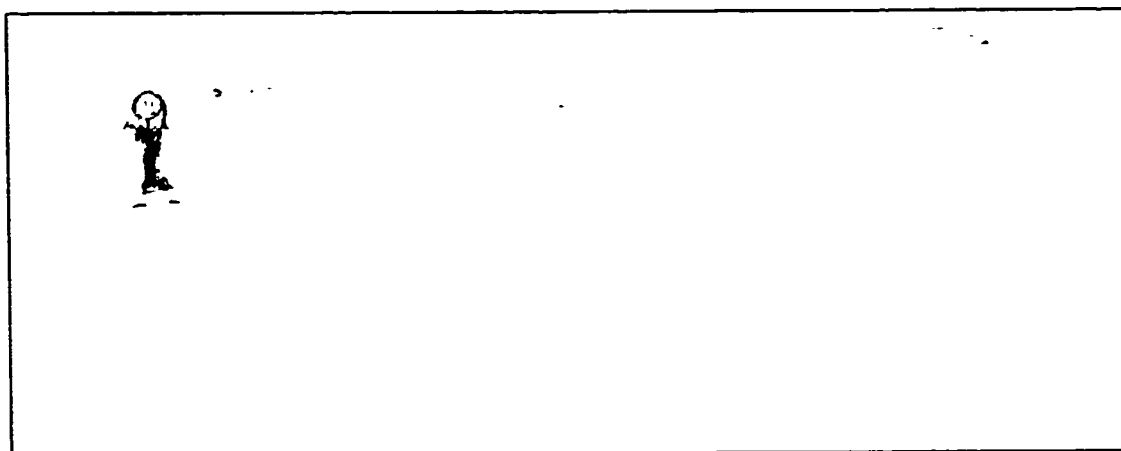
The fact that Alicia mentions wanting smaller breasts is probably linked directly to the fact that she says she feels that having *“big boobs doesn’t make me comfortable with my dad and other older men”*. This feeling of discomfort is sometimes common for young women, since they often have the unpleasant experience of being stared at and sexually objectified by men. Alicia discusses how she has received unwanted attention from men when she is dressed in her school uniform and it is possible to imagine that this has also occurred when she is dressed in everyday clothes.

When it comes to how she supposes her father sees her *“she didn’t think he noticed much, he wouldn’t notice if I cut my hair a little”*. She has previously intimated that her father did notice changes in her appearance or body but didn’t mention them because she believes that he has trouble dealing with the fact that she is growing up. She thinks if he could choose her clothing he would *“put me in a little sun dress or something.”* However, like her peers, she does believe that he, like her peers’ fathers, finds her smart. She also feels that he always makes sure that she knows he is smarter. Perhaps he feels threatened by his daughter’s budding intellect and as a parent (and a

male one) deems it necessary that she know that he is intellectually superior. By convincing Alicia (and perhaps himself) that he is brighter than her, he is then able to justify his attempts to control her life and decide what is best for her. Alicia also feels that her father sees her as better looking than her sister, yet he still manages to insult her and make her feel badly about herself by calling her fat.

6.8 Tracy

Tracy's picture stands out from all the others because her self-portrait is very tiny and non-descript. Figure T-1 demonstrates how she makes a small pencil drawing in the corner of the page and only notes that she is short, has long hair and scars. She makes no attempt to describe any of her other characteristics, leaving me to believe that she does not think too highly of herself. Throughout the group interviews, Tracy is very quiet, preferring to listen to the conversations rather than engage in them. On the occasion that she does comment aloud, she is able to articulate her opinions very well. But for the Tracy's Self Portrait (Figure T-1)



most part, Tracy appears quite content to observe her peers and process the information on her own. In terms of making changes to her body, Tracy only wants to improve her “fly away” hair by straightening it. She would also prefer it to be less oily and she would

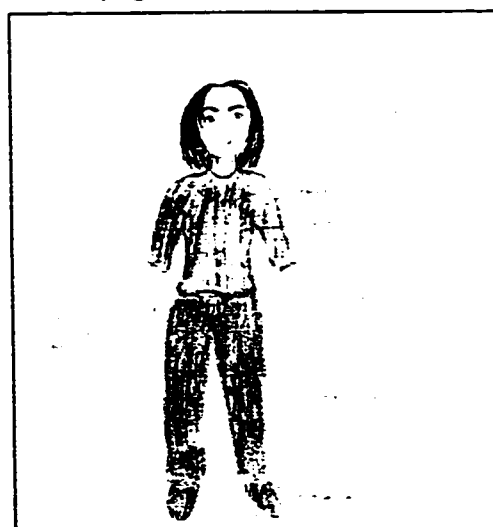
like to ensure that she no longer has any pimples or blackheads. There is no mention of actually changing her body. I am not sure if that is because she wouldn't know what to change, or because she just doesn't think it would be worth the effort. She previously mentioned that she didn't think it was worth her effort or time to do things to alter or (enhance) her appearance such as trying different hairstyles.

I look at certain people, who wear whose hair is in a simple bun... I am not talented with my hair (laughter, agreement) I can't do anything and I look at them and I think they spent a half hour, they got up a half hour early to do that.

When describing how she feels her father sees her, Tracy has a similar response as her peers. She feels that her father is incapable of seeing her as a young woman who is competent or mature. Rather, she thinks he considers her to be "*someone who cannot take care of myself.*" He, like so many other fathers, probably would prefer her to remain a young girl who he is able to protect and care for instead accepting that she is a young woman who is maturing and learning to make her own way in the world.

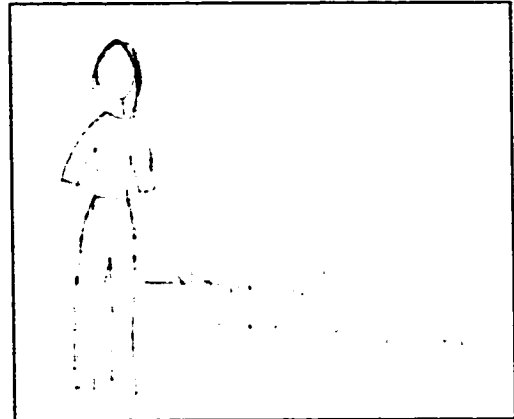
6.9 Vicki

Vicki's drawings are very lifelike. Her self-portrait (Figure V-1) portrays her dressed in her favourite clothes that she describes as "sporty". She mentions that she has lots of beauty marks but doesn't indicate whether she likes them or not. She also and comments on the size of her hips, which she feels "*are larger but not huge or proportional to the rest of her body.*" She would love to be taller and states that her legs are really short. In Figure V-2 she indicates that her



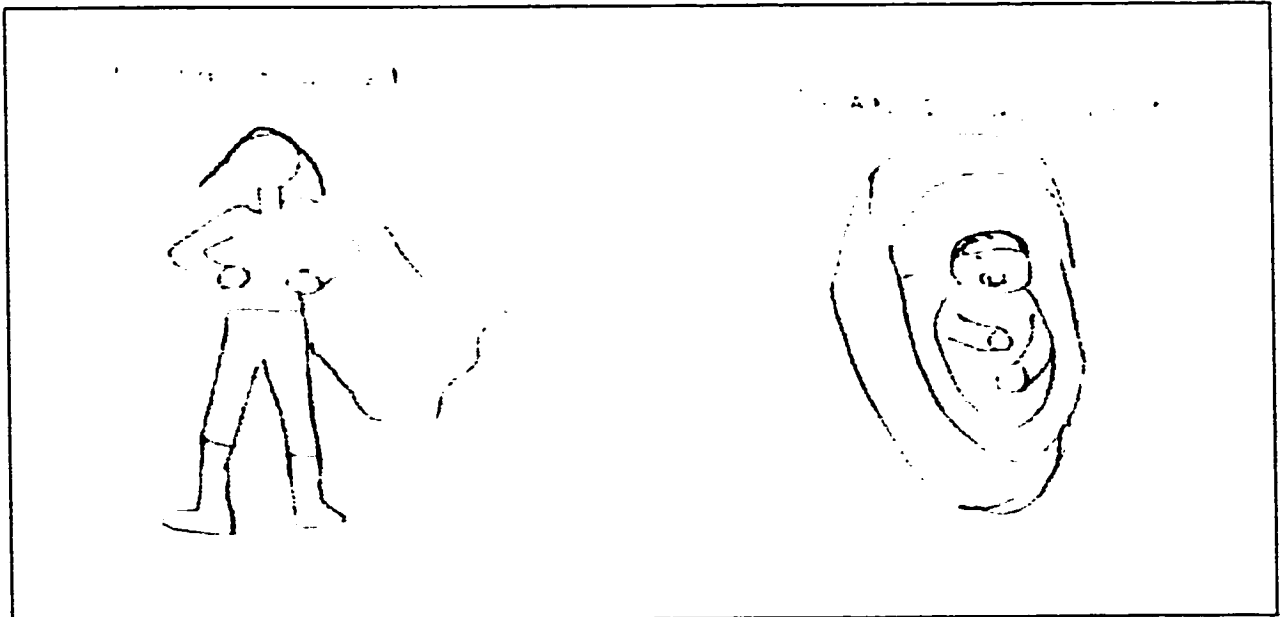
Vicki Self-Portrait (Figure V-1)

legs are the only part of the body she would like to alter. She comments that she wants *“longer legs but not super model legs.”* Figure V-3, the portrait of how she thinks her father views her, is very expressive. She, like Maria, seems to feel that her father views and perceives her as if she is two completely different people. One is strong and competent, able to take care of herself and excel at sports and school. The other is a baby, who needs to be cared for and protected from the dangers of the world (i.e. boys). Vicki claims that when it comes to dating and boys her father *“has that old Italian mentality – NO DATING!”*



Vicki Figure 2 (V-2)

Vicki Figure 3 (V-3)



It is interesting how this theme kept re-emerging in the girls' drawings. For the most part, their fathers are completely capable of acknowledging that their daughters were maturing into intelligent young women but they seem totally inept at accepting the fact that part of growing up includes having healthy relationships with the opposite sex.

Perhaps these fathers are not ready to give up their role as the most important male figure in their daughters' lives and they fear being replaced. They do not seem to understand that their mixed messages could prove to be detrimental to their daughters' development. How can girls develop a strong self-concept and feelings of self-esteem if their fathers' have a limited view of their competencies? If they are smart in school can't they be smart about boys as well? Biller (1993) states that fathers need to be supportive of their daughters developing sexuality and encourage them to form nourishing, stable relationships with males.

When she enters adolescence her accepts her sexual development without being a rival with her boyfriends. The father should maintain a supportive relationship with his daughter without hindering her ability to form positive attachments with other males. He should encourage her to take responsibility for her actions...with male peers. A positive father-daughter relationship provides the young woman with a firm foundation for becoming intimate with other males (p. 178).

6.10 Allison

Allison's self-portrait (Figure A1-1) is interesting because she has not drawn her legs nor has she made her hands visible. Could this mean that she doesn't feel like she can stand on her own two feet? Or perhaps she feels immobile in her life. She appears to be dressed in her school uniform and has a big grin on her face, which would indicate that she is happy. Her body doesn't seem to have any shape to it and she chooses not to describe either her body's form nor its' characteristics. When given the opportunity to wave a magic wand, Allison only wants to change two things; she would like to alter the size of her ears because they "*stick out too much*" and "*get new hair*" because she finds that hers is neither straight nor curly enough but "*somewhere in the middle*". When it came time to discuss how her father sees her, Allison comments on how she thinks her father views both her personality and appearance. She mentions that he likes her smile and often compares it to that of Julia Roberts and states that he prefers when her hair is curly rather than straight. Allison also thinks her father still may perceive her as "*his little baby*" even though she feels he is "*coming to grips with*" her growing up. Yet she also senses that he trusts her judgement and she hopes he sees her as an independent person. Yet Allison does seem to be somewhat uncertain about how her father pictures her. It appears as though her father is accepting that she is maturing because it is inevitable but if he had the choice, he would probably prefer that she remained his "little girl".

Allison's Self-Portrait
(Figure A1-1)



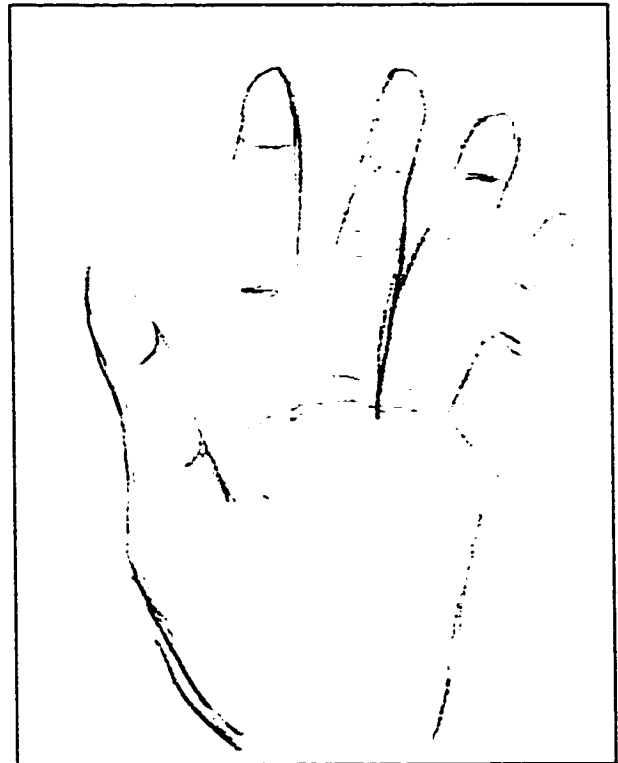
6.11 Soupriya

Soupriya's drawings are quite unique. Her self-portrait is her hand (Figure S-1), which she calls the "window to my soul." She says her hands are very important to her because it is hands that allow her to do all the activities that she loves most, rock climbing, painting, drawing and playing the guitar. She implies that they truly represent who she is because it is through their use that she is best able to manifest herself to world. Soupriya was the only participant who didn't want to change anything about herself. The other participants found this interesting and Michelle was somewhat shocked.

You don't want to change anything? If you took a magic wand there is NOTHING you want to change!?

Soupriya simply replied:

There's lots of things I don't like about myself but I wouldn't want to change them.



Soupriya's Self-Portrait
(Figure S-1)

Soupriya's reaction was not that surprising since she had previously expressed that she feels comfortable and confident about her body. She mentioned that both her parents are and always have been very supportive about her body and appearance and that they often tell her how healthy and beautiful she is.

The image Soupriya creates to demonstrate how she feels her father sees her is quite powerful. Drawing S-2 illustrates that Soupriya is the only participant to create a drawing that depicts a reversal in roles between child and parent. Since she is the one

holding the baby, whom she indicates is her father, she infers that she is the adult in the relationship. Thus, it is her role to support her father and make sure that he feels safe and secure. The look on her face seems to indicate that she does not like this obligation and



Soupriya Figure 2 (S-2)

probably does not appreciate having the burden and responsibility of a parent on her fifteen-year-old shoulders. If Soupriya feels this way it is contradictory to the fact that, during the group interviews, she continuously indicated that she always felt very supported by both her parents. Yet, this idea of conveying a new or otherwise hidden feeling through art should not be surprising considering Weber and Mitchell (1995) state that drawings often allow us to express thoughts and ideas that we would otherwise edit or suppress in verbal or written form.

6.12 Brett

Brett is the only student who was absent for the drawing session. When she arrived at the next meeting I explained what we had done during the last week's activities and she decided that she would prefer to answer the questions in written form only. She does not describe her physical features or character and the sole description she gives is that she sees herself as "*regular fifteen year old girl, nothing really sets me apart from the rest of the girls my age.*" She states that she doesn't obsess about her hair or clothing, which some could argue makes her very different than most teenage girls, many of whom are very preoccupied with their clothing and appearance. However, in our conversations she did maintain that she always wanted to dress in a way that made her comfortable and that she was more concerned with feeling good about how she looked than with what others thought of her appearance.

If given the opportunity to modify her body she speaks of making only one change, a change had nothing to do with her actual body or shape. She says she would love to straighten and whiten her teeth because that is the first thing she notices about people. She contends that a "*beautiful smile makes a beautiful person.*"

When it comes to how her father sees her, Brett first mentions that she isn't really sure because she doesn't spend that much time with him. She assumes that he still views her like a little girl because she feels that he treats her like one. She also feels that he is always reminding her how beautiful she is and that he is proud of her. "*So I guess he sees me like I think any parent should look at their child, beautiful and perfect.*" Brett appears to feel very supported by her father and perhaps this has helped her develop a strong level of self-esteem that enables her to feel secure enough to only be concerned

only with how she thinks she looks, rather than being dependent on reassurance and recognition from outside influences like her peers.

6.13 Reflections on the Drawings

It is interesting to note that when the girls address the second question “If you could wave a magic wand, what might you change about yourself?” only one girl passes up the opportunity to alter her body. The other ten openly admit that they would like to make some minor modifications if they could. In spite of the fact that the media and society dictate that slim is beautiful, only one girl actually states that she wishes to be thinner and although all the girls want to make changes to their appearance, they aren’t as geared towards the shape and size of their bodies as one might assume them to be. Yes, a few girls want smaller hips or thighs, but many girls want to make changes that affect their general appearance but they do not necessarily want to change their body shape or size. Brett longs for straight, perfect teeth while Maria wants to stop biting her nails. A few wish to get control of their hair by making it less oily or by not having it be “fly away”. Many would love to be guaranteed that they never have another pimple or blackhead. But these changes are minor and seem to imply that these girls are, for the most part, happy with their bodies.

When it came time to describe how they think that their fathers’ see them, there was a common theme. Almost all the participants discuss feeling as if their fathers have trouble accepting that they are developing into mature young women. Fathers seem to send mixed messages that confuse and frustrate their daughters. It appears as though they can recognize and praise their daughters for their intellectual growth but do not want to acknowledge that they are physically and emotionally mature as well. It is important to

note that it is possible that the illustrations that the girls created only reflect how they think and feel their father's see them. It is possible that the girls project some of these feelings. They may sometimes feel like little girls in front of their fathers and therefore assume that that is how their fathers view them. Regardless, this idea of having two parts to your identity, one strong and capable, and the other childlike and in need of protection is obviously prevalent in the lives of these young women. It is simply another example of how their lives are filled with contradictory messages and feelings and how navigating through them reflects how they experience their bodies.

7.0 So Where Does That Leave Us - Conclusions, Suggestions and Recommendations

7.1 Caveat

The voices and opinions in this thesis represent only a small sliver of the adolescent female population, and not a typical sample (that was not the intention). The girls I interviewed attend a private all girls' school and for the most part, come from middle and upper class families. Although their family backgrounds vary slightly, the girls were all Caucasian. However, my choice to draw my sample from Gracelyn Academy was deliberate not because I wanted a homogenous, non-representative sample, but because I was anxious to see how a group of girls from this particular type of school felt about their bodies.

Gracelyn Academy is the kind of institution that prides itself in contributing to the development of intelligent, self-assured, capable young women. The school attempts to foster girls' self-esteem by teaching them to be critical thinkers who learn to challenge and dispute the status quo. The girls do, for example, participate in media literacy courses that are designed to teach them to be proactive consumers of the media who learn to examine and question how women (and their bodies) are objectified by this medium. Knowing this, I was curious to see whether or not these teachings had any effect on the way the girls felt about their bodies. Did they, despite all their knowledge, still feel as if their bodies were a place of turmoil? Or were they better able to cope with the fact that they would probably never measure up to society's (absurd) standards of beauty?

Female obsession with body weight and body image problems began as white middle and upper class phenomena, problems which research demonstrates have now

filtered down via the media and popular culture to most social classes and minority subcultures in Western society. A recent study for example, has discovered a direct correlation between the rise of African American girls' desire for thinness and the increase of female African American television characters who are thin (Botta, 2000). Nasser (1997) illustrates how this problem is spreading among minorities who in the past seemed less affected and influenced by the western views of beauty. He states that as developing countries become westernized, young women began to feel pressure to adhere to the Western 'culture of thinness', causing conflict and confusion for many woman who had been raised with the notion to equate thinness with illness, malnutrition and poverty! This dilemma is also quite real for many young women who live in North America but come from culturally diverse backgrounds. They are constantly confronted with the pressure and desire to fit into to a society that idealizes an unhealthy and unrealistic body image. Even though their heritage culture may not approve or endorse this model, many young women believe that they have no choice but to accept this culture of skinniness in order to feel like they are properly integrated into their new culture

It seems fitting then, to study a segment of the population that has supposedly had the most time and experience dealing with these phenomena to see if a more positive picture is emerging, to see how they are coping. Knowing how the most privileged and articulate girls are now relating to their bodies in the context of increased health and media education can point to strategies that might be helpful for the larger population if similar pedagogical strategies were made available.

It appears as though the lives of the young women I interviewed are filled with paradoxes and conflicting feelings. Perhaps this is simply normal, since adolescence is a

time when young people are purportedly seeking answers to important, sometimes indefinable questions such as who am I? How can I fit in? Why do I constantly feel judged by my peers, parents and strangers? How do I reconcile the gap between knowing and understanding that I am a talented, capable person and the feeling of inadequacy and not measuring up? Although the group is, by financial measures, a privileged one, the girls did not strike me as very different from most teenaged girls I have met in my teaching experience.

7.2 The Need to Feel Comfortable

During the group interviews the girls and I spoke quite candidly about how they experience their bodies. We began by discussing and defining the word comfort and exploring what makes them feel comfortable in their bodies. We decided that in order to feel comfortable in your body, one has to feel comfortable in both a physical and mental sense. Feeling physically comfortable in clothing is related to how clothes actually fit your body whereas mental comfort is linked to how you think you look in your outfit. If you think you look good then you generally feel good, and thus, feel comfortable. As we probed this topic, I was somewhat surprised to discover that all the participants frequently feel extremely uncomfortable when they are dressed in their school uniform. The girls revealed that their school uniforms often cause them excessive uneasiness especially because, from their perspective, they feel sexually objectified by men when they are wearing their uniforms. This is disturbing information, since this outfit is compulsory for all students who wish to attend Gracelyn Academy.

7.3 Clothes Shouldn't Make the Women

Further investigation of the topic of clothing led us to examine what influences the girls' choice of style, as well as how they deal with the fact that people are often labelled and judged because of what they are wearing. The participants resent the fact that other people often categorize their personalities and make assumptions about their abilities and interests simply by looking at their attire. The girls expressed the wish that people would refrain from jumping to conclusions and cease judging them by how they dress. They say they detest the fact some individuals believe that their clothing is meant to represent who they are and where they come from. However, the girls also realize that their annoyance is somewhat hypocritical, since they are also guilty of making similar judgments about others.

7.4 The Perils of Shopping

Subsequential conversations examined what influence the girls to choose and purchase certain styles of clothing, and how the media affects both their choice of apparel and body image. They express feelings of frustration about their shopping experiences since they know and understand (from past experiences) that each time they go shopping, they are almost guaranteed to end up feeling unhappy about their bodies. Finding clothing that fits them the way they want is often a challenge since outfits are frequently made for one specific, tiny, atypical body type. However, the girls also state that they (intellectually) realize that their feelings of inadequacy are really quite ridiculous. They comprehend that most clothing cannot actually fit them the way it fits the models, because models bodies are usually skeletally thin and unhealthy. The participants know that they do not have a model's physique, nor do they really wish to. Yet despite this

knowledge, they can't help having an emotional reaction when they go shopping for clothing. Here again I noted a contradiction between what they understand and what they feel. On the one hand, the girls grasped that the images that the media spun are unrealistic, abnormal and unhealthy, yet on the other hand, they still feel inadequate when they realize that they do not, and never will, live up to these images. While these feelings of insufficiency are often short lived, they still occur, even if only for a fleeting moment. This discovery is concurrent with research that was completed by both Oliver and Lalik (2000) and Kirk and Tinning (1994) who state that although adolescents are definitely affected by the media, they are not entirely duped by it. They stress the importance of ensuring that adolescents be provided with safe and open spaces where they are able to exchange ideas and continue to resist against the oppressive standards that the media produces.

7.5 And you think they don't listen- Parental influence

On several occasions, we conversed about their parents and their influence on their daughters' body image and feelings about themselves. The girls said that their mothers often try to control what they wear and eat as well how much they exercise. They also believe that their mothers have many expectations about how they should look and the girls frequently feel that their mothers are more of a negative than positive influence.

Fathers, for the most part, are described as sending their daughters mixed messages. The girls' drawings indicate that the majority of them feel that their fathers see them as intellectually mature yet physically and emotionally immature and in need of

protection. This may result in the girls questioning their abilities and own judgment and may reduce their self-esteem.

The drawings also demonstrate that although the girls are not entirely content with their bodies, they are not nearly as unhappy about them as one may have predicted. It is true that, if given the opportunity, all but one of the girls would make changes to her appearance, but the alterations they want to make to themselves were often minor and not necessarily related to their body size or weight.

7.6 No mention of sex or sexuality

It is worth noting that although the participants and I explored various topics that related to, and dealt with, how they experience their bodies, we never broached the topic of sex or sexuality in any of our conversations. Throughout all our discussions, no one ever talked about what it feels like to have a female body, or how they deal with menstruation, raging hormones or their changing bodies. This may be because I never introduced the issue since I was more focused on areas such as how and why they wear certain clothing and what/how the media and their parents influence them. The girls barely acknowledged that the topic of sex existed. Soupriya made a passing comment once when we were talking about when the girls feel good in their body.

Gillian: What kind of activities or when do you feel good in your body?

Dasey: After exercising, (Maria and Brett agree.)

Soupriya: Sex (laughs)

Gillian: After exercising? (Vicki: you feel like alive) Sex? (Everyone laughs) Are you kidding?

Soupriya: Ya, I'm a virgin (laughs) and others do too.

However, that is the only time there was any mention of the subject. Perhaps the girls did not feel open enough to discussing such personal matters with me, or maybe they simply believe that sex and their sexuality is somehow separate from their body image. Perhaps if I had tried to take the dialogue there, we would have explored the area, but again that was not the focus of my research.

When sexuality was raised it was in terms of being objectified and subjected to the male gaze - especially the unwanted attention of older men that their school uniform seem to attract.

Furthermore, it is possible that the group did not mention sex or sexuality because boys are absent from their daily school life. They do not have to deal with the pressures of the 'culture of the male gaze' that accompanies having males around all day. Boys are not watching them walk down the hallways nor do they check them out during class and so the girls need not worry about whether they are going to draw (wanted) male attention or defend against (unwanted) objectification (at least not in school). While in school they can concentrate on their academics, their friendships and their projects and they do not have to worry about who they are or are not impressing. That being said, I do believe that the participants probably do think about, and have to contend with, issues that relate to their sexuality but that they simply opted not to share their observations in our groups.

7.7 Is There Any Hope?

So what does all this accumulated data mean? Do I believe that this group of young women is suffering from low self-esteem and poor body image? Do I think that all the literature is correct and that these girls live in a "normative state of discontent" (Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999, 5), which leaves them constantly feeling inadequate?

Absolutely not! On the contrary, I consider this group of young women to be rather self-assured and secure. They are capable of introspection and critical thinking, and are therefore able to express the ambivalence, discomfort, and frustration that they sometimes feel. But I do not for one moment believe that they are consumed with unhappiness. Instead, I discovered that these young women are very much like many older women I know since, for the most part, they are content with themselves and happy with who they are. That they are aware that the images and expectations that the media imposes on society, as a whole, are simply illusions that very few people can live up to. Yet there does exist a small vulnerable part in each of them, a little piece of themselves, which ignores the logical and refuses to be rational and reacts emotionally instead. That part of the girls is fragile and sensitive to outside influences and criticism and can truly suffer from feelings of inadequacy and low self-confidence. But this part of the girls does not appear to rule their lives. Rather, it seems to be more like a wave that gets ridden now and then when the girls are in moods that make them more susceptible. They themselves state that when they are in good moods, nothing can bring them down; it is when they are already feeling blue that the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt arise. But these moments are fleeting and appear to be few and far between.

The girls did raise a very important point in our last session together. They realize that most people, adults included, are dissatisfied with some part of their life.

Maria sums it up this way:

Everyone is unhappy about some aspect of their lives and we tend to over dramatize everything and we tend to make things bigger and worse than they really are.

Dorkus added to Maria's comments by stating:

I think adolescents need to be unhappy, we feel the need to dramatize our lives, because we don't have very serious problems. I think a lot of us think we are unhappy but when we look at our lives objectively, most of don't think we have problems.

Michelle implies that girls frequently have problems that have nothing to do with their actual bodies or body image and that nobody really knows what goes on in other people's lives.

If I am acting all happy in here, you don't know what goes on at home. There is so much that nobody knows.

Maria understood what Michelle was saying and took it one step further.

If all the research articles are focusing on body image and how the media effects us and since it hasn't changed anything, maybe it's not what's bothering us as much as other problems.

Falynn wanted people to know that she is very frustrated.

I've read a lot of books done by all these researchers and medical professionals and it is always about how negative our body images are and how bad the media is ... but we know all that. We discuss things interminably and don't really try to change things or if we are trying to change things, it's not working because we aren't doing it the right way. One of the problems with all this research is that people are categorized too much and there's too much generalization. People's individual problems are usually the real issue but people write it up and they say it's the media ... the problems aren't going away even if we do try and change things. It's just too simple to say to "blame the media" because people's problems are so complex.

7.8 Now What? A Few Suggestions and Recommendations

Falynn raises an essential point and seems to be implying that adults are not getting it. Maybe we are not asking the right questions or perhaps we are not really listening to the answers. Regardless, as Falynn states, *"the problems aren't going away."*

We know that adolescence is a difficult time for most children; we understand that it is laden with conflicting feelings and a variety of often-uncontrollable emotions.

Adolescents are frequently moody, depressed and angry and sometimes adults are too quick to attribute their moods and behaviour to them just 'being a teenager.' We

frequently go under the assumption life is supposed to be difficult for them because they are in the midst of self-discovery, which is never a simple process. Yet, changes have occurred in society, which have added more pressure to the daily lives of young women, making adolescence a more perilous stage of development that is more challenging to navigate. A multitude of factors influence their development – pressure from peers to be cool and hip, expectations from parents to achieve and excel at school, and images created by the media of how they should look, act and dress. And let's not forget the temptations of drugs and alcohol, the constant exposure to violence in the world and attempts to deal with their developing sexuality. Many parents are oblivious to the pressures and dangers that adolescents have to contend with in order to develop into healthy, mature, confident young women. Girls need people who are willing to take the time to listen them, not in between commercials or while the cell phone is ringing, but when they are alert and present. They need listeners who are willing and able to really hear what they are saying without judgement or criticism. Lisa Delpit (1995) says this about listening to people's perceptions:

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue (p. 46-47).

These girls seem to be indicating that if anyone is really interested in helping them deal with this multitude of complex issues, they will have to take the time to sit and listen. Researchers and educators have to be available and willing to invest their time and energy into trying to help young women deal with whatever problems they feel they

have. We cannot simply rely on surveys or questionnaires for percentages and numerical data. Nor can we make blanket statements and blame the media and fashion moguls for all the problems girls face. It is time that we fully investigate, face to face, what makes young women feel and function the way they do. We must engage in more intergenerational dialogue because if older women aren't willing to help them, who will? Girls need role models to emulate and with whom they can share their life experiences and discuss issues and topics that are relevant to their lives. This became more evident to me when the members of the interview group requested that I continue meeting with them weekly even when the data collection had ended. The girls said they "enjoyed our talks and didn't want them to end." I was both flattered and honoured and realized that my research had definitely served a purpose since it seemed to be making a difference in the lives of these eleven girls.

Another very important finding is that the data from the group interviews unmistakably connects the girls' feelings about their bodies with their parent's words and behaviour. It is imperative that parents realize the power and influence that they have on their children. They must recognize that adolescence is an extremely fragile time when egos are being built (and destroyed) and children are learning what kinds of behaviour is acceptable. Mothers and fathers need to be more prudent about what they say to, and about, their children because their words have a lasting psychological effect. The habits and attitudes formed during adolescence are very difficult to break. Children learn from their parents, they internalize their words and behaviour and then emulate them. They may then develop similar neurosis and repeat the same patterns.

Although there have been various studies that examine the mother-daughter relationship (See for example the work of Benedict, R., Wertheim, E., & Love, A. (1998); Mckinley, N. (1999); Stacey, M. (2000); Usmiani, S., & Daniluk, J. (1997); and Waterson, D. (1997)), there is very little research that documents the potential impact a father can have on his daughter's body image. It would be extremely beneficial to the field if more studies were completed that examined how fathers see they daughters as well as how their daughters feel they are seen. It would be equally valuable to engage parents in discussions that would examine what influences they think they have on their daughters' body image and compare it with data generated from a group discussion involving their daughters. In addition, it would be useful for parents to learn to identify what kind of feedback has a positive impact on their daughters in order to recognize how they might avoid giving advice that may be interpreted as negative. Workshops could be designed to aid parents improve their communication skills, increase their knowledge of adolescent development and stress to them how this is an especially fragile and influential period in their child's life.

A further recommendation is that it would be of great benefit to many private school girls if their administrations took a few moments to examine their uniform policy. It would certainly be in the students' interests to reassess whether or not it is necessary (and beneficial to them) to wear their uniform to and from school. Perhaps changing into their uniforms once they arrive on the school premises would alleviate some uneasiness. Girls should be given the opportunity to express how they feel about the dress code and to suggest potential changes that could be made to eliminate some of their discomfort. If the real purpose of uniforms is to reduce stress and make the lives of students easier, then

Gracelyn's administration (as well as other administrations) must take a good, long look at its policy and how it actually affects its students emotionally.

Lastly, I believe that integrating media literacy and critical thinking courses into the curriculum would prove to be beneficial for both young women and men.

Adolescents should be taught to challenge the images depicted in the media and develop minds of their own that can question the status quo rather than believing everything that they see on television or read in a magazine. If we want children to feel better about themselves and develop more self-esteem we need to equip them with tools that can help them create change, otherwise they may be fighting an uphill battle.

There is no easy solution or remedy to eliminate the challenges and dilemmas that today's adolescents are forced to struggle with. But I do believe that adults have a responsibility to try and be as open and available for teenagers as possible. If we truly want to help adolescent girls contend with their problems, it is not sufficient to simply give them a voice; we have to be prepared to give them an ear as well.

8.0 Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study: Reflections in their Mirrors'- how adolescent girls experience their bodies.

This is to state that I agree to participate in the program of research being conducted by Gillian Shadley, a graduate under the supervision of Dr. Sandra Weber, in the department of Education of Concordia University. The research will be part of her M.A thesis.

A. Purpose

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to collect information concerning how adolescent girls experience and view their bodies. These data will be collected during six focus groups wherein participants will be asked to discuss issues and voice their opinions about topics that are related how they experience and view their bodies. They will also be invited to draw pictures of themselves. The researcher will keep the drawings unless a participant does not wish for this to occur.

Topics of discussion will include: Dressing/clothes/fads/hair adornment

Sports/Activities

Body Issues: weight, shape, nutrition and diet

Cultural messages/ Peer messages/ Parent messages

B. Procedures

The research will be conducted in my school during my lunch hour. The participants will be in high school, secondary four, and will take part in 6 focus group discussions lasting approximately 45 minutes. Each session will be audio taped. Participants will also be asked to draw pictures.

C. Conditions of Participation

1. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences. I am free to either tell the researcher that I no longer want to participate in the group or I can simply choose to no longer attend the group.

2. I understand my participation in this study is:

CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., the researcher will know, but will not disclose my identity)
When it comes to documenting the results, the students' identities will remain confidential. The students' names will be changed when reporting the findings and no names will appear on their drawings.

However, if, during a focus group, information is revealed that the researcher feels puts my health at risk the researcher has the right to encourage me to seek help as well as inform the appropriate people (school counsellor)

3. I understand that data from this study may be published as part of a thesis.

This study is important because it provides a forum for the participants to express their attitudes, opinions and perceptions of how they experience their bodies. The focus group will allow the participants to discuss issues using their own language and ideas as well as provide an ambience, that according to Morgan (1996), enhances rather than hinders openness and disclosure thus allowing girls to discover that they are not the only ones who believe or feel a certain way.

After the data have been collected, the researcher will organize a time to debrief the participants and discuss the findings of the research. Again, the participants will be re-assured that their names will not appear in the final report and if they wish, they will also have access to a copy of the final report.

I HAVE CAREFULLY READ THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I HAVE FREELY CONSENTED AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

WITNESS SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

For further information please feel free to contact the researcher, Gillian Shadley, at 514-486-9743 or

Appendix B**Information Sheet**

Name:

Age:

Number of siblings:

Position in family: (oldest, youngest, etc...)

Favourite past time or hobby:

Place of residency:

Mother's occupation:

Father's occupation:

Holidays or festivals celebrated:

Year you started Gracelyn Academy:

School you attended before Gracelyn Academy:

Why did you choose this school?

Things you like most about it:

Things you dislike the most about it:

How do you feel about going to an all girls' school?

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