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# A question of culture for overweight individuals

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Heather A. MacDonald  
A Question of Culture  
for Overweight Individuals

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed using flexible research methods to explore the experiences and beliefs of overweight individuals in a cultural context. Two research questions were undertaken: the first being *Do overweight individuals experience a subculture?*, and the second exploring *How do overweight individuals' experiences of oppression relate to whether they have a subculture or not?* As an analysis of the literature revealed, the overweight population's oppression and stigmatization is often unrecognized within our greater society. With millions of Americans being classified as overweight this population is increasing in number, warranting further notice within social research.

This exploratory study includes findings based on 12 semi-structured interviews with individuals who self identified as overweight. Each participant shared about his/her life experiences and beliefs based on their overweight identity. Questions regarding social relationships and encounters with oppression offered a more complex understanding of their dynamic experiences and were used in analysis to draw conclusions to the research questions.

The findings showed the potential for an overweight subculture to exist, however the small sample size lacked in-group participation. These promising findings appear to be linked to internalized oppression, and have set the groundwork for future studies with a larger sample size.

A QUESTION OF CULTURE FOR  
OVERWEIGHT INDIVIDUALS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The latest trend in viewing the increasing size of individuals in our country is to frame it as a “disease of epidemic proportions” (Oliver, 2006). Countless medical sources, commercial industries, popular media, and periodicals use these terms to categorize and stigmatize the rising population of overweight individuals in our country. Approximately 127 million adults are classified as overweight, 60 million obese and 9 million severely obese (American Obesity Association, 2005). These statistics are measured using the Body Mass Index (BMI) which determines excess body weight through height weight differentials. The Center for Disease Control (2000) reports that 16% of children between the ages of 6-12 are overweight or obese. Likewise, 16% of youth ages 12-19 and 65% of adults over the age of 20 are classified as overweight or obese.

As the spotlight has grown brighter on overweight individuals in our culture, so has the oppression of this population. The messages from the medical profession, commercial diet industry, pharmaceutical and insurance companies, fashion designers and clothing manufacturers overshadow various aspects of their daily life and self identity, thus making the concern of excess weight less about an issue of health and more about social acceptance and attractiveness (Rogge, Greenwald & Golden, 2004). Some researchers report that weight oppression is “the last socially acceptable form of prejudice” in our society (Stunkard & Sorenson, 1993 p. 1037).

As a person of weight and a trained clinician I charge you to ponder this question: Is weight the disease or rather is it how we as a society make meaning of it? As the population of overweight individuals increases, we have a responsibility not only to examine and support health conscious research for this group, but to also examine social biases and the life experiences of this growing population.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Historical Context of Weight*

Weight in society is an ever changing concept. Throughout history weight can be identified as a cultural condition (Schwartz, 1986). The social construction of how we define and understand weight either through a person's excess or lack of it is not simply based on issues of health or fashion. Over the years the concept of weight can be linked to movements in the economy, politics, religion and many other areas of interest which change and define society. Long ago voluptuous figures, even body types we may today refer to as obese, were desired. Excess weight at one point in time meant wealth and power. Only aristocratic families could afford such an amount of food on their table and maintained leisurely enough lives not to burn away their pounds. Excess weight indicated social power, a high family economy, and desirability for social relationships (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns 1997).

As society advances often culture evolves thus potentially altering social meaning for various things. In Medieval times while weight still indicated wealth and power, its social definition began to modify in accordance with other cultural changes of the time (Schwartz, 1986). With the advent of strong religious movements excess weight became an issue of morality. Censure was placed on those with excess weight; identifying them as glutinous, sinful and immoral individuals. Thus the pendulum swung to the other



extreme in favor of thinness as societal power was guided by the religious fervor of this time period.

Again in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century excess weight became a visible target (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns 1997). Fashion supported young women modeling thin waist lines and thus the economy began supporting diet schemes which afforded money, power and status to society's upper class and commercial industry. This was a significant turning point in how weight is presently conceptualized. Since the 1880's there has been an ever narrowing tolerance for "fatness." Why this censure of weight has lasted so long unlike past trends is unknown. However, researchers theorize that society has evolved to support such a movement based on emphasis of athleticism, fashion and capitalism and that such conceptualization of weight could change when new ideals gain favor and intensity (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns, 1997; Wann, 1998).

As the ideal of thin has grown in popularity, movements in economy, politics, fashion, and medicine have followed; forming society's conception and social definition of the ideal weight (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns 1997). As this current social construction stands instead of weight supporting an image of power and prestige it has become a mark of marginalization and powerlessness. Access to healthy food void of processing and preservatives has become accessible to only those who can afford it. Instead of the images of large wealthy individuals, the overweight individual in today's society can largely be linked to poverty (Critser, 2003). This can partly be tied to issues of access to such things as healthy nutrition, adequate medical care, and issues around employment (Critser, 2003; Brownell, 2004; Oliver, 2006). This brief history thus illustrates how

weight has been a force within society's structure and how cultural conditions determine more than health and fashion, but issues of power and marginalization.

### *Language as a Marginalizing Medium*

Societal impressions of weight are also influenced by the use of language. Modern day English vernacular is laden with references to weight, and more specifically as our current culture supports, metaphors of fatness (Schwartz, 1986). As dominant culture continues to value and lend power to a thin ideal, we lose consciousness of how discussion of weight is used. When we are reminded of this rhetoric, often it is reduced to being only a matter of language or figure of speech. However, language and communication hold a significant amount of power in how society evolves (LeBesco, 2004). What must be understood about language is that "it does not posit some truly representable reality on which language, like a tool, is used; instead, it speaks to the artificiality of the truths we think we know" (LeBesco, 2004 p4). For instance the euphemism "pig" is commonly used to identify someone as lazy or unpleasant. Understanding how the social construction of weight has affected language informs you that "pig" as a euphemism is referring to deep seated biases and stigmas associated with overweight individuals. The word "pig" was most likely chosen with deliberate intent the first time it was used this way, as a pig is a large animal often associated with being overweight or needing to fatten up. The connotation of the euphemism "pig" relates back to the historical oppression of overweight individuals based on a lack of morality equating to glutinous, slothful, and lethargic behavior. Currently the euphemism "pig" is often used to express disgust and is considered a mere figure of speech. What is not

commonly recognized or regularly acknowledged is the history behind its use. This stands as just one example of how language is used as a tool to marginalize and perpetuate oppression.

The word “obese” can be defined as an accumulation of tissue which contains stored fat or having an excess of body fat (Merriam-Webster, 2005; Lukert, 1982). The Latin origins of this word reflect a meaning “to over eat.” The medical community use this term to define individuals who have excess weight (Lukert, 1982). The use of this word is supported as a label to simply define observation. Yet, there is a need to be conscious of its use as another linguistic tool of marginalization. Like the euphemism “pig” the word “obese” carries covert negative connotations of gluttony, social dissatisfaction, and powerlessness which support the societal conceptions we already believe to be truth. Thus again supporting how the evolution of weight in society and culture draws its support from other areas such as the medical field by borrowing its language and creating meaning of it, past the original intention.

#### *The Role of Authority Figures in Shaping “Truth”*

Much of what leads society’s present conceptualization of weight and opinion of those who are overweight is rooted in a medical paradigm. The medical community is also shaped by societal trends and influenced by the pervasive beliefs about the ideal weight, thus perhaps shaping medical interests (Stearns, 1997). Weight can be linked with societal power which then governs other interests. There appears to be a case for the idea of medical evidence that substantiates and justifies the already present belief about weight that is held currently (Stearns, 1997). This is not to say that medical research is

incorrect in its warning. Medical concerns point toward such risks as premature mortality, morbidity and social disadvantage (Dwyer, 1994). There are genuine concerns with excess weight in relation to metabolic disease leading towards gallbladder issues, hypercholesterolemia, differing concerns around cholesterol levels, insulin resistance and hyperglycemia which are related to diabetes.

Yet, at the same time taking into account genetic individuality it can be difficult to judge how much weight determines health risk. Some individuals gain weight quickly and some do not as related to their individual metabolisms (Lukert, 1982). Genetics determine your height and other physical attributes, as well as determining your body's growth rate and size (Lukert, 1982). Thus some individuals may be predisposed to having excess weight as indicated in their genetic makeup. The medical community's response to measuring appropriate weight is the Body Mass Index (BMI) (Dwyer, 1994). This measurement is used in the majority of literature discussing weight issues and is calculated by an individual's height and weight. The calculation is then compared to ideal ranges determined by the age and sex of the individual. The World Health Organization defines overweight at a BMI of  $25\text{kg} / \text{m}^2$  and obesity at a BMI of  $30\text{kg} / \text{m}^2$  thus quantifying and operationalizing the conceptualization of both overweight and obese (Brownell, 2004). However, the BMI has been criticized due to the measurements lack of accountability for individual genetic predispositions and so presents a biased measurement (Oliver, 2006; Stearns, 1997; Wann, 1998). The BMI does not account for metabolic differences or dysfunctions that may be the etiology of health issues for overweight individuals (Lukert, 1982). The argument for the epidemic of obesity and the medicalization of weight is based upon this measure and therefore should be examined

more critically. While medical warnings about the risks of excess weight should be taken seriously, the highly publicized censure of weight based on medical evidence should be re-examined to include an understanding of the nature of language and the influence of social trends.

### *Controllability Myth*

As a thin ideal has continued to flourish in present day society through popular media, capitalism, and the medical community so has the myth of controllability. Social views still maintain portions of the medieval period's conception of weight being gluttonous (Schwartz, 1986) With this pejorative connotation comes the belief that it is due to the fault of the individual. However, other physical attributes that have been subjects of oppression, namely race, gender and height; are all acknowledged to be outside of an individuals control (Triggerman & Anesbury, 2000). Hence, the belief that weight is a controllable variable set apart from other physical attributes, perpetuates the social construction that overweight individuals choose to be so (Rogge, et al, 2004). From a social construction perspective obesity or excess weight is a matter of losing weight thus being under an individual's personal control rather than accounting for the various other conditions that may affect a person's weight. It is publicized as a health concern and an issue of personal choice of life style (Rogge, et al, 2004). The fact that many overweight individuals lose weight reinforces the beliefs that weight is an issue of individual voluntary control and overlooks a multitude of other factors such as the fact that only a small percentage of those who do lose weight are able to keep it off (Rogge, et al, 2004). The controllability myth does not only have the negative effect of blaming the

overweight individual for their weight, but creates negative psychological pressure on the overweight individual and plays a role in shaping their self perception and self esteem (Rogge, et al, 2004; Blaine & Williams, 2004). The internalization of controllability beliefs around weight is found in adults who have long developed beliefs about the subject of social attractiveness. Even children of all ages, genders, and weights were found to be critical and biased towards overweight children and adults thus indicating the pervasive strength of the controllability belief and negative stereotyping of overweight individuals (Triggerman & Anesbury, 2000).

#### *Internalization and Facets of Overweight Oppression*

Even with the myth of controllability removed, research has found that the overt and implicit stigmatization regarding weight produces negative psychological effects for the overweight individual (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993). Researchers testing the controllability myth determined that for their subjects having this myth refuted by what was presented as credible medical evidence were more likely to attribute negative medical evaluations to a prejudicial bias on the evaluators part (Blaine & Williams, 2004). Additionally it was found that although these women felt affirmed through their identification that the negative evaluation could be attributed to bias, it did not seem to improve their levels of self esteem. Similarly, in a research study focusing on overweight stigma of college age women, when the women were aware of their weight being revealed on a dating questionnaire form they were much more likely to attribute their rejection to their weight than other factors (Crocker, et al, 1993). Outside of individual understanding of oppression, the researchers discovered that while these

women were able to identify prejudice as most likely the source of rejection this did not improve mood and self esteem. These studies support that while overweight individuals are recognizing their experiences as oppressive and prejudicial, the identification of this is not a protective factor for them as it tends to be for many other oppressed groups (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993).

This phenomenon of overweight individuals internalizing their oppression despite knowing that society perpetuates this prejudice against them continues as they believe their weight to be a personal flaw. This may have to do with the fact that unlike bias against other oppressed groups negative attitudes concerning overweight individuals are often encouraged and accepted (Wang, et al, 2004). Research has shown that overweight individuals tend to internalize the social stigma and oppression they face (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993; Wang, Brownell & Wadden, 2004). While they can recognize the prejudice, stigmatization and oppression, overweight individuals tend not to blame others for their opinions (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993). Research supports that overweight individuals while conscious of the experience of oppression appear to hold no preference for in-group members; that is many overweight individuals have internalized and believe the negative stigmas apply to their group (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993; Wang, et al, 2004).

Individuals seen as overweight are typically characterized as unattractive, lazy, gluttonous, sinful, ugly, stupid, flawed in character, incompetent, and personally responsible for their weight. (Crossrow, Jeffery, & Mcguire, 2001; Rogge, et al, 2004) Those who are overweight face a number of prejudicial experiences. People of weight are less likely to socialize at great length or be seen as an attractive choice for a relationship

(Crossrow , et al 2001; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; Rogge, et al, 2004; Wang, Brownell & Wadden, 2004). They are less likely to be hired for jobs despite their competency for the position (Crossrow, et al, 2001; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993; Teachman, Brownell & Jeyaram, 2003; Wang, et al, 2004). Overweight individuals are less likely to receive appropriate services, help or advice due to their weight (Crossrow, et al, 2001; Rogge, et al, 2004; Wang, et al, 2004). In searching for clothing they often are delegated to specialized sections or individualized/specialized stores to find appropriate sized garments. They experience social, structural, and institutional oppression on a daily basis whether it is as simple as trying to sit in a chair within a public facility or traveling by airplane. Most commonly experienced are negative verbal comments made by significant others, children, family members, doctors, and various other individuals on a daily basis that devalue, humiliate and shame the overweight individual.

These are just some of the direct observable ways that overweight individuals experience oppression. The impact of bias and stigmatization of overweight individuals contained within our society holds great power as it is often unacknowledged thus emphasizing the concept of it being “the last socially acceptable form of prejudice” in our society (Stunkard & Sorenson, 1993 p. 1037). While it is shown that awareness of the overweight individual’s experience of oppression reduces the degree of implicit bias held by medical providers and greater society, the pervasive effects on the overweight population remains (Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins, & Jeyaram, 2003).



### *Characteristics of Oppressed Groups*

Young (2000) explains that the term oppression is often used to identify injustice in our society, in other words as an expression of political discourse. Commonly the word oppression raises thoughts of various “isms” and countless forms of prejudice, such as racism, ableism, ageism, sexism etc. While oppression brings up thoughts of the civil rights movement and power differentials, oppression has in actuality evolved over time as society has attempted to become more conscious of it. Oppression slowly has developed to be more passive and covert. It is implied often but rarely stated. Literature has shown the life experiences of the overweight population of our society to experience a form of prejudice that is so concealed into the norms of our society that it is rarely recognized as oppressive (Rogge, et al, 2004). Young (2000) makes an interesting conclusion in her discussion on oppression. In the experience of being oppressed, individuals come together as an identified oppressed group, and, recognize similar “cultural forms, practices or a way of life” (p37).

This is observed throughout many oppressed groups from racial and ethnic communities to larger societal oppressions such as poverty (Longres, 1995). In the case of racial and ethnic groups, many begin the expression of culture with belief systems and traditions carried with them over time; which is solidified and bound in today’s society through their shared experiences of oppression. The resistance of acculturation to the dominant society can find its root in how oppression historically has been applied to various immigrant groups (Kitano, 1997). Such ethnic groups as the “black Irish,” and Japanese originally immigrated to American in the 1700’s and 1800’s for increased

opportunity and found themselves at the time oppressed by dominant society (Kitano, 1997). Racial and ethnic discrimination in these cases were related to the threat of dominant “white” society losing power to growing immigrant populations. In response to this oppression these groups, as many others have, came together as individual communities using their common cultures as protective factors in facing their oppression (Kitano, 1997). In these examples culture becomes as much about retaining traditions and beliefs as supporting and relating to each other in mutual experiences of oppression.

The concept of culture traditionally is linked to thoughts of growing civilizations, societies, as well as, racial and ethnic groups (Barker, 2004; Culture, 1991; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). It may be easier to link oppressed racial and ethnic groups with the shared experience of culture. However, cultures linked to oppressed groups can be found outside of the history of racial and ethnic groups. Poverty in its experiences of marginalization and oppression has developed a culture (Longres, 1995). Those who experience poverty’s culture are not necessarily joined by similar historical traditions and beliefs. However, they share an understanding of how it feels and what it means to be in poverty, as well as to share similar experiences marked by their poverty. In this we can see that traditional conceptions of cultures, namely racial and ethnic groups can experience oppression, along with oppressed populations, namely those in poverty, being able to experience and define a culture. This understanding therefore opens the opportunity for other oppressed groups without the benefit of racial or ethnic ties to share a common culture.

### *Defining Culture within an Oppressed Group*

Culture can be a complex subject to examine as the meaning of culture has evolved over the years (Barker, 2004; Culture, 1991; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002; Laird, 1998). Early conceptualizations of culture were tied to interests in anthropology and sociology in regards to studying social evolution and various individualized societies or civilizations of people (Barker, 2004; Culture, 1991; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). Since the early roots of these professions, culture has taken on other meanings. The various disciplines which make up the subject area of social sciences each create a unique paradigm from defining culture that lends itself to the focus of their study. No longer does culture only refer to previous civilizations, nationalities, races or ethnicities.

Modern definitions of culture include subcultures or groups of people with distinct sets of values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and traditions that differentiate them from a larger culture which they are a part of (Barker, 2004; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). Subcultures may be distinguished by age of its members, race, ethnicity, class, and or gender as well as such identifying qualities as distinct as religion, occupation, politics, sexual identity, etc. or any combination of these factors as long as it deviates it's members from those of the dominant culture (Barker, 2004; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). Often in our western culture, individuals fall into organizing themselves around "difference" particularly around binary oppositions---male-female, Black-White, gay-straight, rich-poor" (Larid, 1998, p20) and as we examine here thin-overweight. This practice of identifying differences like the binary examples stated above indicates the natural development of subcultures.

In order to examine the question of culture in relation to an oppressed group, we first need to understand what culture means. Traditionally culture is defined as a set of values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and traditions that are commonly held by members of a society or group within a larger society (Longres, 1995; Schriver, 1995; Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998). These various components of culture are generally seen to form an organized pattern or set of symbolic meanings under which members of a culture govern and identify themselves (Longres, 1995; Robbins, et al, 1998; Barker, 2004; Culture, 1991; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002).

The experience of oppression as related to weight may indicate that overweight individuals as a group can recognize a similar culture as Young (2000) describes within the experience of other oppressed groups. Much like the culture of poverty, overweight individuals do not generally fit the traditional conceptualization of a cultural group. Yet, overweight individuals as a group share similarities in their experiences of marginalization which could point to the identification of a subculture set apart from the dominant culture shared by Americans. A thorough examination of the beliefs, experiences, and social patterns of behavior exhibited by overweight individuals is therefore needed in order to determine whether they experience a subculture specific to their individual group or rather are general members of the larger society who merely experience oppression through its social structure.

With the multitude of subcultures being identified and participated in it is important to gather cultural knowledge from members of a population in order to make a comprehensive study of it. Cultural knowledge is stored internally in the mind (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986), and influences the analysis of cultures. The use of methods

such as qualitative interviewing supports the goal of examining the question of a unique subculture to an oppressed group, and captures internalized cultural knowledge.

Some professionals argue that culture can be used to mask pathological behaviors thus potentially enabling people's problems and preventing them from seeking solutions (Laird, 1998). With this argument professionals could view acknowledging an overweight subculture as support of unhealthy decision making. However, not exploring the potential of such social patterns and the potentiality of a subculture would be perpetuating anti-fat prejudice and weight biases which oppress and carry on the need for such a subculture.

### *The Question of an Overweight Culture*

The question of whether overweight individuals experience a subculture is not new despite the lack of discussion around this within social research. "Fat-activists" as well as others participating in the size-acceptance movement have been discussing this for some time in their attempt to address the oppression experienced by overweight individuals (Wann, 1998; Stearns, 1997; LeBesco, 2004; Dimensions, 2007; National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, 2007). Well known fat-activist Marilyn Wann illustrates this clearly in a passage within her book *FAT! SO? Because you DON'T have to Apologize for your SIZE!* (1998).

If there were a fat homeland somewhere on the world map, we might not have this problem. If there really had been a golden fat era, when fat was worshiped, we wouldn't be in this bind... If fat children were only born to fat parents, and thin people only came from thin families, then our glorious fat heritage, passed down through the generations might save us from this situation. As it is there is no official language of fat pride. There are no fat slang words, no fat neighborhoods, no fat holidays, no traditional music of the fat people. There is no

comforting and familiar fat cuisine, no special dance that the fat people dance when we are happy or sad, no fat hairstyle, no rite of passage for fat children to undergo (other than the teasing). There is, in short, no fat culture.

Now, black culture and queer culture and Jewish culture and deaf culture, to name a few, are sources of support and identity and pride for the people who belong to them, and these groups speak a common language. Meanwhile, individual fat people rarely even have the words to refuse our oppression... Instead when we want to talk about our condition, we end up parroting the very words that the mainstream culture uses to keep us down. We say, 'I need to do something about my weight problem,' when what we really mean is, 'I want this discrimination and mistreatment to end.' (Wann, 1998, p.121)

Wann clearly outlines the lack of an overweight culture by traditional cultural definitions; there are no historically based fat traditions or customs such as food or music. What exists in historical reference for this population is its oppression by dominant society. Wann (1998) goes on to identify that although she feels there has yet to be a "fat" culture there does exist a community made up of "fat organizations and newsletters, books and magazines, conversations and parties, clothing stores and dating services" (p. 121), and a growing number of resources created by and for this population. Although Wann states that an overweight culture does not exist she does indicate that there is the potential for one to exist. She cites that individuals' lack of open identification to this population and continued internalization of their oppression inhibits the recognition of such a culture. Given the time since Wann's passage was written, fat-activists and the size-acceptance movement have made significant strides in raising the awareness of the oppression of overweight individuals. Acknowledging this, it is relevant to readdress the question: *Do overweight individuals experience a subculture?* While examining that question it is also important to examine the additional question of: *How do overweight individuals' experiences of oppression relate to whether they have a subculture or not?*

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Problem Formation*

This qualitative study was designed using flexible research methods to explore the experiences and beliefs of overweight individuals. As the literature review revealed, the overweight population's oppression and stigmatization is often unrecognized within our greater society. There continues to be a gap in literature concerning protective factors for this population as there have been for other oppressed groups. This study was exploratory because there was insufficient research to formulate hypotheses about this particular population. This chapter presents the methods of research used in this study and will describe sample selection, data collection and data analysis procedures.

#### *Research Questions/Hypotheses*

The research questions are focused on first, the exploration of a possible overweight subculture, and second, examining if and how the oppression of this population may impact the existence of such a subculture. The hypothesis that there is an overweight subculture is based on the fact that this population appears to share a number of experiences, many of them based in the oppression of this group. It is the aim of this study to explore how a subculture may be affected by the oppression of overweight individuals and how the population views this oppression. Therefore this study contains two separate thesis questions 1) do overweight individuals experience a subculture? and 2) how do overweight individuals' experiences of oppression relate to whether they have

a subculture or not? The choice to have two research questions was based on the rationale that there is a need to explore whether there is an association between a possible subculture and the possible oppression experienced by overweight individuals.

### *Research Design*

The following study is a flexible methods, qualitative design based upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals who identify themselves as overweight. The intent was to examine each individual's experiences of possible oppression and how those experiences relate to the construction of personal beliefs, values, behavioral practices, and social relationships. A comparative analysis of the participants' responses was completed to illuminate emerging patterns possibly indicating a subculture as defined by identification as overweight. The comparative analysis will additionally serve to connect and relate emerging themes related to experiences of oppression based on weight and how this impacts the participants.

The use of face to face interviews was chosen to promote in-depth and clarified responses to the interview questions (Appendix E) that may not have been achieved through use of other methods. Procedures to protect the rights and privacy of participants were outlined in a proposal of this study and presented to the Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) at Smith College School for Social Work before data collection began. Approval of the proposal (Appendix F) indicated that the study was in concordance with the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1996) and the Federal regulations for the Protection of Human Research Subjects.

### *Research Participants and Sampling*



Study participants were limited to individuals who self identify as “overweight” and are classified as such by BMI measurements, as well as being over age 18. There were no other exclusionary criteria. Potential participants were screened by phone to ensure that they met the study’s criteria and to schedule interviews. The small sample size meant it was not possible to ensure diversity among the participants regarding gender, age, race/ethnicity, or religious affiliation. However, every effort was made to recruit a diverse group of participants by searching in urban and suburban areas.

Participant recruitment was designed to be flexible and collected through convenience and snowball sampling methods. The convenience portion of the sample was completed through advertising for participant interest (Appendix D) within the geographic area of northern Connecticut. Notices were posted in public locations such as supermarkets, public libraries, medical offices and local weight related groups (ie: Weight Watchers, and community support groups). A large portion of the sample was identified through snowballing within the initial response to participant interest advertising.

Sampling was designed so that interested participants would call or email the researcher through the contact information listed on the participant advertising flyer. Upon initial contact, any questions regarding the research study were answered. Each participant was screened for self identification as “overweight.” Contact information was gathered during this initial phone conversation followed by verbal agreement to participate in this research study. It was explained to each participant that this information would be kept confidential and will be used to mail copies of the informed

consent letter and demographic data form to them prior to the interview. Participants were verbally informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that if they choose to withdraw, all confidential information regarding them would be destroyed. At the conclusion of this initial contact a convenient interview time and setting was arranged. Interview settings included personal residences and quiet public locations such as coffee shops and public libraries and lasted approximately one hour. Participants were verbally informed that they could call the researcher with further questions or to reschedule interview should conflict develop.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Data collection procedures included a letter of informed consent (Appendix A) and demographic data form (Appendix B) mailed to participants prior to the date of interview, extra copies were provided at the time of the interview when necessary. Both these forms were reviewed with the participant immediately prior to the interview. Both researcher and participant retained copies of the informed consent following the interview.

The letter of informed consent (Appendix A) outlines the study's purpose and participant's rights including the option that the participant may choose not to answer any questions at any time. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time until May 15, 2007 at which time the research findings would be written and if so all materials related to them will be destroyed. Participants' were informed that all personal information was to be kept confidential and pseudonyms would be used within the analysis and reporting of this data to provide anonymity. Each

interview was digitally recorded upon the participant's consent with additional field notes taken by the investigator during the interview. All materials related to interviews and participant information will be kept confidential and secure for three years as required by Federal regulations after which they will be destroyed. Within the written findings, illustrations and brief quotes will be used to represent the data identifying participants only by the pseudonyms provided for them.

The demographic data form (Appendix B) collected prior to the interview included each individual's age, and gender. Additionally each individual was asked to voluntarily identify their other cultural identities so this variable could be included in data analysis. Finally, each individual was requested to provide their self identified height and weight. The purpose of this request was explained to the individual. Height and weight measures were used to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI) which is the most frequent measure used by researchers to classify weight. BMI will be utilized in this study to classify its sample as "overweight." It is recognized that BMI is currently debated as to its accuracy and validity as a scientific measure. Yet, it is important for the study to be scientifically comparable to other research which is why this measure was chosen. For example Klaczynski, Goold, and Mudry (2004) used self identification of measurements to avoid the need to actively measure this data; I therefore chose to use this method.

Each interview commenced once the informed consent had been signed, the demographic information form completed and both were collected by the researcher. Research participants were provided an opportunity to address any questions or concerns related to the research prior to and immediately before the interview. The interview

utilized a combination of fixed and flexible open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview design. Questions for the interview design are cited in Appendix E.

#### *Potential Risk to Study Participants*

Participants were made aware that the interview may bring up some painful feelings and memories and so is not without personal risk, although this was expected to be minimal. Therefore, a list of referrals for counseling was provided to all participants at the time of each interview (Appendix C). Participants were also invited to contact the researcher with further questions or concerns regarding these referrals.

#### *Potential Benefits to study Participants*

It is the hope that this study will enable its participants to talk about their experiences in their own words. Additionally, it is hoped that participation in this study has a positive impact on individuals who are struggling with issues of oppression pertaining to their weight. This study holds the possible large scale benefit to the overweight population in that it adds further voice to their oppression and may be a catalyst towards greater awareness on multiple levels. Ultimately there was no concrete benefit to participating in this study through either money or other rewards. Participation was completely voluntary and without coercion.

#### *Planned Analysis*

The interview questions were designed to highlight such concepts as oppression, personal perception, interpretations of societal views, experiences of social interactions and possible solidarity within the overweight population. Data collected from the

demographic information form was combined with interview data for each participant to be included in a combined analysis. The responses to the interview questions along with the field notes and demographic data were manually transcribed by the researcher and then openly coded and examined for emerging dominant themes. Open coding was completed according to procedures described by Rubin and Babbie (2006) which includes data being broken down “into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences” followed by questions being asked about the conclusions based on this. Analyses of these coded responses were used to determine the presence of an overweight subculture.

Due to the small sample size of this research design, the results of this study will not hold strong transferability outside that of the sample’s experience. However, through this study it should be determinable whether further study of the research question within a larger and more representative sample would be a valid direction for future studies.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of 12 interviews with participants who self identified as overweight. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the possibility of the existence of an overweight subculture. This study also seeks to explore the role that the oppression of overweight individuals plays in whether or not a subculture for this population exists. Although much has been written on the overweight population and more recently the oppression of overweight individuals (Agell & Rothblum, 1991; Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crossrow, et al, 2001; Critser, 2003; Crocker, et al, 1993; Klaczynski, et al, 2004; Lebesco, 2004; Oliver, 2006; Rogee, et al, 2004; Schwartz, 1989; Streamns, 1997; Stunkard & Sorensen, 1993; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Teachman, et al, 2003; Tiggermann & Anesbury, 2000; Wang, et al, 2004), a review of the literature reveals a gap in the research regarding shared identity and connection within this group. This exploratory study will investigate the experiences of overweight individuals, as well as their social relationships with overweight and non-overweight individuals, their opinions of society's views on weight, and possible experiences of oppression. All 12 interviews were conducted in accordance to the above mentioned research methods. The following represents the emerging themes found within those discussions. The findings of this study have been broken down into six major themes including: acknowledging social views on weight; recognizing discrimination; social attractiveness; overweight and the social self; relating to a thin ideal; and, internal vs. external self image. These themes represent the

shared beliefs, experiences, behaviors, and expectations as expressed by the study's 12 participants.

### *Participant Demographics*

All participants were located within northern Connecticut and found through participant advertising or snowballing efforts. Due to the convenient quality of this sample there is a lack of diversity within it. The sample population is 100% (n=12) racially white. The gender breakdown of the participants was 83% (n=10) female and 16% (n=2) male. The age of participants ranged a span of 52 years; the oldest being 76 and the youngest participant age 24. The approximate average and median age of the participants was 47 years.

The primary exclusionary criteria for this study was that all participants must self identify as overweight. Each participant was asked to self identify height and weight measurements so as to calculate their Body Mass Index (BMI). This was used to classify the sample as overweight. The BMI measure was chosen because it is the most frequent measure used in weight related studies. The average BMI measurement was 40.25 and the median was calculated to be 36. The overall range of BMI measurements was between 70.3 and 31.5 equaling a 38.8 point difference. According the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (2006) interpretations of BMI measurements 100% (n=12) of the sample is considered obese; many of which may also be considered morbidly obese. During the interview participants were asked to indicate when they first identified as overweight; 58% (n=7) first identified in childhood, 25% (n=3) as young adults, and 16% (n=2) first identified within middle to late adulthood. All participants noted that

following first identifying as overweight, they have always identified as such no matter how much their weight may have fluctuated.

Due to the United States being such a culturally diverse society participants were asked to indicate the various cultural identities in which they personally associated themselves. Their responses were then organized into general themes and present as the following: 50% (n=6) identified within their profession, 8% (n=1) identified as disabled, 58% (n=7) identified with a particular interest group, 33% (n=4) identified with their ethnic background and 41% (n=5) identified with their family role (ie: mother, daughter, brother, etc.). The most prominent cultural identity within this sample was religious affiliation at 66% (n=8); 62% (n=5) of which identified as Catholic, 25% (n=2) as Jehovah's Witnesses, and 12% (n=1) as Protestant.

### *Description of Findings*

*Acknowledging Social Views on Weight.* In examining for the presence of subculture it is import to gauge how a population views the relationship between the larger dominant society and itself. Each participant was asked during the interview to describe societal views of people who are overweight. The general response was similar to one respondent, Sharon commented, "Society is pretty nasty towards people who are overweight. Everybody has this idea that everybody should be skinny." She, as many of the other participants did, believes that "Society looks down on people who are overweight." She further elaborated by stating...

They have a very negative attitude towards overweight people. I think the whole of society really wants people to be thin and athletic and healthy... they'll even take someone who is anorexic over someone that is overweight. It's their



preference and I think that kind of sucks, but that's the way it is. They've had enough advertising drilled in their heads that that is what is important.

Another participant Lily similarly agreed about the subtle messages our society sends out regarding weight. She explained that she and many others get told society's views on weight in so many different ways "The media tells me, the big woman's sizes and well we get told in so many ways that half of them we're not even really aware of anymore."

Additionally, Nancy expressed her opinion that society believes overweight individuals,

Have no self control... that they should take better care of themselves. That they have it in their power to lose it, which is easier said than done. I think that [it] all depends... some people have more control than others... They take smaller portions. I think it's funny because they see me as overweight, but I see people who eat ten times more than I eat. [Then there is] someone from the outside who thinks that I eat tons of food, but I don't.

One more respondent, Hope, stated "I think people actually have issues on why they are large. People in society don't realize that, they just say. 'She's just huge because she's too lazy and doesn't care about herself' and that's not true." Debbie similarly agreed saying,

Society is very judgmental of those people who are overweight. They think you're a slob; they think you're sloppy; they think you're not clean. They think that you're a pig; they don't understand that it might be genetics... Metabolism and that sort of thing does play a part.

Brad explained that weight is something that is rarely accepted in society even amongst the powerful and elite. He also explained that society in general does not accept people who are overweight unless:

That is who they are. Like athletes, if they're big that type of thing. They accept them because that's how they found them, but if this one gains weight, looks a little bit heavier or is with someone who is heavier. I think people don't enjoy that as much. It's pushed me to want to lose weight. If people are going to look at me then I don't want them disgusted or outraged.

All participants in one way or another acknowledged that their population is not accepted within the preferences of society in general. They recognized that it is much more than individual personal opinions on weight, but rather ingrained into a larger culture that is present in media, and public opinion, and is not easily changed by positions of power and privilege. Thus here we see the indication of overweight individuals' witnessing society's or the dominant culture's judgment of overweight individuals. Additionally observed is the separation or "othering" of the overweight population as differing from the dominant culture setting up indications of a subculture.

*Recognizing Discrimination.* As was discussed in the literature review, recently there has been a significant amount of literature discussing the oppression of overweight individuals (Agell & Rothblum, 1991; Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crossrow, et al, 2001; Critser, 2003; Crocker, et al, 1993; Klaczynski, et al, 2004; Lebesco, 2004; Oliver, 2006; Rogee, et al, 2004; Schwartz, 1989; Streamns, 1997; Stunkard & Sorensen, 1993; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Teachman, et al, 2003; Tiggermann & Anesbury, 2000; Wang, et al, 2004). A large part of examining for an overweight subculture is first based on the concept of their being an oppressed group, as this sets them apart from the dominant culture. Furthermore, this study also seeks to explore the role of oppression in the possible identification of such a subculture. That being said, during each interview participants were asked whether they had ever experienced oppression related to their weight. All of the participants (n=12) noted that they did not feel as though they had been "oppressed" at any point. This is interesting to note in relation to how the power of social constructs such as the controllability myth affect this population (Blaine & Williams,

2004; Rogge, et al, 2004; Triggerman & Anesbury, 2000) and how oppression can be internalized (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993; Wang, et al, 2004). It is notable that throughout the interviews in discussion of their experiences all participants described feeling discriminated against, viewed prejudicially, and treated poorly related to their weight. 100% (n=12) of the sample could comfortably acknowledge that. However, when provided the Webster's dictionary (2005) definition of oppression describing it as: the negative treatment of an individual through an "unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power" all participants denied experiencing this. The difference between identifying as discriminated against and being oppressed appears to be the concept of "unjust" treatment. As was stated in the literature review many overweight individuals have overtime internalized their oppression so that while able to recognize this as discrimination and prejudice they do not feel as though it is unwarranted (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crocker, et al, 1993; Wang, et al, 2004).

The participants of this study could easily express that the discrimination and prejudice experienced due to their weight is often not easily observed by general society unless they can somehow relate to being overweight. As Beth stated "Most discrimination is subtle. People aren't just going to come right out and say it to your face, but you can tell what they're thinking." She likened it to racial discrimination in saying "It's like being black and something goes wrong and you say it's because I'm black. You can't prove it, but you can't disprove it either." She further stated that overweight individuals are made to feel like a "second class citizen" and that there is a "certain intolerance for overweight people." Nancy similarly stated that she "can tell by the way they look at [her]. I just feel it." The existence of overweight discrimination and prejudice

are subtle and not easily observed. However, the accounts of these participants (n=12) note that it is there.

Kelly believes “People in general are prejudiced against people who are overweight. Someone would walk down the street and someone who isn’t [overweight] would be quick to criticize or make a comment.” Brad described trying to avoid people’s discrimination “I know I’m not horribly overweight so I can try to hide it.” Amy explained that “Some days I’ve not wanted to leave my bed, not wanted to leave my house. I’ve just wanted to do nothing because I was feeling like... I was feeling like an outcast.” Lily believes “there are some people who don’t know what it’s like and value looks a great deal... If they see me and I’m overweight. They act a certain way towards me because I’m overweight and that’s personal, a personal thing”... “I think I take on some of that, I think I know it intellectually, but emotionally I let myself take part of that on as my identity... not as much as I used to, but I think I still do that.” Again these present as typical experiences of individuals of other oppressed groups including the feeling of prejudicial stares and judgment when out in public. Brad described trying to pass for non-overweight at times to avoid discrimination much as someone may remain in the closet about their true racial or sexual identity. Ultimately overweight individuals appear to internalize feelings like being an outcast, as Lily described taking “part of that on as my identity.”

Lily further explained that the effects of overweight discrimination are far reaching:

There are huge misconceptions about why people are overweight and that they are very stigmatized and stereotyped. I think that the medical society doesn’t even really have a [clear understanding]... for the overweight and why it’s so hard for

some who are overweight to lose weight. It's not just a physical thing and they really don't have a handle on the physical part of it. They can think in fact that we're just physical beings, but we're much more than that and so I think that's when we fail to understand. I'll even go so far that first of all there's that misconception that nobody should be overweight and there's an error on thinking that well then if they don't succeed it's because they don't want it bad enough or they're lazy or all these inaccurate causes get put on why people are overweight. That leads people to judge them in other areas of their lives like personality, and character.... Especially in the United States I feel like we are so image conscious and it permeates everything that we do so it influences not only the judgment of people who are overweight [but] it does on what gets researched and it permeates everything... [like] hiring, for employment, for promotions It really affects a lot of things because we as a country are kind of shallow when it come to that. It leads to society placing blame with the individual who is overweight so that kind of hinders advances in medicine, advances in psychiatry, advances in anything that will help people who are overweight. We even have this phenomenon in a country where we do have a higher percentage of people who are overweight.

Lily described weight discrimination to have various affects beyond impacting experiences of individual overweight people. She described discrimination and prejudice of overweight individuals as having affects which alter medical treatment, research and understanding, influences employment, and essentially shapes the core of how the United States culture functions.

Participants provided a number of examples of how the overweight population has been subjected to discrimination. Hope, who has been a waitress for years explained,

I've even watched people go in and they order this big bacon cheese burger with a diet coke and it's a big joke in the restaurant industry when the waitress goes back and is pouring a diet soda. They're talking and laughing with the other people they work with and they're saying 'you should see the cow at three who is ordering the humongous saturated fat burger with a diet soda.'

Debbie described in a previous employment situation where she had a boss inappropriately comment on her appearance:

I had a boss one time tell me because I was overweight that I should wear dresses and I thought 'isn't that something.' You know just because you're overweight you'd look better in dresses. Wow, guess what 'I'm not wearing them.' I was just

surprised that he said it. He could have gotten into a lot of trouble for that comment and he had a lot of nerve.

Donna shared about witnessing overweight discrimination in the work place:

I've been in a number of positions in my jobs where I saw people making fun of overweight people behind their back or just calling them names. I felt then and I feel now that they don't know the story of the person and so they shouldn't do it. All this does is hurt the person because there are lots of reasons people are overweight.

Sharon witnessed it in the media:

I've noticed listening to the *View*, Rosie O'Donnell said with everything that people call her, they might call her a lesbian, bigot; they might call her this or that, but they always put FAT in front of it. It's the first thing out of their mouths. FAT Lesbian, FAT Bigot, FAT whatever she said so that's always an issue.

Just as Stunkard and Sorenson (1993) described weight oppression as the “the last socially acceptable form of prejudice” in our society, Beth explained that people discriminate against “overweight people where they wouldn't do this with anyone else. It's true that now it's not socially acceptable to make fun of blacks or Iranians or homosexuals or whatever, but it's okay to do it with fat people.” In the end this discrimination and prejudice takes a toll on the individual. Nancy expressed “I think I have to work twice as hard. I feel that with the weight I have to work harder to get recognition.” Hope stated “I can't imagine the people who have had to deal with this forever because just what I've felt in the last year or so.” Debbie said “I feel sorry for my own self in a sense because I wish I was a size that was acceptable to society, but I'm not... if I had to pick a life it would be normal, the normal way, the normal everything.”

It was viewed by this study's participants (n=12) that those who are not overweight have a harder time truly comprehending the experiences of overweight individuals. It was felt by many of the participants that if a non-overweight individual

had family or friends who were overweight they may be more likely to recognize the discrimination and prejudice and be sympathetic of the experiences of overweight individuals, but without personal impact on their own lives they would lack real comprehension. Hope, who has very recently identified as overweight reflected on her sister who has been overweight for years. She stated at one point “Looking back on it, it’s really sad because if I can feel this way in such a short period of time and have this happen [then] what does my sister go through? What has she been going through for years that I never took the time to notice or to pay attention to?”

Kelly who first identified as overweight during her young adulthood shared her experiences over time:

I’ve come to have a lot more sympathy than I did as a young person realizing that not every overweight person simply eats too much and that they could control it much better if they tried... A lot of people who don’t have a problem with their weight feel that people who do have done this to themselves and I can safely say that because at one time that’s how I felt.

Another participant Beth who has identified all her life spoke of her sister who has just recently identified as overweight

I think my sister was always kind of shallow, but since she’s put on weight she’s more sympathetic to other people. My sister feels very strongly that people discriminate against you if you’re heavy. She would probably feel the difference more having been thin.

Lily described a relationship with an important friend who died six years ago from cancer. Their relationship spanned 30 years and Lily did not feel as though her friend ever truly comprehended her experiences as an overweight person until the end.

She was like super physically fit and beautiful and worked out all the time. Though she tried to understand what it was like for me she could never understand it. I remember we went to a gym together. Sometimes together, sometimes not and they acted very differently to me than they did to her. I pointed

it out to her one day. There was this one woman who was particularly rude to me. So I said something and she said 'oh no, she was very nice. I think you misunderstood or something like that' and I said 'No, I don't think so.' I said 'you don't know it, but they act differently towards me than towards you' and she could not take it in. She was blown away with the thought that she would be that way. She only experienced the way they treated her and didn't see the way they were with me. She died of cancer and before she died she'd lost her looks and lost her hair and had gone through all kinds of things. Talk about image change and it was then that she said to me 'I know what you were talking about.' People react differently when they see your physical presence and so I think that's what makes it hard for me to believe that someone who has never been overweight can understand what people who are experience.

In the end one cannot deny that overweight individuals experience discrimination and prejudice. Those who are not overweight can recognize this and be sympathetic towards it. However, one third of the participants (n=4) believed that without experiencing it you would ultimately fail in understanding the enormity of it.

*Social Attractiveness.* A large component of culture is that it is a social function which joins individuals together. Based on the participant responses (n=12) it appears overweight individuals have a strong doubt regarding their social attractiveness. This is important to examine as it represents shared beliefs about the attractiveness of their population, as well as interaction between themselves and the dominant culture. It illustrates how overweight individuals value weight and physical attractiveness as opposed to how they believe dominant culture does.

In reference to his social interactions Matt said about his weight "It holds you back. It held me back in a lot of things. When you're younger you're not as outgoing; you're not as comfortable with yourself and you're more insecure so it holds you back from being more personable, due to lack of acceptance." Sharon stated that her weight is:

Probably why I don't try to expand my circle of people, because I just figure they're not interested in getting to know a fat person... You shy away from



establishing new relationships with some people because they don't know you. They just think of you as a fat person they don't want to get to know. I do think that people look differently at fat people... I just don't approach some people because of it; because I think their prejudging me.

Amy spoke about the enormity that her weight impacts and shapes her life,

[It] impacts my friendships. It impacts relationships. It impacts family... It impacts the quality of my relationships and the number of relationships when compared to other people in my age range and the types of relationships I have with people... My weight is something within my community that everyone sees and notices, but nobody publicly makes known... I feel that if I was not overweight I would be more outgoing, more sociable.

Lily who described herself as a naturally introverted person to begin with stated that,

If I'm in a new place with new people I think I'm more hesitant to introduce myself... I go there in my mind, so I have my own imaginings of how people perceive me... that they may have the same misconceptions that I see are common within our society and that they will judge me and make fun of me... I turn myself off to things because of being overweight, just so I don't have to deal with it.

Overall, these individuals (n=12) described being hesitant to engage with new people and that they fear rejection based on their weight. Nancy stated "You know it makes you feel yucky because you're not quite as small as they are." Brad said "My first thought would be to go for it, but they'll only say no because of the way I look." In the end beliefs around social attractiveness appear to limit overweight individuals confidence to engage.

Beyond hesitancy to engage, participants described feeling additional limitations to their social existence due to the pressure for social acceptance. Several participants (n=4) described hesitancy to eat in public feeling as though this invited censure from others. As Nancy described:

They don't think you have self control. I think they look at you no matter what you're eating... it could be a salad and they're looking at you. 'Oh my God look

at her she's eating a salad' No matter what you have and if you have something bad it's 'she shouldn't be eating that.'

She further described the feeling that she sometimes must hide her eating from public view:

Sometimes when I eat I don't want to eat in front of people. You know if I'm having something bad I'd rather have it privately. Or hide it like let's just say for instance that I had a candy bar at work. I might take a bite of it and just leave it in my desk drawer until I take another bite.

Amy stated that her weight has "affected my behavior a lot, especially when it comes to social situations. In social situations and eating I have issues with that in being around other people." Brad has experienced people commenting on his eating when he's out at a restaurant, "If I'm eating something they'll say I can't believe you just ate that much."

Beth described hating to go to the lunch room at work because...

I used to go up to the lunch room and everybody was always trying to give me stuff that they didn't want to eat as if you're a human garbage pail. They believe that because you're heavy that you'll eat anything that they give you and I got great pleasure out of saying 'no thanks I've got my own.' But it's the little subtle digs.

It is not just when eating that overweight individual's feel under the scrutiny of others. Tracy said "I think if I was smaller I'd feel better about myself. I'd probably wear more clothes that were revealing and not be so covered up." Debbie stated that she "Won't wear a short sleeved shirt, my arms are too fat." Amy explained "I'm very self conscious about what I wear. In my profession I'm very self conscious of how I act; how I present myself. It affects just about everything." She elaborated by saying...

It impacts my diet. It impacts my routine. It impacts a lot of my daily life. It impacts my whole routine. I wake up and my first thought is I look at myself and I'm disgusted with the way I look because I know when I go out today, when I go out to work, when I go out to see friends... I'm going to be looked at as this fat girl or as someone who is overweight and who shouldn't be out doing the things

normal people are doing. I should be out at a gym running around a lot or I shouldn't be allowed out at all. That's how I feel quite a few days of the week.

Standards around physical attractiveness are constantly reinforced in our culture and eventually limit those who do not fit the mold. Limitations are not just based in the inherent discrimination present, but also in the internalized censure individuals place on themselves. It impacts by holding individuals back from engaging with others, and placing self restrictions on such behaviors as eating and how they physically present themselves. These values and beliefs deviate from those of society in general.

*Overweight and the Social Self.* An extremely important component to identifying a functioning subculture is examining participation within the studied population. Explored within this section are the participants described social interactions and conception of themselves as social beings looking specifically at their social groups, as well as traits, values and overweight membership within them. Participants stated that weight was not something that they particularly used as criteria for selecting their social relationships. "I have probably as many friends who are overweight as I have friends that are not, if I start counting and I may find that I have more..." explained Kelly. Generally participants indicated that their social groups were small and consisted of individuals who were "understanding" and "kind." Donna claimed that her friends "love me for who I am." Social groups tended upon description (n=10) to be comprised equally of overweight individuals and non-overweight individuals. However, many of them (n=5) did indicate that there was a special preference for overweight individuals. As Amy explained:

I'd rather interact with individuals who are overweight... we have that in common so it's not something as hanging out with normal individuals feeling like I'm

being judged. I feel I'm being looked at from someone in a status above me, and when I'm with other overweight individuals we're all in that category. We're all on the same level.

Three of the participants indicated that while they had equal number of friends from each group that their best friends were overweight. Debbie chuckled as she stated "My best friend is overweight... I have lots of friends that aren't overweight. I have some friends who are tiny and we have just as much fun, but would I go clothes shopping with them, probably not."

While weight was not a determining factor in selection of social relationships for this study's participants, they did indicate that there was a difference in relationships with overweight individuals verses non-overweight individuals. Most often it was described as a sense of "camaraderie" with the other overweight individual. "I can sympathize with them. I have more of a camaraderie with them you might say. I don't feel as threatened by them" explained Nancy. Amy stated that she was,

Friends with several overweight individuals... With friends of mine that are overweight it's almost a bond; it's something we have in common. It's something depending on the relationship that can be discussed. I've had discussions with people who are overweight about the way they are viewed in public, about trying to find some way to be accepted into the non-overweight [community].

Overall individuals expressed a sense of "comfort" with other overweight individuals knowing that they can discuss topics such as diets, food, eating, clothing and societal views without judgment. Debbie described it as being just "more comfortable in [her] own skin because they're overweight too." Similarly Hope described it as a,

Comfort level... that you can say to each other 'I just ate a whole bag of cookies' and instead of getting 'you shouldn't have done that, you probably shouldn't have done that' you get laughter. You know what you're doing is wrong but there's this camaraderie.

Nancy explained “You can sit and talk with them because you know how they deal with things. They’re on the same page as you.” Kelly described that when sitting down with her overweight friends “Sometimes we’ll talk about things that we’ve done that have helped us to lose some of the weight, ways that are healthier eating and different things like that. We tend to talk about those things more with people that are under the same situation as you.” So while overweight individuals may not specifically seek each other out for social relationships, there is a notable difference for overweight individuals when interacting with someone within their own group. Additionally, there appears to be specific traits to social groups and particular expectations about relationship interactions and boundaries as related to their identities as overweight individuals.

*Relating to a Thin Ideal.* As the defining factor of this population is their weight and this represents the variable which sets them apart from the dominant culture it was vital to examine their perceptions of body image and how it relates to the thin ideal held within today’s society. 100% of this study’s participants (n=12) presented as struggling with their body images. All participants indicated wanting to currently lose weight. Three participants are current members of Weight Watchers and one member is on the Medifast Diet plan. All participants at one time or another participated in some type of weight related group be it weight management programs like Weight Watchers or social support groups like Overeater’s Anonymous, or Take Off Pounds Sensibility (TOPS).

Participants named either one or both of the following reasons for their desire to lose weight: first being their health (n=9) and second being the desire to be accepted within society (n=7). Brad stated that he wants to be “healthy not necessarily skinny.” He said “When I became aware of certain social standings and when I’m with people who are

extremely skinny and emaciated then I'm uncomfortable and then I try to compare myself to them." Amy explained "I feel like I should be thinner; that I would look better if I were thinner, that I would, you know, have more fun, be more popular and be more successful if I was thinner." Lily described seeing other overweight women,

That are very okay with it. They are very comfortable with themselves; they're accepting of it. I don't think I was ever like that. It was always that in my family I was given the message that I was to be ashamed of the fact that I was overweight.

Beth expressed her struggles with weight loss and how that has changed her view on her weight. She said:

I go on a diet, lose it and gain it back again so I guess it's just a part of me. I don't think much about it. I think about it more from a health point of view then a social one.

Hope described meeting a previous acquaintance on a recent trip to the grocery store and the feelings that this evoked:

I ran into someone at the grocery store yesterday that I haven't seen in five years and I've obviously gained like 45 pounds. I was so embarrassed I pretended I didn't see her in the deli line. Then all of a sudden she looked up at me and we caught eyes and you can't pretend. You see her face and you have to say hi. It's embarrassing, I felt embarrassed and disgusted with myself.

Sharon expressed her approach on life to be:

My approach towards everything in life has been to always be sexy no matter what and you don't feel quite as sexy when you're overweight. Because, I mean, I feel just as sexy, but new people don't look at me as being sexy... I know I get frustrated because my clothes don't fit anymore and I refuse to buy clothes for a larger size. I've been doing this for years. 'I'm never gonna buy clothes if I weigh that much' because I'm not going to weigh this much for long, but then I don't lose the weight and I don't have the clothes. I'm squeezing myself into uncomfortable clothes. It's a vicious cycle.

Lily when talking about her body image and its effects on her marriage stated,

It's important to me. It's hard to know that you have a partner that is so accepting of you just the way you are. There's that and you can't let yourself be comfortable

with that. Let that be it. I can't let that in as much because of the way I perceive myself.

The range of reactions to their bodies appeared fluid and subject to change moving from new found acceptance to disgust. Even when there is a level of acceptance that their body is overweight and that is the way it is, participants still sought to change that. Be it for health or social reasons all of the overweight participants expressed a desire not to be overweight.

*Internal vs. External Self Image.* Lastly culture can create an understanding of self for its participants both on external and internal levels. Cultural identities be them made up of a dominant culture or various subcultures helps us develop a conception of ourselves, the meaning of who we are as an individual and who we are in relation to the world around us. What was found during a review of the interviews is that the overweight individuals who participated in the study presented with a conflict between their internal and external self images. Each participant (n=12) made it a point to describe themselves personally as a positive person in some way or another. There appears to be a distinct separation between the participants' internal self image as "positive" people and their view of their external self. Beth first described herself as someone who "always tries to see the brighter side." She next expressed an inner conflict between her external and internal self images stating "I think I'm a good person, but I'm not raving beauty. I think if people looked for the inner person then they would find that I had a lot to offer." The internal conflict continues as she described herself as feeling "like a very weak person, but I'm very strong in other areas of my life." She related this feeling to her weight stating that she feels "guilty when I do bible study readings that talk about gluttony

because I don't see myself as a glutton... but when I hear that I feel kind of guilty."

Ultimately Beth's internal self image of a "good person" is in sharp contrast with her external self image which is presented to be undesirable, "weak" and a "glutton."

Nancy said "I'm a good person" and "I have a pretty decent personality."

However, due to her weight she described herself as negating others' comments when they say something like "Oh you're so good. You work so hard." She described being very self conscious stating that she tries when going to work to "dress so nicely, so I'm clean. I always feel like I always need to be clean and then dress nicely. Then there are some days when I go that I don't like what I have on and I think it has to do with the weight." Despite indicating that she herself is a "good person" Nancy stated that due to weight she feels she needs to be told that she is a "good person" more often relating this to her size conscious, self judging external image of herself.

Sharon stated that she still has a "pretty good view of [herself]." However, her description expresses a level of ambivalence indicative of the internal conflict.

If you're up and you're positive and have a good self image people will like you and I really think that. I'm pretty happy. I might be depressed, but I'm happy. I feel pretty good about myself. I'm overweight; it's just an annoyance and something I'll get over someday... I guess I'm getting bigger and bigger. I find that annoying that there's just not enough room to be comfortable... It is impacting me physically and my health that I don't like about it, but somebody else's image of me is their problem. If they don't see me besides all that, then I think it's their problem.

In this she described a strong positive internal image of self that is contradicted by depression and annoyance at her external self image.

Kelly stated 'I'm a very positive kind of person.' When referring to the difference between her internal and external self images Kelly said,



I don't accept it as who I am. It's just one of those things I have, that I deal with... I guess it would probably be a conscious decision I made to not let other people define me... I've always been comfortable with the fact that I'm a very intelligent person that I can do a lot of things so I'm a relatively competent person... Therefore my view of myself is good enough that I don't require other people to constantly tell me how good I am.

Yet even with this strong internal image Kelly shared "It's not as fun looking in a mirror, I don't like the way I look often enough, but I work with what I've got." She also explained:

Where I am today in terms of tolerance, acceptance, and feelings of self-worth are not necessarily where I was previously. I know at different times I've struggled a lot worse, but at this particular point and time like I said I don't allow it to define who I am. I don't think of myself as just overweight. It's not an issue that I allow to define my life.

Debbie stated that "I'm a very positive person and I have good outlook on life besides being not comfortable in my own body"... "If you don't like the way I am then turn around and walk the other way because I'm happy. I wish I was a size 12. I really wish I was a size 2, but I'm not." Yet another example of a positive internal self image contrasted with a size conscious external image.

Lily stated that she,

Let go of the wanting to look beautiful and lean a longtime ago, but I wanted that for a long time now. It's not that so much as being healthy and feeling good in my own body, so there's this desire for that. I can be hard on myself and so when I'm not succeeding in not trying to attain that goal, I can be compassionate about it for myself... It affected my self esteem and my confidence and comfort in dealing with the people. I think I overcame a lot of that and I became more comfortable with who I was even if I didn't like necessarily being overweight. There isn't a lot of shame behind it for me anymore. There was no shame about it and so I think as I became more comfortable with that I began not using it as a measure of my self worth.

In this Lily presented herself as intentionally working on the conflict between her internal and external self images identifying past feelings of “shame” and working towards a more congruent sense of self.

In contrast Amy said that her weight has “affected the way I feel, the way that I look, the way that I dress... I view my physical self differently than my vision of my self in my mind.” Matt described past “insecurities; you’re not being comfortable. Society is not accepting; you basically hold back who you are. When you really get used to who you are or become comfortable with yourself it doesn’t matter. I’m in the process of losing weight just because I need to for my health, you know, that’s all.” Each participant over time appeared to have built an internal self image based on personality, intelligence and character which is different from their physical image which is open to criticism and judgment based on the prejudice of general society. Additionally it appears that those who have identified as overweight for longer periods of time, such as Kelly, Lily and Matt, have stronger internal self images that are able to withstand conflict with their own external self.

### *Summary*

The six major themes which comprise the study’s findings: acknowledging social views on weight; recognizing discrimination; social attractiveness; overweight and the social self; relating to a thin ideal; and, internal vs. external self image represent the related content from each interview. Subculture can be examined for within the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and experiences expressed within all six of these subsections. Discussion of overweight oppression is directly addressed in the first two: acknowledging

social views on weight and recognizing discrimination, although it is also present on an implicit level within the other subsections of the findings. The following chapter presents a critical analysis of these findings and examination of the research questions referencing both issues of subculture and oppression.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### *Review of the Findings*

The findings suggest that overweight individuals do in fact have many of the same beliefs as others who are overweight. They hold similar experiences, recognize discrimination and prejudice within this group, and present with similar behaviors based on their identity as overweight. The findings also suggest that overweight individuals hold internalized societal views about themselves. The categories presented in the findings chapter reflect the complexity in the experiences and lives of overweight individuals encompassing both micro and macro observations. Perhaps the most significant finding within the participant narratives was that despite feelings of deeper understanding and “camaraderie” with other overweight individuals, the participants did not choose to consciously seek out members within their own group. Also noteworthy was the fact that despite recognition of discrimination and prejudice towards the overweight population, this study’s participants did not report feeling oppressed.

*Analysis for Potential Subculture.* This subsection seeks to examine the conclusions to the first research question: *Do overweight individuals experience a subculture?* Research conclusions are based on the concept of culture and the traditional definition of subculture being a set of values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and traditions that form an organized pattern or set of symbolic meanings under which members of a group govern and identify themselves, as well as differentiates them from a larger

dominant culture (Longres, 1995; Schriver, 1995; Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998; Barker, 2004; Culture, 1991; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). What was discovered during an analysis of the findings was that overweight individuals as a population hold the potential to be considered a subculture. They hold values which support social acceptance for their population and sympathy toward other oppressed groups. Although they struggle around issues of social attractiveness and external self image related to weight and dominant culture's weight bias, the participant's were noted to largely value seeking positive internal images and a comfort within their individual senses of self. They commonly hold beliefs about society's conception of weight and recognized discrimination and biases on both a theoretical level and personal level as it is evident in their life experiences. A behavioral norm amongst this group related to hesitancy to engage in certain social interactions. Other behavioral norms included expectation of social reaction to their weight, and internal preparation to respond against discrimination and prejudice. Behaviorally the participants described careful social eating habits, conscious decisions made around personal hygiene and fashion, and careful selection of social relationships. These represent just the obvious connections of similar experience and understanding held by the 12 participants of this study again pointing toward the potential for an overweight subculture.

So is there an overweight subculture? The conclusion of this study is that presently there is not an identifiable subculture. The rationale being that although these 12 participants presented numerous examples of similar values, beliefs, behavioral norms, etc., there was not a notable participation or seeking out of others within this population. Similar experiences on an individual level do not make a subculture, but

rather points to the potential of one. Without consciously seeking out other members of the overweight population they are not coming together as a group to share their common experiences. This leaves them as individuals with similar life experiences rather than a group with truly shared experience. The study's participant's noted a sense of "camaraderie" with other overweight individuals, but noted that this did not influence selection of social relationships. The participant's indicated that there was no preference for relationships with in-group members and that there was no significant presence of other overweight individuals within their social groups. Given that this was a study of limited sample size the conclusion is not empirically valid. This conclusion may be refuted if studied on a larger scale. The potential subculture noted here may in fact already presently exist despite the results of this study.

*Examination of Oppression's Role.* The second research question *How do overweight individuals' experiences of oppression relate to whether they have a subculture or not?* was made to examine the role oppression of overweight individuals played in the existence of an overweight subculture. The conclusions to this question largely consist of further hypothesizing. What is seen in the findings is that this population recognizes itself to be the recipient of discrimination and prejudice. It is evident through the descriptions in the findings that the oppression of overweight individuals which is discussed in the literature review (Agell & Rothblum, 1991; Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crossrow, et al, 2001; Critser, 2003; Crocker, et al, 1993; Klaczynski, et al, 2004; Lebesco, 2004; Oliver, 2006; Roggee, et al, 2004; Schwartz, 1989; Streamns, 1997; Stunkard & Sorensen, 1993; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Teachman, et al, 2003; Tiggermann & Anesbury, 2000; Wang, et al, 2004) is additionally present in the lives of

the study's participants. Yet when provided with a layman's definition of oppression cited from Webster's Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2005) 100% (n=12) of the participants denied experiencing it.

This researcher's hypothesis is that the denial of experiencing oppression may be related to the internalization of society's weight biased messages. As was stated in the literature many overweight individuals internalize their oppression believing that it is a fact of life they have to accept (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Croker, et al, 1993; Wang, et al, 2004). This is a social construct propagated by modern culture through such concepts as the controllability myth and other false beliefs related to weight issues (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Rogge, et al, 2004; Triggerman & Anesbury, 2000). Overweight individuals are socialized to believe that they have invited their discrimination and prejudice. This internalization has been shown to create a sense of self hatred or inner conflict, as well as encourage bias against other overweight individuals. Thus the internalization of oppression may be a factor in the lack of in-group participation within the overweight population. Internalized oppression may then have a direct role in the lack of social connection amongst the overweight population and influence direct effects regarding the identification of an overweight subculture.

#### *Methodological Strengths and Limitations*

The most obvious methodical limitation of this study is that small sample size limits the applicability of this study's conclusion. Due to this limited applicability the broader thesis questions are harder to address with direct conclusions. Rather than offering conclusions that are empirical and universally valid, this study presents a small

examination of the potential for such conclusions when examined in a larger context. Due to time and resource limitations a larger and more empirically sound study was not an option although that would be preferable to the purpose of answering the research questions.

Both an observed limitation and strength to this study is the author's identification as member of the study's population. As an individual who identifies as overweight and at times oppressed, this researcher is able to highly identify with the study's participants. Likewise this identification posed as a strength to the study as it appeared many participants felt supported and at ease during interviews. The researcher's overweight identity seemed to encourage more genuine responses to questions from participants. This conclusion is based off of their non-verbal communication with this researcher during the interviews as well as participants' (n=12) directly indicating that this researcher could comprehend their experiences due to her identity. Furthermore there is also a possibility that the sensitive discussion of these interviews was received more openly and experienced as less oppressive during the interview due to the researcher's identity. However, with that all said it is also important to recognize that her shared identity with the studied population lends a certain bias. This bias was a conscious presence throughout the process for this researcher. The researcher made her best attempt to separate her research from her personal bias during the design and commencement of this study. While this may have an affect on the conclusions drawn, it is debatable whether this weakens or contributes to the findings.

*Implications for Professional Practice*



The conclusions of this study point to both theoretical and practice implications towards overweight individuals. In terms of the social sciences and human service professions, knowledge about and understanding of culture is important to determine competence and awareness of other's experiences. Specifically in relation to the Social Work profession the NASW (1996) Code of Ethics indicates that social workers should maintain cultural competence which includes an understanding and sensitivity to clients' cultures and differences among people. Despite weight not being specifically cited within the profession's Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2001) this still implies a professional responsibility including awareness and sensitivity towards other cultures. Although the conclusion of this study did not result in identifying an overweight subculture, the analysis of the findings notes that there exists the potential for such a subculture and that absence of such a subculture is largely due to lack of open participation. The suggestion of a potential overweight subculture implies that social work and other social science practitioners hold a professional responsibility to be aware of the experiences of overweight individuals as is expressed in both the literature review and findings of this study.

Further understanding of the experiences of overweight individuals may shape and alter clinical analysis of clients, change diagnostic assessments, direct appropriate and sensitive client interventions, inform clinical bias and countertransference issues, and ultimately has the potential to prevent pathologizing weight exclusively as an illness or disease. It is important for clinicians to understand that while medical concerns are a reality for overweight individuals; weight identity is both separate and impacted by medical issues. Therefore it is essential to note that while they are defined by the same

physical traits they are not one and the same thing. Identifying the difference between weight identity and medical concerns may feel less stigmatizing to overweight clients.

Other implications could lean towards the eventual paradigm shift in how weight is viewed. Presently overweight individuals are viewed within an illness model focused on medical diagnosis and physician based interventions. When and if an overweight subculture is able to be identified there are implications that this illness or medical model could then shift to that of a minority model. Within the paradigm of the minority model minority groups are seen as components of human diversity. Should it be determined that there is such a subculture the negative aspects of weight such as stigmatization would hopefully be removed and shift to a more inclusive framework of diversity and acceptance. Such a shift to diversity and acceptance offers numerous potential advantages for this population to develop protective factors for its members to combat existing oppression.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

Due to the small sample size of this study and its lack of strong empirical validity the first implication for further research is an expanded study of similar design which incorporates a much larger sample size and increased diversity. Also, as was noted to be a strength of this study's methodology, the researcher's shared identity with the research population leads to other research implications. The noted positive response to the researcher related to her in-group status indicates that studies similar to this existing research could be completed while additionally testing the variable of the interviewer's in-group status. There very well may be a strong difference between what an overweight

individual will express about their life experiences depending on the interviewer's identity, more specifically, in-group status. The affect of this variable would additionally have implications towards the existence of an overweight subculture. Singularly, research based on the in-group implicit and explicit biases and nature of the overweight population deserves further exploration. Other research implications point toward an increased need to explore the internalization of oppression by the overweight population, protective factors for this population in relation to its oppression, as well as, research needed on the de-construction of biased cultural views on weight.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Informed Consent

Dear potential Research Participant:

This study is being conducted by Heather MacDonald for a written thesis in partial completion of a Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work. This study may also be used for future presentation and publication on this topic. I am conducting a study on the experience of "overweight" individuals. I hope to answer whether or not overweight individuals' experience a subculture and I am interested in understanding how overweight individuals' possible experiences of oppression may relate to whether a subculture exists. A subculture is defined as a group of people with a distinct set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and traditions that set them apart from the larger culture which they are a part of. Research indicates that some overweight individual's have had negative experiences by being targeted by other people in society. Beyond exploring whether overweight individuals experience a subculture this study seeks to explore potential overlapping associations between the possible subculture and oppressions experienced by overweight individuals. Your perspective and life experiences as an "overweight" individual are important and valuable to the further development of research in the field of Clinical Social Work.

You are being asked to participate as an individual who identifies as being above average weight. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sit for an interview with me, which will take approximately one hour of your time. Additionally, I will be asking each participant for self identified weight and height that will be used to calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI) so as to measurably classify each participant as "overweight."

The interview will be tape recorded. Privacy will be protected by assigning a code to each participant's tape, demographic information form and by removing all names and locations from the transcripts. Information will be reported in scientific papers and publications in the aggregate only, with some illustrations and brief quotations that will not be linked with identifying data about you or any participant. Tapes and transcripts will be kept in confidence by the researcher for three years, consistent with Federal



regulations. Thereafter they will be destroyed. Subjects will only be from the northern Connecticut region.

It is my hope that this study will help mental health care providers as well as other professionals to better understand and view the “overweight” population. There will not be financial benefits to participating in this study. However, it will allow you to talk about your experience in your own words. In addition, I hope that participation in this study has a positive impact on individuals who are struggling with issues pertaining to their weight.

There are some possible risks of participating in this study. The interview may bring up some painful feelings and memories. Therefore, I will provide referrals for individual counseling.

You can withdraw from this study at any time, including before or during the interview. Should you withdraw all materials pertaining to you will be destroyed. However, the final date of withdrawal is May 15, 2007 when the report will be written. You can also refuse to answer certain questions during the interview. No monetary compensation will be provided for your participation.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information; that you have had an opportunity to ask questions about the study, your participation, and your rights and that you agree to participate in the study.

---

Signature of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact Heather MacDonald, 36 North St. Enfield CT 06082, (860) 874-1656, [hmacdona@email.smith.edu](mailto:hmacdona@email.smith.edu).

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS

**Participant Identification Code**

(To be filled in by researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

Thank you, for your agreed participation in this research study. Prior to your scheduled interview please review the letter of informed consent and this form of demographic information. Both forms will be reviewed immediately before the interview. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact: Heather MacDonald, 36 North St. Enfield CT 06082, (860) 874-1656, [hmacdona@email.smith.edu](mailto:hmacdona@email.smith.edu).

## Demographic Information

**Date of Birth:**

**Gender:** (please circle one)            **Male**            **Female**

**Self Identified - Cultural Groups:** (please list any cultural identities or groups you participate in ie: religious affiliation, civic organization, ethnic/racial identity, gender/sexual orientation, disability, interests, profession)

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**Self Identified – Weight & Height: \***    Weight \_\_\_\_\_lbs.    Height \_\_\_ ft. \_\_\_\_in.

**\*NOTE:** Your self identified weight and height will be used to calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI). This eliminates the need to actively measure each person’s weight and height. Please estimate these figures as close to your actual measurements.

**Participant Identification Code**

(To be filled in by researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C  
**Counseling Referrals:**

**Community Health Resources**

24-hour Central Access and Crisis Triage Center

Local: (860) 683-8068      Toll-Free: (877) 884-3571

995 Day Hill Road  
Windsor, CT 06095  
Phone: (860) 731-5522

**Genesis Center**

587 East Middle Turnpike  
Manchester, CT 06040  
Phone: (860) 646-3888

**North Central Counseling Services**

47 Palomba Drive  
Enfield, CT 06082  
Phone: (860) 253-5020  
Fax: (860) 253-5030

**United Services Inc.**

**Adult Mental Health Outpatient Services**

1007 North Main Street  
PO Box 839  
Dayville, CT 06241  
Telephone: 860.774.2020

132 Mansfield Avenue  
Willimantic, CT 06226  
Telephone: 860.456.2261

**Maine & Weinstein Specialty Group, LLC**

**Margo D. Maine, Ph.D.**

**Robert J. Weinstein, Ph.D., M.B.A.**

970 Farmington Avenue, Suite 301  
West Hartford, CT 06107  
Phone: (860) 313-4431

**The Institute of Living**

200 Retreat Avenue  
Hartford, CT 06106

**Outpatient Services Assessment Center**

(860) 545-7200  
(800) 673-2411

Appendix D

**Participant Interest Advertising Flyer:**

**Seeking to draw awareness to  
the experiences of**  
**Overweight Individuals**

**Interview Participants needed for  
Research Study**

For further information contact:  
Heather MacDonald  
(860) 874-1656 or [hmacdona@email.smith.edu](mailto:hmacdona@email.smith.edu)

## Appendix E

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions:**

- How did you come to identify yourself as an overweight individual?
  - First time you were conscious of this identity?
  - How long have you identified as such?
  
- How has identifying as/ being overweight impact your life?
  - Belief system
  - Thoughts / Self-talk
  - Employment
  - Activities of daily living (grocery shopping, clothes shopping, etc.)
  - Social interactions
  - Personal relationships
  - Access to resources
  - Environmental accessibility (chairs/seats, seatbelts, doorways etc.)
  - Behaviors
  
- How has being overweight affected your view of yourself?
  - How has being overweight affected your self esteem or feelings about yourself?
  - How has being as overweight affected your self judgment or criticism of yourself?
  - How has being as overweight changed self concept or beliefs about yourself?
  
- How would you describe societal views of people who are overweight?
  - How has this affected your self perception and behaviors?
  
- Why do you believe you are overweight?
  
- Do other people believe that you are overweight?
  - How do you know that they believe this?
  - Why do the people in your life think you are overweight?
  
- What relationships, if any, do you have with other overweight individuals?
  - Do you feel you have a shared identity with them?
    - How does your shared identity affect the relationship?
    - Do you recognize shared behaviors, thoughts, beliefs, or experiences?
  
- How does it feel interacting with overweight individuals verses others (non-overweight individuals)?

- How has your weight been viewed with your family, circle of friends, extended family, community, etc.?
  - Are any of them overweight?
  - How does your / their weight affect the relationship?
  
- Have you experienced oppression as an “overweight” individual?  
 [Oppression in a social context can be defined as the negative outcome experienced by people targeted by an “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power” (Merriam-Webster, 2005) in a society or social group]
  - If so how has this affected you?
  
- How do you feel towards other overweight individuals?
  - Do these feelings effect how you interact with others who are overweight?
  - Does this effect your beliefs of how others perceive you?
  
- What do you believe non-overweight people attitudes to be towards the overweight people in general?
  
- How do you perceive non-overweight individuals’ attitudes towards you personally?

Appendix F

**HSR Approval Letter:**



Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950  
F (413) 585-7994

March 11, 2007

Heather MacDonald  
36 North Street  
Enfield, CT 06082

Dear Heather,

Your Consent revision is fine and all is now in order. We are, therefore, able to give final approval to your interesting study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Ann Hartman'.

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Nora Padykula, Research Advisor