

2007

An exploration of the relationship between personal ideal(s) of female beauty, self perception(s) of female beauty, and self esteem in women

Megan S. Lynch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lynch, Megan S., "An exploration of the relationship between personal ideal(s) of female beauty, self perception(s) of female beauty, and self esteem in women" (2007). *Theses, Dissertations, and Projects*. 1343.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1343>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Megan S. Lynch  
An Exploration of the Relationship  
Between Personal Ideal(s) of  
Female Beauty,  
Self Perception(s) of Female Beauty,  
And Self Esteem in Women

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the relationship between personal ideals of female beauty, the self perceptions of female beauty, and self esteem in adult women. Most studies that have been conducted on this topic have been quantitative and used college age samples that are still in the process of transitioning into adulthood.

The sample for this study consisted of twelve adult women between the ages of 24 and 39. Participants were asked a series of structured demographic background questions followed by more semi-structured and open-ended questions that explored their ideals of female beauty. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (a standardized self-esteem inventory) was also administered.

Major findings were that all participants made a distinction between and placed higher value on internal characteristics of ideal female beauty as opposed to physical characteristics of female beauty. Furthermore, participants' ideals of internal characteristics of female beauty were more flexible and mediated by whether the personification of their ideal of female beauty was personally known (e.g. mothers, friends, and colleagues) or not (e.g. celebrities).

AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONAL IDEAL(S)  
OF FEMALE BEAUTY, SELF PERCEPTION(S) OF FEMALE BEAUTY, AND SELF  
ESTEEM IN WOMEN

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

Megan S. Lynch

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2007

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been completed without the support, assistance, and guidance of many individuals!

I would like to thank my parents who constantly encouraged and supported me through this process and in developing my own ideals of female beauty.

I would also like to thank Dr. Joanne Corbin for her guidance in developing my research question; Dr. Mary F. Hall for helping through this intensive process.

Thank you to the insightful participants whom this study would not have been possible without; and to my friends and family who have provided endless love, care, and support throughout this thesis project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	4
II LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
III METHODOLOGY .....	32
IV FINDINGS.....	36
V DISCUSSION.....	62
REFERENCES .....	66
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter .....	71
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer .....	72
Appendix C: Informed Consent.....	73
Appendix D: Referral List .....	75
Appendix E: Interview Guide .....	76

## LIST OF TABLES

### Table

1.	Table 1: Participant Demographics: Age, Ethnicity, and Marital Status .....	37
2.	Table 2: Participants' Education, Occupation, and Income.....	38
3.	Table 3: Internal Characteristics of Beauty .....	41
4.	Table 4: External Characteristics of Beauty .....	43
5.	Table 5: Participants' Examples of Ideals of Female Beauty .....	44
6.	Table 6: Internal Characteristics Generated by Known Examples of Ideals of Female Beauty .....	48
7.	Table 7: Factors Influencing Participants' Ideals of Female Beauty .....	50
8.	Table 8: Participant Responses to Statement, "I am a beautiful woman!" ....	56
9.	Table 9: Participants' Responses on: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.....	59



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

While a substantive literature has emerged in recent years exploring the relationship between cultural standards of beauty, body image and self esteem in women, most of this literature has been quantitative and conducted on samples of college age students because of their greater availability and willingness to participate in research (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999). As a result, we know relatively little about the subjective experience of women in this domain and in their own voice; e.g., the relationship between cultural ideals of female beauty and what women internalize as their personal ideals of female beauty; and, in turn, the relationship between women's self-perception of their own female beauty and the ideal(s) they have internalized, etc. Thus, this qualitative study is exploratory and designed to make its contribution to filling this gap.

There is widespread consensus in the literature that self-image is an image of the self that a person creates, and that this self-image may or may not concur with the assessment of others (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Festinger, 1954; Spurgas, 2005). In general, self-esteem refers to how positively or negatively a person feels about the subjective image of themselves they have constructed (DeBord, 1997). There is consensus that a person's self-image is not just one image, but comprised of many images that are a reflection of the many different parts of the self that form the whole, e.g., parent, child, worker, student, sibling, friend, man, woman, etc (Choate, 2005; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Saucier, 2004). However of all the parts of the self that form the whole, how a woman feels about her physical appearance is generally accepted as the best predictor of self-esteem in women (DeBord, 1997; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Sinclair, 2006). This relationship is considered to be positive, i.e., the better a woman feel's about her

physical appearance, the greater her sense of self esteem. In contrast, for example, a number of health problems have been traced to poor self-image and low self-esteem including eating disorders, substance abuse, depression and suicide (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Monro & Huon, 2005; Thompson & Dolce, 1989).

There is also consensus that self-image and self-esteem are continuously evolving and being renegotiated throughout a woman's lifecycle development and associated lifecycle challenges (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Spurgas, 2005). It is possible for an individual to feel good about their performance in some areas of their lives and not so good in others; and to value differentially their accomplishments and successes across roles. Thus a woman's self-perception/self-image and her sense of self-esteem have an impact on all areas of her life (Webster and Tiggemann, 2003; Weiner, 2006).

Most of the research on self image and self esteem has been quantitative and directed towards identifying predetermined variables that influence a woman's subjective experience of herself. There are two basic trends in this literature, those that deal with broad sociological processes and those that deal with specific sociocultural variables. For example, the media has been identified as a significant cultural institution contributing to female beauty ideals in the culture-at-large (Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004; Posavac & Posavac, 2002; Saucier, 2004; Tiggemann, 2005). Similarly, there is literature to suggest that race and ethnicity along with the accompanying processes of assimilation and acculturation are significant sociocultural variables. Assimilation refers to the attempt to blend into the dominant culture as much as possible, distancing oneself from one's ethnic group; while acculturation (or bicultural identity) incorporates both the home culture and the dominant culture (Tatum, 1997). As Langlois and Roggman (1990) observe, standards of beauty are culturally specific and a universal definition is nearly impossible.

Variables that have been widely studied and considered influential in the quantitative literature have included the significance of standards of beauty in the culture-at-large (Anderson-Fye, 2004; Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000; Tatum, 1997) on a woman's self perception of her own female beauty; as well the standards of beauty held by a woman's family (Harris, 1995; Ogden & Elder, 1998; Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006) and peers (Noles, Cash & Winstead, 1985; Tatum, 1997; Tiggemann, 2005; Weiner, 2006). Specifically, the media projects a standard for how women should be and the associated benefits of these ideal standards. How a woman compares herself with these idealized media images can have both positive and negative consequences for a woman's self perception of her own female beauty (Jones & Buckingham, 2005; Monro & Huon, 2005; Pompper & Koenig, 2004) and self esteem.

As indicated, the majority of the literature on this topic is quantitative and conducted on samples of women that were college age (Smith, et al., 1999). An inherent limitation to quantitative studies is the requirement that the variables studied exist independent of the life experiences of participants in the study. As a result, we learn little of how women story their experience and make meaning of the standards of beauty they have internalized. Similarly, a limitation of samples of college age students is that they are, for the most part, in the process of transitioning to adulthood. Thus, at least theoretically, their ideals might be more in flux and we learn less about adult women when, again theoretically, their ideals of beauty might be less in flux and more stabilized. Particularly apropos to this study is the relevance of social comparison theory (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Festinger, 1954; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) because it emphasizes the basic human drive for self evaluation and the comparing of oneself to others (Engeln-Maddox, 2005).

The qualitative study reported here was designed to make a contribution to filling this gap by capturing the voice of women that, chronologically, at least in theory, should have completed the transition to adulthood. How do such adult women story the contributing factors that have

resulted in their personal standards of beauty? What connections do they make between their personal standards of beauty and how this makes them feel about themselves?

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Socializing Influence of Cultural Institutions

As human beings we are social beings (Davies, 2004). With this in mind, we are socialized to learn expectations of the culture in which we develop. The socialization of gender is a significant process during development. This often starts even before a baby is born and continues on through the developmental stages of life. Socialization involves almost every aspect of experience, including toys, clothes, media images, and, of course, parental expectations and behaviors (Freedman, 1986). As children reach school age, school and peers become socializing influences as well. Expectations and ideals continue to be conveyed through cultural perceptions, family traditions, and peer comparisons (Dittmar, 2005). How a person is socialized is pivotal in the process of developing one's identity, sense of self worth, and self esteem (Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004; Lewis & Chachelin, 2001; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003).

Once parents learn the gender of their child, a series of projected gender stereotypes ensue (Davies, 2004; Kohler Flynn, 2003). All parents generally have expectations of what a girl or boy will be like. These expectations may be consistent with or counter the culture-at-large. Many of these stereotypical expectations are emphasized as the child begins school where other adults and peers continue to ascribe to gender norms (Davies, 2004). As the child continues to grow into adolescents, other cultural institutions, namely media, project and reinforce ideal images of the culture-at-large (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Kohler Flynn, 2003). These developmental processes all contribute to the formation of the child's identity. While there are many cultural institutions, those particularly related to female beauty ideals in childhood are the

family, school, and peers (Davies, 2004) and the media in adulthood (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Saucier, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

### *Family*

Families are the first cultural institution in a child's life as they introduce the standards and values they ascribe to and of the culture-at-large. Girls ingest familial beliefs, thoughts, and opinions about the world and their place in it until they are old enough to form their own (Weiner, 2006). Thus, the family is described as the most influential group in the development of self-image (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000). Family values and parents appear to be almost as significant an influential source as media for body image ideals (Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Spurgas, 2005).

Mothers, particularly, are expected to bridge the dichotomy of culture and family. Their role is to socialize their daughter to societal norms in an attempt to guarantee happiness in adulthood (Freedman, 1986). Most research indicates that the mother-daughter experience is another significant influential factor in regards to the internalization of female beauty ideals (Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Rieves & Cash, 1996; Spurgas, 2005). Mothers encourage the beauty rituals, model the fashions, and provide the motivation and means to turn their girls into marriage material (Freedman, 1986, p. 66).

### *Peers*

As a child grows older and enters school, peers and other adult role models assume more important roles. Children experience separation from their parents and depend on other adults and peers for a sense of security during this transition (Davies, 2004). Children learn through observing older peers and identifying with same-sex peers, older adults, and media celebrities. A child's social reputation becomes dependent on their status in a group and, therefore, peers' opinions becoming increasingly more significant (Davies, 2004). These social interactions and expectations have significant effects on the child's development of identity. During adolescence, children become more self-conscious about their appearance and more concerned about what

their peers think as they increasingly disengage from parental authority as part of the individuation process of adolescence (Tatum, 1997). Developing a personal identity becomes increasingly more important during adolescence while a girl begins to negotiate her personal dimensions of life including gender roles, ethnic identities, values and preferences, etc. (Tatum, 1997). Through social interactions, people typically begin to participate in social comparison, a characteristic of human social life in which we relate our own features to those of others and vice versa (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001).

### *Media*

Media also contributes to social learning throughout our lives. These images can affect the way we view others and ourselves. Davies (2004) argues that young children are more influenced by media images because their exposure occurs at a time in development when they are actively learning schemas of how the world works (p. 103). Piaget defines schemas as cognitive structures that develop as infants and young children learn to interpret the world and adapt to their environment (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). Schemas also include general conceptual clusters of knowledge, regarding objects, people and situations. These knowledge packages help children decode generalizations about the structure of the environment (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). These developed schemas are assumed to stay with a person as they get older, however, there is little research elaborating on the effects throughout adulthood (Davies, 2004).

### *Beauty Pageants*

Beauty pageants are a premiere example of media as a cultural institution, socializing girls to the beauty ideals that represent feminine beauty schemas. Miss America, the first beauty pageant, was held in 1921 where a sixteen-year-old blonde female was crowned, embodying the national feminine ideal. The Miss America Pageant is America's longest running and most popular beauty pageant. It has become an annual ritual and purports to celebrate beauty as a woman's noblest achievement (Freedman, 1986). Today beauty pageants occur at every stage of

a girl's life, across the developmental life cycle. Miss Hemisphere Pageants are for girls between the ages of three and twenty-seven. These pageants continue to grow in popularity. In 1963 there were a few hundred contestants, while today there are hundreds of thousands of participants (Freedman, 1986).

Within the first five years of their lives girls experience beauty pageants, fairy tales, and/or Barbie dolls; all illustrate a similar societal standard of female beauty ideals. These feminine beauty schemas are then continuously reinforced throughout a woman's life (Davies, 2004; Freedman, 1986). In beauty pageants, women and girls are adorned with makeup, long flowing hair, high heels, and bathing suits as they walk along a stage to be judged by others (Freedman, 1986). These beauty rituals are also emphasized through fairy tales where heroines, such as Cinderella and Snow White, are fair skinned, slender, and young. Similar to the illustration of female beauty ideals by beauty pageants and fairy tales, Barbie is the most popular fashion doll, simply because "she is the prettiest" (Freedman, 1986, p. 122). Barbie's proportions are unrealistic but emulate societal standards of young, blonde hair, blue eyes, small waste, large breasts, and a defined behind. Barbie, like beauty pageant participants, comes adorned with makeup, exotic dresses, high heels, and a partner, Ken (Freedman, 1986).

Beauty pageants and fairy tales also convey feminine stereotypes of behavior. Pageant winners are expected to appropriate the feminine look of success by acting incredulous, tearful, and humbly grateful (Freedman, 1986, p.105). While fairy tales convey ideals that passivity is richly rewarded and beauty transformations buy security and love (Freedman, 1986). Girls are also reinforced to learn that happiness and power do not come through active engagement. Instead, girls are expected to be physically attractive, passive, patient, nurturing, and cooperative, denying their own needs while simultaneously valuing intelligence, assertiveness, self reliance, and separation from their parents (Choate, 2005; Freedman, 1986; Kohler Flynn, 2003; Lovejoy, 2001).

Beauty pageants are common in other cultures as well. Anderson-Fye (2004) studied a community in San Andrés, Belize to discern the impact of Western culture through the representation of media and tourism affects on the body image of Hispanic girls. Similar to Western culture, beauty also has a significant impact on this community, demonstrated by the emphasis on beauty pageants and their ability to provide upward social mobility for some women. However, care, adornment, and shape of the body were found to be more highly valued characteristics than body size and stature among the Belizean women (Anderson-Fye, 2004). Overall, this study contributes to the notion that different cultures value different ideals. Although Western culture and the community in Belize both participate in beauty pageants, they do not project the same cultural standards.

#### *Cultural Standards of Beauty*

A person's conception of self is strongly guided by the culture in which she develops (Poran, 2002). Western cultural ideals influence the US and much of the world, demonstrating a globalization of culture. Perceptions of beauty are socially constructed and embedded in this larger social framework of cultural ideals. Western culture has a narrow ideal of female beauty (Poran, 2002). The dominant, Anglo-Saxon influence seems to establish this ideal of female beauty (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Freedman, 1986). These beauty ideals are constantly changing and often unrealistic; creating a culture of oppression for women whose debasing thoughts, dialogues, and actions attempt to satisfy cultural ideals that nature cannot (Freedman, 1986; Mazur, 1986; Weiner, 2006). The value placed on these cultural ideals allows women to gain social and economic success, but usually at a cost (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Mazur, 1986).

The lure to these ideals is quite sensible because they confer considerable social advantage (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Tiggemann, 2005). These advantages include gaining social acceptance with peers and possible mating preferences (Freedman, 1986; Ogle & Damhorst,

2005). Social conditions often contribute to and reinforce these ideals, i.e. negative discourses towards obesity. By individuals and the culture-at-large better understanding social conditions that contribute to and reinforce these ideals, Peralta (2003) argues that internalization of stigma would not be so widespread and motivation for change would be more possible. Thus, beauty moves from an abstract concept to a reality of social importance (Freedman, 1986).

Substantive literature uses the terminology “standards of beauty” (Jones & Buckingham, 2005; Langlois & Roggman, 1990; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) in relation to these cultural ideals of female beauty and women’s self-perceptions. Langlois and Roggman (1990) believe these standards of beauty are culturally specific and a universal definition is nearly impossible. While the majority of researchers narrow standards of beauty down to specific features such as being thin (Birthcnell, et al., 1987; Evans & McConnel, 2003; Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004; Peralta, 2003) or slender (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000), youthful (Lewis & Cachelin, 2001; Saucier, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004), and more specifically having blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin (Evans & McConnel, 2003). These specific features foster unrealistic expectations of how women should look. Some research indicates that societal standards of beauty as influencing personal ideals of female beauty related to self-esteem and self confidence (Spurgas, 2005). While other research names self esteem as the most significant mediator of personal ideals and not the internalization of societal standards of female beauty (Jones & Buckingham, 2005).

### Women and the Internalization of Female Beauty Ideals

Women are considered an oppressed population (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Freedman, 1986; Saucier, 2004; Tatum, 2003; Weiner, 2006). Female beauty ideals in Western culture add to this oppression by socializing women to embody culturally dictated ideals as opposed to genetically determined ideals (Freedman, 1986). These ideals of female beauty are often internalized by women and affect their personal ideals of female beauty, self perceptions, and self

esteem. Similar to the developmental process of valuing the opinion of peers, social comparison also impacts the development of one's identity. The degree to which a woman ascribes to female beauty ideals, especially through the cultural venues of assimilation and acculturation significantly affects women's identities.

### *Social Comparison Theory and Self Esteem*

Social Comparison theory is thought to be a useful theoretical paradigm constructed to conceptualize the process of how a woman's self esteem and self worth are impacted by their personal comparison to others. Festinger (1954) notes that we typically choose to make upward comparisons when comparing one's self to a slightly better other, or downward comparisons, comparing one's self to a slightly worse other. These upward and downward comparisons either lower or improve self-regard (Lin & Kulik, 2002). The basic assumption is that superior others are the comparison choice we typically orient towards, typically having detrimental effects on our self-esteems (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001).

Social Comparison Theory provides a framework for understanding the social comparison process, providing a cognitive basis that characterizes our psychological functioning in any situation (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). Women and many oppressed populations participate in upward comparisons. By understanding the internalization process and the psychological mechanisms involved in social comparison, we can better understand the impact of upward social comparison and pervasive cultural norms on minorities (Evans & McConnell, 2003). By making upward comparisons and the amount of comparisons, women run the risk of experiencing body shame and dissatisfaction, negative mood, weight anxiety, and low self esteem (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Women who make social comparisons frequently use this mechanism to reduce uncertainty rather than validate their attitudes about themselves (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). It is suggested that there might be coping mechanisms women can implore to minimize detrimental affects of social comparison.

Individual differences in predisposition to make comparisons, the actual process of comparison, a woman's self knowledge and her reactions to the comparison play important roles in women's abilities to cope (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). These findings parallel Frederickson and Roberts (1997) distinction that some women are more likely than others to see the self from the point of view of an outsider, and to regard their body as an object of other people's gaze. Jones and Buckingham (2005) also concluded that many women suffer from lowered body image following comparisons with highly attractive others. Although these results are not surprising in Western culture where thinness is highly valued and rewarded as a standard of beauty, these studies also suggest that this phenomenon is not true for all women.

Engeln-Maddox (2005) notes that this theory emphasizes that when objective means for self-evaluation are not available, comparing one's self to others often occurs in an attempt to fulfill the basic human drive for self-evaluation. Rieves and Cash (1996) also acknowledge this self-evaluative drive but categorize it in relation to psychologically important attributes. Other researchers note that even comparison with one thin peer can negatively affect a woman's body perception and confidence (Lin & Kulik, 2002).

Upward social comparison is significantly associated with greater internalization of the thin ideal and decreased satisfaction with one's own appearance (Engeln-Maddox, 2005, p. 1114). For women, these attributes are often physical characteristics that frequently represent power and prestige in social or occupational situations, e.g. financial position, intellectual capabilities, and physical attractiveness (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). These are standards women compare themselves to, however, this standard lingers beyond the social comparison situations (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). A significant factor contributing to the effects social comparison has on a woman is the group with whom she compares herself and her cognitive functioning.

### *Other Theories of Self Esteem*

Unfortunately, many women determine their sense of self worth based on their physical appearance (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Sinclair, 2006). Women who emphasize all aspects of themselves in determining self worth, creating a sense of inner beauty, are less vulnerable to societal pressures (Choate, 2005; Saucier, 2004). Attributing a woman's importance to weight and shape can be an endless struggle that creates a negative body image, which in turn affects how a woman perceives her self. By regarding appearance as a relatively minor aspect of the self, a woman is encouraged to focus on how she acts towards herself and others because this allows for true development of an intact self (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). This perspective encourages women to require less approval from society's obsession with youthful outer beauty, on a path towards self awareness (Saucier, 2004). This struggle enables women to not settle for a false self but achieve individuality, allowing women to be less vulnerable to external pressures (Saucier, 2004). Many women wear a mask of sorts, a false self, to please society and in this attempt lose a sense of who they are. By compromising one's true self for an unrealistic ideal, many women struggle with accepting themselves and experiencing positive self-esteem. Some women are able to criticize social body ideals, moving the struggle to fit these ideals from a personal challenge to one outside the self (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005).

Freud discusses the importance of the ego functions in helping people negotiate through the world, as part of Ego Psychology (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2002). One of these functions he calls self esteem regulation. This function involves the capacity to maintain a steady and reasonable level of self-regard in the face of distressing or frustrating external events (Berzoff, et al., 2002, p.76). Self esteem regulation occurs when frustrating or painful emotions are balanced with exhilarating emotions. When these emotions are not balanced, there is cause for concern (Berzoff, et al., 2002).

Another way of describing self-esteem regulation might be cognitive control. Although Webster and Tiggemann (2003) did not explicitly define cognitive control, it is suggested that these controls are a way of lowering expectations and cognitive responses by reducing the importance of the body and its appearance to be controlled. Similarly to cognitive control, other researchers believe assertiveness training and cognitive restructuring will help women develop a resistance to external influences regarding self perceptions (Saucier, 2004). Another suggestion is using counterarguments, thoughts indicative of critical processing of media images about beauty (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). These suggestions use cognitions to control women's experiences of their bodies in reaction to the varying cultural messages women receive about female beauty ideals.

Refraining from partaking in comparisons also deems very useful for women. By replacing societal female beauty ideals with more realistic, broader, and inclusive definitions of female attractiveness, women were found to be more accepting of themselves (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Women are also encouraged to develop a resistance to external influences of female beauty ideals and instead view herself as a valued member in society (Saucier, 2004). Some argue that this is difficult, suggesting that women should instead focus on their own attributes that are superior to those portrayed in the media (Engeln-Maddox, 2005).

By using protective means of cognitive control and trying to refrain from social comparisons, women tend to have more positive perceptions of their selves (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Saucier, 2004). This hopefully has a more positive effect on their sense of self, self-esteem and mental health. Teaching women these protective factors is vital in improving women's personal female beauty ideals.

#### *Women and the Internalization Process of Ideals of Female Beauty*

Although women have different cultural experiences and therefore different cultural standards of female beauty ideals, all women have the capacity to adopt flexible and

individualistic definitions of female beauty (Celio, et al., 2002; Choate, 2005). The internal world uses ideas, memories, and experiences in the world to comprise a representation of self and others. Although these representations begin as cognitive constructions, it ultimately takes on a deep emotional resonance (Berzoff, Flanagan & Hertz, 2002). Some women are able to acknowledge that cultural ideals (e.g. thinness and youthfulness) are neither realistic nor relevant, based upon their comparisons of these ideals with their own experiences (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). A woman's mental, emotional, and physical health and well being are affected by her self perceptions in relation to cultural ideals (Spurgas, 2005). Of these, emotional experiences appear to be the most detrimental (Thompson & Dolce, 1989).

Some of the key elements in building resilience and a positive self image include an acceptance of the self and body in the here and now (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). While another study found a positive correlation between awareness and internalization and between internalization and body dissatisfaction (Warren, et al., 2005). By accepting the self in the present some women are able to understand how unrealistic Western culture ideals are. However, some women do not implore protective measures, leaving room for ambivalence in regards to the dichotomy between their own standards and those of society (Saucier, 2004). It is not easy to reconcile this dichotomy and many women often struggle with it. It appears that in order to get to a place of self-acceptance, women must reconcile with some ambivalence, especially in regards to constructing alternative ideologies (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). This balance is particularly challenging when women begin to balance their personal value systems and the expectations of others and society, leaving room for ambivalence (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). The challenge of balancing all of these messages is determining what a woman's personal value system is and the basis of this value system. Some women are able to develop coping strategies, however, others are not and struggle with these symptoms for most of their lives. In fact, most women at one time

or another will struggle with their self-esteem because of their body image perceptions (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Rieves & Cash, 1996).

Another significant factor in women being negatively affected by idealized images is the role of self-objectification. Ideals are not equally detrimental, but the internalization of these ideals can be detrimental especially in regards to body dissatisfaction (Monro & Huon, 2005; Guaraldi, et al, 1999). If women are able to closely approximate an internalized ideal, such as these beauty standards, they are more likely to have a positive self image (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Posovac and Posovac (2002) suggest that any intervention that reduces the likelihood of perceived discrepancy between women's self perceptions and the cultural ideals may reduce the possibility of negative self perceptions and potentially harmful behavior.

#### *Some Sociocultural Factors and Processes Influencing the Internalization of Ideals*

Female beauty ideals are often categorized as unachievable norms that women constantly strive for. These idealized images become a source of pressure to attain (Monro & Huon, 2005). The challenge for women in these situations is to accept themselves even when they do not fit the unrealistic ideals of female beauty (Saucier, 2004). The more a woman endorses the importance of female beauty ideals, the less she believes she has control over things such as weight and appearance (Sinclair, 2006). This can often result in women viewing themselves in a distorted manner. One demonstration of this is over estimating their actual size. In one study by Thompson and Dolce (1989) emotional estimates of size were significantly larger than actual size, ideal self, and ideal other ratings. Other studies also employ this scale of rating one's ideal figure in relation to current perceptions of themselves, emphasizing the impact of female beauty ideals (Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999). Women commonly distort these self perceptions.

Some women do challenge these beauty ideals by emphasizing other attributes in determining their self worth, taking the emphasis off of physical characteristics such as weight

and shape (Choate, 2005). Other women express a desire to embrace more flexible ideals of female beauty and hope that society might be able to do the same, recognizing that cultural ideals of female beauty are problematic, not the women (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). This realization is considered a positive defense against unrealistic ideals (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005).

Some research indicates a discrepancy between perceived cultural ideals of female beauty even with a similarity in personal ideals of beauty (Poran, 2002). Perceptions of female beauty ideals are formed by the conjunction of cultural institutions and sociocultural factors. Some of these more specific factors include ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, etc.

### *Ethnicity*

When looking at the cultural phenomenon regarding female beauty ideals, it is important to remember that there may be important mediators that differ between races (Evans & McConnell, 2003). Bodies are primarily governed by genetics, a significant factor that is often overlooked in women's experience of mainstream beauty standards. Accepting this idea is challenging, because women often believe that having a body at odds with cultural ideals is within their personal control, although it generally is not (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). This discrepancy becomes challenging particularly when women with cultural backgrounds differing from the dominant white standard attempt to compare their shape with that of the dominant culture (Kennedy, Templeton, Gandhi, & Gorzalka, 2004). Racial minorities experience being different than mainstream standards of beauty; different ethnicities endorse mainstream standards of beauty to a varied extent (Evans & McConnell, 2003).

Research indicates that black women and white women have similar levels of body weight/size dissatisfaction, although black women were found to be heavier (Smith, et al., 1999). Black women also reported greater investment in appearance than Whites and they tended to be more satisfied with their appearance (Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999). This greater satisfaction might be in part because many Black women incorporate other aspects of

beauty in their repertoire of personal standards of beauty. Their definitions of beauty tend to be more flexible and individualistic. Some of the factors that contribute to this expanded perception include: personal confidence, attitude, grooming, fit of clothes, hairstyle, skin tone/color satisfaction, and ethnic pride (Celio, et al., 2002; Choate, 2005). However, a growing number of researchers indicate that Black and White self-perceptions are becoming increasingly more homogenous (Spurgas, 2005). Black women employ self-protective strategies and did not find mainstream ideals of beauty as relevant social comparisons (Evans & McConnell, 2003). While, Asian women appear to be more prone to adopting mainstream beauty ideals. This is shown by Evans and McConnell's (2003) study in which Asian women were more conforming to the dominant culture of beauty ideals rather than rejecting them and adopting in-group standards like Black women.

Other research has investigated the relationship between body size, body image, and self-esteem in African American, European American, and Mexican American women while holding socioeconomic status constant (Snooks & Hall, 2002). This study found no significant differences by ethnic grouping for body image, self-esteem, or differences in real and ideal body size. Snooks and Hall (2002) suggest that sociocultural factors assumed to be linked to ethnicity might not be the most important determinants of body image or self-esteem in adult females (p. 465).

Hispanic women identify culture including language, food, customs, and traditions and integral in their experience of body image, although there is limited data regarding Hispanic women (Pompper & Koenig, 2004). Contrary to Snooks and Hall's (2002) findings, Pompper and Koenig (2004) suggest that Hispanic women are less satisfied with their bodies and more likely than European American and African American women to consider themselves overweight.

Asian women appear to be more prone to adopting mainstream beauty ideals. The challenge with this perception is that Asian women have physical features that are far from

mainstream standards and yet they try to adhere to these out-group standards (Evans & McConnell, 2003) especially attractiveness (Kennedy, et al., 2004). Kennedy, et al. (2004) made the distinction of in-group ethnic differences in their study of White women, Chinese women, and Indo-Asian women and found ethnocultural differences with satisfaction levels for body image. They concluded that there are factors affecting women of Chinese descent greater than those of Indo-Asian descent and European descent. One of the significant factors in this difference was length of residency in North America. Similarly, in comparing Asian mothers and daughters with White mothers and daughters, Asian daughters who did not immigrate showed greater satisfaction with their bodies (Ogden & Elder, 1998). While a different study showed that ethnic group is a significant factor in regards to ideal body shape because white participants preferred a thinner ideal to Asian participants (Rieves & Cash, 1996).

Kennedy et al. (2004) included length of residency in North America as a factor in their study. They discovered that those who immigrated at a young age showed higher, but not significantly higher, body satisfaction than those born in North America. However, they also noted that length of residency was related to body image satisfaction regarding those of Chinese descent. While another study showed no significant correlation between acculturation and measures of body dissatisfaction or eating behavior for the Asian subjects (Rieves & Cash, 1996). The family environment and socio-economic levels complicate the notion of Western culture inducing eating pathology and body image disturbances in non-western societies, making it difficult to distinguish which factors are most significant contributors (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006).

#### *Assimilation and Acculturation*

Recent literature lends itself to the idea that assimilation and acculturation are also significant factors contributing to the internalization of female beauty ideals and body image. Assimilation is the attempt to blend into the dominant culture as much as possible, distancing

oneself from one's ethnic group, while acculturation (or bicultural identity) incorporates both the home culture and the dominant culture (Tatum, 1997). Another distinction between assimilation and acculturation is that assimilation can be represented as a melting pot, devoid of unique cultural characteristics, while acculturation can be represented by a mixed salad where all aspects of culture enhance each other. Acculturation can be very positive but not easily achieved; for some the attempt to bridge two cultures may result in alienation from both (Tatum, 1997).

Even more significant is the idea that immigrants did not appear to be as impacted by assimilation but rather a sense of (acculturation) around beauty ideals and body image. Western culture regarding beauty ideals and more specifically body image does not appear to only affect people living in this culture but also women in other countries (Anderson-Fye, 2004). Immigrants struggle with the Western culture's ideals for thinness, particularly if they immigrate as a teenager because of the vulnerability already present in this stage of development (Kennedy, Templeton, Gandhi, & Gorzalka, 2004). Assimilation might also have an effect on these findings, as identification with certain cultural practices may serve as a significant mitigating factor in the predisposition and development of eating disorders among Hispanic women (Pompper & Koenig, 2002, p. 93). In other words, when women immigrate to the United States might impact their perceptions of their body image.

Peralta (2003) also notes that research suggests that the "thin is beautiful" mantra is penetrating communities of color that previously did not appear to be significantly affected by this mentality (p. 14). Therefore, although thinness is typically a genetic predisposition it has become such an integral part of Western culture that many women use diets and other means to try to achieve this ideal and experience the supposed benefits. Unfortunately many studies indicate that poor body image is becoming increasingly more prevalent (Rieves & Cash, 1996) and widespread among women of diverse cultures and geographic locations (Spurgas, 2005).

Acculturation appears to be a significant factor in female beauty ideals; however, few studies measure the level of acculturation and rather study women based on their ethnic culture.

An important factor to consider with cultural ideals is whether or not the ethnic group makes within group or out-group comparisons. When members of stigmatized groups compare themselves with other in-group members (Evans & McConnell, 2003) they exhibit more resilience strategies than those who compare themselves to mainstream beauty standards. However, even in-group comparisons might differ because there are typically subgroups within the in-groups. A woman's need for conformity appears to play a significant part in comparison with mainstream beauty standards and women are more likely to experience lower self-esteem (Evans & McConnell, 2003).

#### *Age*

Time is important in reaching maturity and feeling comfortable with one's body (Spurgas, 2005). This maturity might also lend itself to women's abilities to prioritize their own value and meaning systems over those of society by enabling women to define their self-worth beyond the opinions of others (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Therefore, life experience can be beneficial for women in midlife because this experience often serves as a medium for self-reflection and personal growth, allowing for a well-defined sense of self and what they want (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). This individuation of self takes time and helps women gain more confidence and personal ideals of female beauty. Other researchers agree with this position of satisfaction with one's self taking time to achieve (Spurgas, 2005).

Women in midlife often struggle with accepting the natural progression of aging and the contrasting standards of youthfulness. This stage can often lead to dramatic and often stressful changes such as menopause, wrinkles, and peers dying. These changes allow for self-reflection, personal growth, and an increasing awareness of their own mortality leading to an epiphany of questioning the cultural preoccupation with appearance (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). An important

means to cope with these significant changes is to undergo this deepening of a woman's sense of self, possibly decreasing their vulnerability to upward comparisons with peers (Lin & Kulik, 2002).

Webster and Tiggemann (2003) found that body dissatisfaction is constant across the life span. This parallels the idea that college age women and women in midlife are both significant stages in life that emphasize the value of body image (Pompper & Koenig, 2004). Even young women believe aging is in conflict with youthful ideals of Western culture (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). The challenge with these stages is the belief that the aging process and physical appearance can be controlled (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Although there may be some truth to this idea, aging and physical appearance are often very difficult and expensive to control.

#### *Socioeconomic Status*

Socioeconomic status is also discussed as a sociocultural factor influencing female beauty ideals. There may be a significant association between socioeconomic status and cultural background but research has not typically included socioeconomic status as an influential factor related to body image and self esteem (Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999). Some research notes a negative correlation between socioeconomic status and obesity (Peralta, 2003). This research suggests that knowledge of risks by those who have resources plays a significant role in allowing them to engage in protective efforts to avoid the negative impact of Western ideals, such as access to health care (Peralta, 2003). While other research does not correlate socioeconomic status with body image dissatisfaction (Matz, et al., 2002). However, other researchers argue that once a certain level of affluence is achieved in a particular society, socioeconomic status does not have a significant correlation to eating disorders (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006).

Another study noted the significance of education levels (Smith, et al. 1999). Thus there are many significant and minute factors that contribute to female beauty ideals. It is challenging to dissect which factors are the most significant and they appear to vary on an individual basis.

### Some Relationships Between a Woman's Personal Ideals of Female Beauty, Self Perception, and Self Esteem

In Western cultures, in which beauty is so highly valued and rewarded, it is not surprising that many women suffer from lowered body image following comparisons with highly attractive others (Jones & Buckingham, 2005, p. 1183). Women experience a variety of mental health issues in response to unrealistic female beauty ideals. These include symptoms of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sexual difficulties, shame and eating disorders (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Monro & Huon, 2005; Noles, et al., 1985; Rieves & Cash, 1996; Saucier, 2004; Thompson & Dolce, 1989). Many of the factors that contribute to these issues are ethnic background (Evans & McConnell, 2003), internalized oppression (Saucier, 2004), exposure to idealized images (Monro & Huon, 2005), size overestimation (Thompson & Dolce, 1989), and cultural immersion (Saucier, 2004). Some of these symptoms can become life threatening. Women are also socialized to attribute these factors to being a female, hormones, genetics, or dysfunctional family systems (Saucier, 2004) while in fact it appears to be societal ideals that have the most significant effect.

In response to this, many women turn to unhealthy lifestyles and plastic surgery to achieve these unrealistic standards of beauty (Jones & Buckingham, 2005; Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006). Some women are able to view ideals of slenderness as unrealistic social constructions, however this evaluation process leads to a discrepancy between their lived realities and social discourses about ideal female beauty (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Researchers suggest

that women are believed to be responsible for their weight (Mazur, 1986; Peralta, 2003; Poran 2002). One study by Matz, et al. (2002) found that evaluations of the physical self and overall self evaluation are closely linked in overweight women.

If women's appearances do not conform to female beauty ideals, they often experience stereotypical consequences of being viewed by society as unattractive, asexual, immoral, lazy, unhealthy, or lacking in self discipline, especially in regards to the ideal of thinness (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Peralta, 2003). Other social consequences include: lowered self-esteem, increased depression, and eating disorders (Insel, 2005; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Obesity is seen as a source of body dissatisfaction, rejection, humiliation (Peralta, 2003, p. 11), something to be loathed (Spurgas, 2005), and is stigmatized (Sypeck, et al, 2004). Beauty standards emphasize thinness at an impossible level that is often achieved by whatever unhealthy means necessary (Birtchnell, et al., 1987; Mazur, 1986; Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann, 2005).

Another approach to beauty ideals is Peralta's (2003) literature, which presents an epidemiological overview of obesity as a social problem in the United States. It looks at the relationship between sociological implications of obesity rates and the unequal distribution of goods and resources, noting that obesity is both a genetic and behavioral phenomenon. One of the sources blamed for this phenomenon is the societal standard of beauty that has become much thinner (Peralta, 2003). However, obesity rates continue to increase and are considered a serious threat to women's health (Snooks & Hall, 2002). Weiner (2006) adds that Western culture normalizes body hatred by encouraging the constant thought process and obsession of weight.

### *Family*

In the U.S., mothers are often seen as guides or examples of womanhood in a family. As a child develops into an adult, the daughter is divided by wanting to connect with her mother, but at the same time experiences the discomfort of not living up to prescribed cultural standards of

ideal female beauty (Debold, 1991). Daughters sometimes reject these female beauty ideals and choose beauty or body issues as a symbol of their struggle for independence, often exemplified by eating disorders (Freedman, 1986). Ogden and Elder (1998) found no matching between mothers and their daughters for body image or eating disorders. Insel (2005) points out that familial responses to an eating disorder is important to explore, in that necessary assistance can be vital to helping women recover. Many therapeutic models used to treat eating disorders emphasize the importance of including the family in treatment. Understanding the link between body image and family dynamics is vital.

Haworth-Hoepfner (2000) notes that the family operates in mediation of culture and works in combination with other factors. Because of the value and prominence of thinness in the culture, some families appear to create a climate in which weight is crucial to identity (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000). However, Haworth-Hoepfner (2000) also notes that interactions within the family might also mediate the effects of cultural ideas on the construction of body image. The internalization of White-supremacist standards of beauty and the desire to maintain what little advantage can be gained in a racist system leads some families to reject dark-skinned members (Tatum, 1999, p.44). Haworth-Hoepfner (2000) seems to extend this idea of the interaction between culture and family to experiences of adolescent rebellion. Some women use eating disorders to reassert personal control over their bodies and increase autonomy (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000, p. 224).

#### *Peers*

Contrary to social comparison ideals, Lin and Kulik (2002) found no evidence that general self-esteem is significantly influenced by comparisons of physical appearance with peers. However, Weiner (2006) notes that current societal messages encourage women to be in competition about their bodies and romantic relationships-- as if there is a limited supply of

happiness, success, and contentment to go around (p. 135). Wade and Abetz (1997) agree that there is a relationship between women's self perceived body image and romantic relationships.

### *Media*

According to Davies (2004) children who internalize negative images are particularly at risk for poor self-esteem and depression. Developed schemas contribute to an internalization of societal norms resulting in more negative effects of upward social comparison and higher levels of body image disturbance (Jones & Buckingham, 2005). Just as children learn to navigate the world through observation and imitation, so too do media images create a standard for how women should be and the benefits these ideals can have (Pompper & Koenig, 2004). However, this standard also contributes to an objectification of women by themselves and others (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), especially with the emphasis of certain body parts (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). To be objectified means to be seen as a thing that exists for the viewer. This can either bring women to life through recognition or snuff a woman out by ignoring her (Freedman, 1986, p. 37). Objectification changes a woman's self perception of her body and erodes self-esteem (Freedman, 1986). Weiner (2006) also argues that, "the media is a major contributing factor to women's self-esteem- like a background of really loud noise that makes it difficult to hear the softer inner voice of truth" (p. 104).

A majority of the images in the media portray women through a lens of perfection, an artificial standard of beauty (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Although these images of perfection portray pleasure and success, they also have a negative effect on women. This may lead to the onset of eating disorders in women and also classifies society as having one of the major symptoms of an eating disorder (Wiseman, et al., 1992). It is the drive to embody this cultural ideal of female beauty that the media feeds off of, creating unrealistic expectations for women to adhere to. Because of the pervasiveness of media, women are exposed to idealized thin beauty images. Women are also objectified in advertisements that use parts of women or women's

bodies to sell products (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Body dissatisfaction, body shame and appearance anxiety are some of the negative emotional consequences media ideals can potentially increase (Monro & Huon, 2005; Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). These negative feelings often lead to a desire to alter the body's weight and shape (Monro & Huon, 2005; Sypeck, et al., 2004). However, not all women develop unhealthy preoccupations with these ideals (Sypeck, et al., 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Magazines are a common form of media portraying female beauty ideals. Research shows that models in magazines have become increasingly thinner over time (Mazur, 1986; Sypeck, Gray, & Aherns, 2004). One study by Sypeck, Gray and Aherns (2004) analyzed cover models of four popular American fashion magazines over the last few decades. They found that the amount of women's bodies displayed on cover models and the extent to which the bodies of the models are revealed have increased with time. Another study emphasizes that since the 1970s there has been an increase in breast reduction, more recently moving towards an emphasis on reducing the hip, thigh, and rear regions as well (Mazur, 1986). Thus, society desires the body size of a person who is extremely thin.

Images are altered and edited with technology (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005) and create unrealistic and unattainable images of women's bodies (Spurgas, 2005) that some women believe are realistic and struggle to attain (Monro & Huon, 2005). These portrayed images do not usually occur in nature because the vast majority of women are genetically predisposed to be heavier than female models (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Thus leading to unhealthy practices to attain media portrayed ideals of perfection. Visual media typically conveys women epitomizing the current beauty ideal as young, tall, and extremely thin (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Peralta, 2003; Pompper & Koenig, 2004; Saucier, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann, 2005). Media also conveys these ideals by using body-part images that represent women as fragmented parts and devoid of personality (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). These "body-isms" as labeled by

Tiggemann and McGill (2004), elicit as much social comparison as full body images. These part and full body images are successful because they promote that beauty and thinness will bring prestige, happiness, love, and success for women (Choate, 2005; Saucier, 2004). The desire for these ideals is significant enough to allow women to feel justified in participating in unhealthy means so they can be seen as successful and happy people, strong ideals in Western culture.

#### *Influence of Western Culture in Other Countries*

In Western culture eating disorders are often associated with beauty pageants and models (Mazur, 1986), however this was not found to be a significant phenomenon and is not emphasized by the cultural community or the families in Belize (Anderson-Fye, 2004). Another example of the influence of Western culture's beauty standards are Asian women who have physical features that are far from mainstream cultural standards and yet they try to adhere to these out-group standards (Evans & McConnell, 2003) especially attractiveness (Kennedy, et al., 2004) which also leads to experiencing negative self-perceptions. This parallels an increasing trend towards using plastic and reconstructive surgery to alter women's appearances to fit the cultural ideal.

#### Conclusion

A woman's body and her sense of self are often inextricably linked. The perception of one's body is influenced by many of the factors that have already been discussed; but it can also be dependent upon the significance a woman places on her physical appearance in regards to her overall sense of self (Spurgas, 2005).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Formulation

While a substantive literature has emerged in recent years exploring the relationship between cultural standards of beauty, body image and self esteem in women, most of this literature has been quantitative and conducted on samples of college age students that are transitioning to adulthood. Such research does little to capture the personal experiences and voices of adult women on this topic, i.e. the relationship between cultural ideals of female beauty and what women internalize as their personal ideals of female beauty, etc. This qualitative study sought to make a contribution to filling this gap by exploring what we can learn from adult women in their own voice about their personal ideals of female beauty, their self perceptions of their own female beauty, and their sense of self esteem.

#### Sample

To participate in this study, a woman had to be between the ages of 23 and 40, English speaking and agree to be seen in a face-to-face interview that would take no more than an hour. The age range is somewhat arbitrary and meant to capture the voice of women who are not in a transitional phase of their life, e.g. traditional undergraduate student and menopausal women.

### Recruitment Procedure

This study employed a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants. This was done through posted advertisements (see attached flyer) and word of mouth petitions to colleagues and friends. Posted advertisements were placed in local churches, gyms, women's groups, clothing shops, and beauty shops that targeted women. Those who are eligible and agreed to participate were asked to recommend others as well. Every effort was made to recruit as demographically diverse a sample as possible in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, education, and occupation.

### Data Collection and Analysis

As colleagues and friends helped identify potential participants, they were asked to make the initial contact and let participants know this researcher would follow up with a phone call. Participants recruited through advertisements were asked to contact this researcher via phone. At this time the study and nature of participation this researcher was requesting were described. Those who consented to participate in this study were seen in a face-to-face interview with the researcher that took not more than one hour. The interview was scheduled at a time and place that was convenient for both the subject and the researcher, e.g. a coffee house, this researcher's office, a restaurant, etc. The interview with the researcher consisted of three types of questions: structured demographic background questions; semi-structured and more open ended questions that probe respondents' female beauty ideals and self perceptions of personal female beauty; and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (see attached interview guide).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a Likert scale where respondents were asked to rate their strength of agreement with ten statements. This scale was included as one of the questions in the interview. It was administered orally by the researcher and took no more than 5 minutes to

complete. Since its creation in 1965, this scale has been widely used in social science research and can be used for educational and professional research free of charge.

Interviews were digitally recorded with permission from participants. All identifying information was removed from the paperwork and coded to ensure confidentiality. Participants were informed of the potential risks and benefits of participating in this study and a list of local mental health resources was given to each participant before beginning the interview. Prior to conducting this research, approval from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee was obtained (See Appendix A). The researcher transcribed all interviews. A content analysis was subsequently conducted to identify emerging themes.

#### Confidentiality

The researcher ensured that none of the data collection tools contained participants' names. The researcher maintained confidentiality by removing names from interview tapes and transcripts as well as from completed self-esteem inventories and assigned numeric codes to these materials. Information collected during the study was reported in aggregate only. Any illustrations or brief quotations included in the study were sufficiently disguised to prevent identification of specific subjects. The researcher kept interview tapes and transcripts and completed self-esteem inventories in a locked file box for three years, in accordance with federal regulations. After that time tapes, transcripts, and self-esteem inventories will be destroyed.

#### Risks and Benefits of Participation

The potential risks of participation were explained to each participant before they agreed to participate. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they had the right to refuse to answer any question in the interview or in the self-esteem

inventory. The researcher also informed the participants that it was possible to withdraw from the study and the audio recording and transcript of the interview would be destroyed.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Demographics

The sample consisted of 12 participants that ranged from 24 to 39 years of age, with a mean age of 30.25 years. In terms of ethnicity, 8 participants self identified as White or Caucasian, 1 participant identified as Italian American, 1 participant identified as Middle Eastern, 1 participant identified as Asian/ Pacific Islander, and 1 participant identified as multiracial. All 12 participants self identified as heterosexual. Participants were evenly divided between married and single. Six participants were married, five participants were single and one participant was engaged. Only two participants had children.

This was a highly educated group as all participants had at least received a bachelors degree. The mode was a Masters degree. Specifically, 5 participants had a Masters degree in Social Work or Psychology. Four participants had a Bachelors degree and 3 participants had a doctorate in psychology. Nine of the 12 participants had degrees and worked in the helping professions. Six participants received a degree in Psychology, 2 participants received a degree in Social Work, 1 participant received a degree in Sociology, 1 participant received a degree in English, 1 participant received a degree in Communications, and 1 participant was actively pursuing a Masters degree in Nursing. This group of participants was also relatively affluent as most of the participants make more that \$51,000 annually. Specifically, six participants make between \$51,000 and \$74,000 and 3 participants make above \$75,000. Only 3 participants make below \$50,000 annually (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics: Age, Ethnicity, and Marital Status*

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status
1	24	White	Single
2	24	Italian American	Married
3	25	White	Single
4	25	Caucasian	Married
5	26	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Engaged
6	29	Caucasian	Single
7	31	Middle Eastern	Single
8	32	White	Married
9	35	White	Married
10	35	White Multiracial	Married
11	38		Married
12	39	Caucasian	Single

Table 2

*Participants' Education, Occupation, and Income*

Participant	Education	Occupation	Income Range
1	Bachelors	Business profession	\$26,000-\$50,000
2	Masters	Helping profession	\$26,000-\$50,000
3	Bachelors	Business profession	\$51,000-\$75,000
4	Masters	Helping profession	\$51,000-\$75,000
5	Bachelors	Helping profession	\$51,000-\$75,000
6	Masters	Helping profession	\$51,000-\$75,000
7	Doctorate	Helping profession	\$76,000 +
8	Masters	Helping profession	\$26,000-\$50,000
9	Bachelors	Business profession	\$51,000-\$75,000
10	Doctorate	Helping profession	\$76,000 +
11	Doctorate	Helping profession	\$76,000 +
12	Masters	Helping profession	\$51,000-\$75,000

*Note:* Business profession refers to Program Assistant, Executive Assistant, and Marketing Manager. Helping profession refers to Psychologist, Social Worker, Special Education Teacher, and Nurse.

## Female Beauty Ideals

Participants were asked to discuss their ideals of female beauty. All participants (12=100%) made the distinction between internal characteristics of beauty and physical characteristics of beauty. Participants also conveyed a hierarchy emphasizing that internal characteristics were more important than physical attributes.

### Participant 7

Well, I think that it is a combination of physical attributes and characteristics or personality that... someone that we might consider very beautiful by societies standards you might meet that person and if they don't have the personality to match... they might not appear nearly as attractive I guess, but I mean I think that still I do somewhat buy into societies standards of beauty to a certain extent.

### Participant 12

Intelligence, good self care, health and wellness, I guess mindfully and physically active, I guess well balanced in mind, body, and soul, high self esteem.... I think in self confidence like a persons posture and the way they feel comfortable expressing themselves as they are, their opinions about whether it be in the work place or their personal lives.... Like sort of knowing their not perfect, so whatever feelings or impacts they have, having the capacity to manage those things, sort of their interactions with others whether that be a coworker or a partner, or a family member, sort of like whatever emotions come up they have the capacity to manage them appropriately as opposed to being a reactive kind of person, that's what I'm thinking

### Participant 4

An ideal... I think... so is this... my answer will be all over the place... but when I think of that I think confidence first... because I don't automatically go to looks or physical attributes because literally everyday someone looks entirely different and usually its based on how they themselves feel about themselves so confidence is number one for the ideal of beauty in women.

### Participant 11

Well that's a loaded question... what do I think the ideal... confidence... without... I guess confidence without narcissism... what word do I want to use... I know there's word but I'm blanking on it... I'll just say confidence... and obviously someone who cares about the way they present themselves.... Just taking care of their appearance... it doesn't mean that they have to be high fashion or anything but just that they put some energy and attention into putting their best self forward... does that make sense... because I think when you feel good you just kind of walk with a little kick in your step I think.... Yea, confidence... like I don't really see beauty... like everyone has their ideal of what they think physical beauty is but you don't have to have whatever Hollywood thinks is beautiful to be beautiful because if you feel from the inside confident and beautiful to yourself you put that out there and other people experience that to.

#### Participant 6

I don't know that I necessarily have a specific idea of an ideal for my... I think that all... especially in the work that I do here... I really believe that we come in all shapes... and that everyone is beautiful in their own way... so I don't really... I think a lot of it is affected by my relationship with the person and their personality affects my perception of people... I feel like a lot of where I see beauty is coming from within the person... I guess... I don't think its necessarily something I can articulate... its just sort of a feeling... but I don't... I really don't have like a... like a certain thing in mind when I think of beauty... I think beauty strikes me when I see it... I don't know... I'm not sure if that's helpful for you... I know what our culture tells you what is beautiful... but I don't really like to conform to that.

Having made this distinction between internal and external characteristics, participants generated a list of 20 internal characteristics that were indicative of female beauty and 13 external characteristics. There was far more consensus for internal beauty as opposed to external beauty. The most frequently noted internal characteristic was confidence (10= 83%), followed by self acceptance (8=67%). It should be noted that “personality” was mentioned as an ideal of female beauty by half the sample (6= 50%). Other internal characteristics that fall under personality include four participants (4= 33%) naming intelligence, four (4=33%) naming care for others, three (3=25%) naming honesty, two (2= 17%) naming openness and one (8%) naming thoughtfulness. Other characteristics that participants listed include: sense of humor, forgiving, assertive, independent, and outgoing. See Table 3.

#### *Examples of Internal Characteristics*

#### Participant 4

There was something with that though that was... it was just full acceptance of who you are, of yourself, of flab or no flab, of big breasts or little breasts... it was just... so nakedness more to me is more about... it also goes hand in hand with confidence... but we just are who we are.... What I'm thinking of is like... confidence... how do you see confidence... I think it comes across as self assured, strong personality, strong person... someone who doesn't seek approval or compliments necessarily... they don't... there's no fishing for compliments... I mean I think people get complimented but I think there are also people who ask for it which to me is fine but I think...I don't think they're necessarily very self assured at that point... you know they are not necessarily confident with themselves or their looks at that point.

Table 3

*Internal Characteristics of Beauty*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Confidence	X		X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
Self Acceptance	X	X		X	X	X		X	X			X
Personality	X			X	X	X	X	X				
Intelligent					X		X				X	X
Kind			X		X				X	X		
Honest			X		X					X		
Compassion/ Respect			X		X							X
Open		X			X							
High Self Esteem				X					X			X
Self Awareness						X						X
Thoughtful			X									
Independent				X								
Sense of Humor							X					
Forgiving										X		
Assertive												X
Maternal Instinct		X										
Loyal			X									
Relaxed			X									
Fun							X					
Sincere								X				

Participant 2

I think... someone who is able to have the freedom to express themselves and be themselves totally without letting their self consciousness and like things they don't like about themselves get in the way of letting them be who they are.... I don't know if you ever know fully who they are... maybe people are that way sometimes, but maybe you can tell when somebody allows their personality to shine through and I guess I could list off qualities... I'm envisioning somebody who is not critical but is open to other people in the way they are too because they accept themselves for who they are and so they let that... they let others be ok with that too and enable others to be their best selves when they're around them... I always think of somebody... I think of beauty as the way other people feel when they are around a beautiful person, like I think of beauty more on the inside.... I think my stereotype of feminine beauty and like something that I think I can admit is beautiful is a maternal instinct... I think that is beautiful in women... I don't know if that's from my cultural upbringing or from society or whatever... I think that a woman who is open to bearing life and loving children and being a good partner to somebody... even if it's not their partner if they just have that maternal qualities... I think that is really beautiful in women... I think mostly what I said in the beginning is my overall.

#### Participant 5

I am a firm believer of the inner beauty.... A kind person who is respectful, respects themselves and respects others.... I guess someone who is just courteous and follows social norms.... Like saying hello when you come in contact with someone or referring to somebody by their name as opposed to some other name that may be inappropriate... somebody who doesn't backstab... someone who is just very honest and open... someone who is loving and caring... I'm all about the caring

#### Participant 8

I would say that is more of a presence that is more sincere, not really fake.... By how I interact with that person if I see that I am more relaxed and sincere myself and more myself that's sort of an indicator of how I am feeling in the presence of that person, if a person is really fake I tend to be that way myself.

The most frequently noted response of physical characteristics, i.e. overall presentation, was only mentioned by six participants (6= 50%), half the sample. Of the remaining 12 descriptions, none had more than three responses. Other physical characteristics participants generated included: athletic, smile, symmetry, healthy weight, nice skin, thin, sense of style, natural, tall, blonde hair, blue eyes, and hairless. See Table 4.

#### *Examples of Physical Characteristics*

#### Participant 6

We're taught from a young age that to be beautiful and successful you have to be thin and that you have to have perfect skin and perfect hair and perfect teeth and these are all things that don't usually come together in one person... with Hollywood women become so modified with different surgical procedures that are available and there are women who are probably at an anorexic weight and have huge breasts... and it's not that often... I mean sometimes it occurs in nature but just not... it's not the norm... so we're taught to have this sort of really... well it's an unrealistic expectation of beauty that we try to live up to and it's just not... people are different.... I don't think that beauty necessarily fits an ideal.

#### Participant 1

The ideal... I guess when I think people say beauty it's more than the looks, I think pretty is just the looks... so I think when I think of beautiful it's more of a confident and comfortable woman who... just... is comfortable with themselves and confident in what they do.... but when I think of my friends that I consider beautiful they always have a good personality... and again I would say pretty is more the looks... I think beauty is more the confidence and a good personality... and I think too confidence when you are confident with your body then you become more attractive to other people too... I would kind of rule out the good looks with the word beauty... when I think of beautiful though I would think of well put together... like... I don't know... they are not sloppy; they are just well put together and confident.... not the presentation... more that they are comfortable and they have a sense of style that is them... like they have developed into

this and that they are just comfortable and confident... I'm trying to think of a good personality but if they have really bad hygiene or... then I probably still wouldn't call them beautiful

Participant 4

I mean based on just image alone... not knowing anybody... based on image alone I would chose the more "attractive beautiful person" as someone who was wearing clean clothes, who matched their clothing, their clothes generally fit them... so.... [took a couple minutes] maybe only a couple but they there was some effort there.

Participant 9

Probably someone who's somewhat active although not necessarily athletic but someone who you know.... Takes care of themselves, and I guess who's body would lead you to believe that they cared about how they presented their self.

Table 4

*External Characteristics of Beauty*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Overall Presentation	X			X	X		X		X		X	
Athletic			X						X			X
Smile			X						X		X	
Symmetrical			X		X		X					
Healthy Weight			X						X			
Nice Skin			X				X					
Thin					X					X		
Sense of Style	X											
Natural				X								
Tall										X		
Blonde Hair										X		
Blue Eyes										X		
Hairless					X							

### Examples of Female Beauty Ideals

Participants were asked to describe a woman that they felt exemplified their ideal of female beauty. Although participants were asked to select one person, this question generated multiple examples. The most frequently noted response was a friend (8= 67%), followed by mother (7= 58%) and celebrities (7= 58%). In addition, 2 participants (17%) identified a colleague as exemplifying their ideal of female beauty (See Table 5).

Table 5

*Participants' Examples of Ideals of Female Beauty*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Friend	X	X	X		X		X	X		X		X
Mom	X	X		X	X		X			X	X	
Colleague							X					X
<u>Celebrities</u>												
Angelina Jolie					X			X	X			
Katherine Zeta Jones			X									
Anna Kornakova			X									
Drew Barrymore				X								
Kate Winslet						X						
Queen Latifah						X						
Katie Couric									X			
Helen Muren									X			
Kristi Brinkley										X		

### *Examples of Friends*

#### Participant 8

I have a friend, I have a lot of friends that I would identify in that category.... sincere quality and sort of how they are able to have compassion for other people and themselves as well, you know its sort of that balance and just the way that you look at the world and more of a positive outlook a lot of laughter, not too much drama.... Yea, well sort of I mean everyone has their moments but yea more of a being able to deal with life and stress without falling into the pit all the time.... what I'm sort of saying of my friend is the part of them that is beautiful is that they can laugh and be you know in that space I just admire that but I don't want to say that the people that don't do that aren't considered [beautiful]

#### Participant 2

I'm thinking of [my friend]... she's really maternal and she's very caring toward children and she has a heart for people and she's really like the little guys... not necessarily the little one but the underdogs... you know... and she uses herself to bring people up... and... what else do I like about her... she's another strong one... she's proud of being female but doesn't make excuses for herself because she's a girl

### *Examples of Mothers*

#### Participant 4

She takes care of herself... she gets dressed up... she takes those couple moments to do a few special things that will make her like herself like herself better and ultimately my dad and on and on... once again the few minutes of getting ready... she has curves... she's breastfed for like 21 years or something so her breasts are used if you want to say... they are not perky in any sense of the word but she still exemplifies woman almost because of all those reasons because they have made her who she is now... the fact that she has had 6 kids and the part of [being a] mom and what that's done to her body... all those things to me are beautiful.

#### Participant 11

She is self assured and confident without being too boastful and she's strong.... Strong in mind, strong in body... I also think that... I think... how do I say this... I always have to be very careful because I work in an eating disorder clinic so everything is always taken out of context... you know... she takes care of keeping her mind strong by exercising it by staying current on a lot of different things as well as keeping her body strong by you know now working out excessively... but so she's capable... you know... she's 60 years old this year and she's very capable... so.... Yea, that would be it... strong of mind, strong of body and had very good lessons to teach me... modeled good behavior.

#### Participant 2

That's kind of hard because my mom does in many ways but she has a lot of insecurities and that clouds it for me sometimes for her because I want her to be like able to be more free... like I see the beautiful person inside but I also see that she has a hard time expressing that and being comfortable with herself.

### *Examples of Colleagues*

#### Participant 7

Umm... I think of [a coworker] as really beautiful, she exemplifies that young attitude and that can go so far when you don't get too bogged down by life, responsibilities and have more of a pessimistic view point that can really turn things ugly, I think of her she has a great sense of style too and she's fun and outgoing, she takes of herself and she looks good.

#### Participant 12

She is really a very nurturing and comfortable in her own skin presentation I think and open minded and well spoke and it seems to be a good balance of life, I mean I know she deals with life stressors and stuff, well she's married with a kid and she's going under some personal stresses right now but she's still capable of sort of addressing that in the workplace, like sort of knowing the responsibilities she needs to take on or delegate so she can remove herself to take care of her priority at home at the time but she's very intelligent and self aware and insightful

Those who identified celebrities generated a list of 9 celebrities. Angelina Jolie was the only celebrity mentioned more than once. Other celebrities were: Katherine Zeta Jones, Anna Kornakova, Drew Barrymore, Kate Winslet, Queen Latifah, Katie Couric, Helen Muren, and Kristi Brinkley. All participants acknowledged that they did not know the celebrities personally, implying that they got their impression from media images.

### *Examples of Celebrities*

#### Participant 9

I don't know if I like [Angelina Jolie] as an example... umm... again... that she's... I think that her life is enriched by her children and by doing good causes and that that gives off... I mean physically she is attractive as well... that she expresses that self confidence and takes care of herself but isn't obsessed with those... that there are other things in her life that fulfills her... which I think is part of what beauty is as well, not just the outward appearances but also what you do for others and what you do for yourself... makes you happy inside and then you project that... what you do.

#### Participant 6

I think anyone who's like... like if you think of Queen Latifah... I think she's like... well I don't really know what she's got going on but I think she's like been a person who appears to be ok being a larger size and is very comfortable I think with herself but I guess that's kind of been what has been put out there about her but I don't know really as much about her and I don't know if she... I don't if she struggles with weight... I don't know what her patterns are but I think... I think its just important for more women who are different sizes to be having leading roles on movies and television and for us to be more exposed to different shapes and different... I mean she's African America... for her

to have... for the beauty ideal not to be the white, blonde stick thin, big boobs, that kind of... for there to be room for other ethnicities and other kind of... to be room for other

Participant 8

I don't know, maybe I feel kind of weird saying this but maybe Angelina Jolie because she has more that natural beauty but then there's this sincere kind of quality to her that is not too preoccupied with materialistic things and that sort of feels something more whole.... I don't know because I have never met her.... but obviously I don't know, its just I'm getting that from reading her interviews and sort of reading about what she does

Participant 9

For Helen Muren... she's just an example showing that I think beauty isn't just about some younger woman... you know she's on the older side... and I've seen interviews with her where she says she wears certain clothes to hide flaws, you know... that she thinks she has in her body but you would never now that... she just comes across as very self assured and kind of radiates self confidence and charisma and a joy... the sense that I get from seeing her in interviews and pictures and things like that.

Participant 10

You know I think in terms of exterior [Kristi Brinkley] has that Scandinavian look, she's also somebody who is at the age I am looking at, she's aging really well and able to still have some of those characteristics and is not somebody, you know, who has the current ideal of being really thin and you know that is more active and attractive as she gets older

It was interesting to note that participants' responses to why the woman they selected exemplified their ideal of female beauty generated a new list of internal characteristics (see Table 6) that were not included in their responses to the first list of internal characteristics they had generated (see Table 4). The new list of additional internal characteristics was generated exclusively from examples of women they knew personally that personified their ideals of female beauty (mothers, friends, and colleagues). No new descriptors of internal characteristics were generated or needed by those who identified celebrities as examples of women that personified their ideals of female beauty. Again, none of the participants knew any of the celebrities they used as examples personally. Characteristics that participants used to describe their examples of ideal female beauty that were known to them included: manage stress, balance their roles, have a positive outlook on life and express their sense of being a woman.

Table 6

*Internal Characteristics Generated by Known Examples of Ideal Female Beauty*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Balance	X					X	X	X				X
Manage life Stressors							X	X				X
Accept age				X					X	X		
Positive outlook							X	X				
Outgoing					X		X					
Self Care							X		X			
Laughter							X	X				
Strong		X									X	
Nurturing												X
Insightful												X
Proud of being female		X										
Professional	X											
Joyful									X			
Social Justice									X			

### *Factors Influencing Participants' Personal Ideals of Female Beauty*

When participants were asked to share the most significant factor(s) that influence their current ideals of female beauty or a beautiful woman they generated a list of 14 factors. The most frequently noted were media (10= 83%) and family (10= 83%). Of these participants, eight (8= 67%) listed both media and family as influential factors. Five participants (5= 42%) listed friends as influential factors. Other factors that participants generated included: parents (3= 25%), occupation (2= 17%), college (2= 17%), mother (2= 17%), and grandmother (2= 17%). The remaining factors were mentioned by only one participant: personal growth, self awareness, husband, God, strong women and the male opinion (see Table 7).

### *Examples of Media as an Influential Factor*

#### Participant 5

Probably popular culture.... I mean we are exposed to.... I'm highly obsessed with people magazine and entertainment tonight and other celebrity gossip show or magazine... granted I don't subscribe to the whole you have to be anorexic to be beautiful mentality... but I think that popular culture definitely has an impact on what I think is beautiful... because I mean photographers don't snap ugly people and ugly people don't get put into the media spotlight... I definitely think that the media has a big influence... but in terms of real life... but I guess the media is technically real life.

#### Participant 9

The media would be... number one sort of the educational aspect... the good things that the media does would be one thing like telling you on the Oprah shows and things how to dress so it fits your body better or how to... you know... the exercising programs and better nutrition and things like that... so number one I think the media can educate people so you can understand what it is so you can make one more healthy and that in turn affects one's beauty... so there's the positive aspect of the media but then the negative aspect of you know putting a lot of attention on women who give birth and then getting back to their pre baby weight... I think in the last couple years... you know has been a lot more evident that they are focusing on that... like Katie Holmes for example... they show pictures of her but then don't say anything... they say you know... then might have some innuendos that she might have a baby bulge and then now that she doesn't they focus a lot on she's getting too thin and she's looking like her friend Posh and you know... I think that that's a negative impact the media has.

Table 7

*Factors Influencing Participants' Personal Ideals of Female Beauty*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Media	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Friends	X						X	X	X	X		
Parents	X	X	X									
Mom				X							X	
Grandmother					X			X				
Career						X						X
College				X		X						
Personal Growth												X
Self Awareness												X
Male Opinion					X							
Husband		X										
God		X										
Strong Women		X										

Participant 7

Probably the media is a big one... I mean we are constantly bombarded with images of what to do and what... to remain beautiful and be beautiful... what you need to buy and look like what your hair should look like... what your shoes should look like and I think more recently with the whole equal rights and civil rights revolution with women getting back in the workforce... that has been incorporated in the media as sort of an attractive thing to be self confident, to care about your career and be successful in your career or whatever it is that you decide to do.

### Participant 8

Probably media, I mean even though I am trying to be extremely conscious of it and I am working with women who have been extremely influenced by it and internalized it, I think its extremely difficult to be a woman in society, no matter how aware you are to not be influenced by it and I definitely think that media and society in general, the way westernized societies think about beauty has influenced me the most I mean I'm part of that sea of fishes.... [it's influenced me] by constantly being there, all these ads, remarks people make about since you were little you would hear people evaluating other people in a certain way and its obvious sort of they confirmed what's in the media. All this advertising, all these magazines what people seem to have an agreement on that and I think I have been very much influenced by that, I think its very hard to get away from it I feel its easier for me now to step up and see the overall picture and be there you know looking [down] be aware of it and I've noticed that I'm getting better at it more aware of it and I don't know if I'm just... you know age as I'm getting older and less sensitive to it or because I'm working with these women who are slaves of it and you get more distance and look at it from a distance, I don't know, I think that's it, but I've definitely noticed that even though I'm able to have those moments where I'm able to be looking at it from a distance and not be extremely influenced by it in the magazines that I see I definitely have moments that I'm totally part of that.... I would say society in general, but obviously I think my friends and family are sort of the first people that have influenced me the most and then there are sort of these other layers and then I think media is over this umbrella

### *Examples of Family as an Influential Factor*

#### Participant 2

I was just thinking that I think it helps too that when I was growing up that my dad told me I was beautiful and he was proud of me and stuff and I know a lot of people that don't have that... and that really affects them.... I think it just... I always had a sense of self worth... when its not intrinsic as a child and it comes from an outward source I think somewhere in your brain chemistry I think it kind of settles in... you know... if you have that sense of self worth and self love... even if you don't feel it towards yourself at times... the fact that my parents were loving toward me... and told me they were proud of me and even if I messed up that's ok... I didn't have to live with them being disappointed or making me feel bad... you know... I think as an adult that's helped me grow up and be a healthy person... I was just thinking about... because I didn't say anything about my dad but I think that helped a lot

#### Participant 1

I think the first would definitely be the way I was brought up... like my parents never... I guess I was never... never had to think I was not beautiful... I think I was constantly reinforced growing up that... yea... to be confident that personality was more important than my looks... and I would say my parents always did say I was pretty when I was growing up but I was never brought up to like... to really care too much about my looks... except my parents always expected us to look... to be well groomed... well not well groomed because that's a bad word but to be put together... wear nice outfits... wear appropriate outfits to certain events... so I think there was an emphasis on that for me... that I should dress appropriately for like dinner and school

#### Participant 8

I've been influenced by other people definitely, people around me a little but my parents, not that much, more my grandmother.... Well, its very interesting, its actually both my grandmothers that the older generation where I come from its sort of a valued beauty and every time my grandmothers would be talking about somebody they knew when they were young almost always the first thing out was if that person was considered beautiful or not or handsome or not, its very interesting because my mom doesn't describe people that way but they did and I don't know I haven't figured out why that was but its sort of you know makes you I think realize that that is an important part

#### Participant 3

I grew up in an enormous family where there's just a huge number of women... so I know that I am influenced immensely by all of the different people that are in my family.... that's probably where I got the initial basis of comparison of external beauty in seeing all the different shapes, sizes, and colors of my female relatives and you know the men as well but as you said we're looking at beauty as sort of a feminine thing... some of it was associated with how they treated me... I had hundreds of cousins, aunts, uncles, that sort of thing... so some of them would be really great and some of them would be... you know we just didn't click or whatever or I was just a little too young... whatever the reason is... they just... it was kind of like nod, give a quick little smile and move on type of thing... so that made them less beautiful

#### Participant 5

I think my family also has an influence... they're very quick to tell me... about myself... oh you don't look so good today or you look really good today... I guess my family's criticism of me in turn affects how I see others... so if I see someone who has whatever flaw my family likes to point out... then I think they must be ugly... whatever... like my grandmother use to be like your hair is so long you look so ugly... so... well that's for me personally... so my hair is short and it will always be short

### *Examples of Friends as an Influential Factor*

#### Participant 1

I remember trying to think when I was little that everyone had something that they obsessed about in middle school and freshmen in high school so I decided that I was going to think my thighs were fat and my parents were like, what??... and so I was like yea I really don't... and I remembered that I wanted to have something because everyone else had something that they obsessed about and talked about it... I just never did... it didn't become an issue when I was younger so it's not really an issue now

#### Participant 10

A lot of my girlfriends... that they have a lot of those internal characteristics... that I really admire... and being really strong women... and all having either careers, you know, in the business world or have taken the career of motherhood very seriously, you know... they have a lot of those internal characteristics that I really admire and look up to

#### Participant 4

It was a sense of the community itself is pretty laid back and you were expected to enjoy things rather than worry about things or worry about... its all about the experience rather

than what people are thinking or judgments... that was probably... since I have moved from there... the further I have gotten from living there... now mind you I would never ever go back to live there... that's the strangest part about it... but as the years have gone on from me being there the confidence has kind of dropped... it's a totally different world because now it is about having to make... like find your claim and a lot of that is based on beauty and first impression looks... I think... other people who have influenced... I met a group of older... meaning 15+ years older than I was... 15 years and more than that older than I was... a group of women in Santa Cruz and they were all beautiful and all very different from each other but... they are all different body types, all different color hair, I mean just the whole thing... but they are all just beautiful women, amazing women... there is sort of an independence to them... there's... its so hard to try to put it in words... I think they also probably influenced me greatly... and not so much by... I mean some of it I think was just general encouragement of living and being where you are at and enjoying what you do... striving and kind of blooming where you're planted... but there's that ultimate acceptance that I don't think is really in the real world... I think often times that's missing

#### Personal Ideals of Female Beauty: Changes Over Time

When asked if their views of female beauty ideals have changed over time eleven participants (11= 92%) said yes and one participant (1= 8%) felt that her views have not changed. All of those who felt their ideals had changed felt the change was an increased valuing of internal characteristics of female beauty.

##### Participant 7

I think that I am more confident in terms of not just outside beauty I mean over time I have become more self confident in terms of my personality and being more comfortable with that and um, seeing that as being the more attractive thing but at the same time I can't remember a period of complete oblivion to what society says is beautiful physically.... I feel more confident, the older I get the more confident I feel in a way but I mean I am also aware of aging so I don't know.... I think just learning about who I am, being more comfortable with who I am learning who I am, my career development as well, being more self reliant, even financially, relying more on myself, not really feeling dependant on anyone, I think that has a lot to do with it, and also just having close friends, just good relationship and good support system, people that mirror back to you that you're doing good

##### Participant 1

I think I have realized too that I'm never ... that my body is never going to be a supermodels' body... and just to be more comfortable with what I have and I have never really obsessed about it and my expectations of what I could look like are never going to happen

#### Participant 4

I've kind of changed over the years with my idea of beauty... I think my idea of beauty... since I do work and I've studied old people for years now... I just... I find... I do... I find everyone absolutely beautiful and I see 105 year olds and I see 80 and 90 and 70 and 60 year olds... I mean I see every age and I really find the older women tend to be more beautiful than all of us and I don't know if it's just that they have finally grown into it... I don't know what it is... but its somehow reassuring

#### Participant 9

I think over time that they have become a lot broader.... in high school there was an emphasis on exterior appearances for women .... I didn't particularly like that emphasis and made a conscious decision when I went to college..... [in college] there was more diversity, less emphasis on physical emphasis.... I think my idea of beauty ideal has expanded and encompasses more than it would have in high school where I was in a more sheltered environment.... I think that's made me realize that you know as you get older your body changes but just because your body changes you can still have control over what you look like and that beauty is different for each person

#### Participant 12

I've become more aware of the importance... of the value of a person outside of the outside package... and I think that's always been sort of a... always been shallow and... its sort of a shallow situation anyway... so its sort of a desire to develop internally more... I think I've always been that way... but I think that it just grew and grew and grew as I got older and... I mean... you know... you go to college and decide what more you want to have as a life and a career and have a purpose... you know and so its sort of what I developed... with that and then people you get exposed to and experiences you get exposed to and relationships... I think personally in relationships I think and interactions with people I've realized more and more what I value as opposed to the superficial

#### Participant 10

I would definitely say that they have changed... I would say that when I was in high school I really ascribed to having that... thin and you know trying to be perfect and spending time in front of the mirror and spending a lot of time on makeup... and you know... as I've gotten older I've realized that that external stuff is not something I want to waste time on... I would rather spend time with somebody rather than spend time in front of the mirror doing my hair or makeup... way too much of an effort... I would rather play with my son

#### Participant 5

I do... I would think that when I was younger that Asian wasn't necessarily beautiful... its not that I wanted necessarily to be another race... I remember when I was younger thinking that white people were more beautiful because being Philipino there's this strong emphasis on what color your skin is... so when I am really tan my mom says, oh gosh you need to get out of the sun because you are very ugly... because if you are lighter then you are suppose to be of a higher class because you do not have to be out in the sun to work and so the lighter you are the more beautiful you are... and that still holds true to today... when I watch Philipino TV a lot of people are very light... so I think that because my mom told me that at a young age I was like... well you can't go any lighter than white... so I think that's just why I thought before that white people are more beautiful...

but now that I think I have become more comfortable with myself I don't think that is necessarily the case

Participant 11

I'm just older, wiser... the field that I'm in... we always have to self reflect and we come across some many people with what we do and... you know I can't help but be kind of a sponge and change and grow... so I think also part of being beautiful is having an open mind and not being too closed... to not taking in new information

Participant 8

It was just sort of... feeling more confident... I don't need that external reinforcement as much as I think I needed it before... I definitely feel like its there... its really easy to get into that... but I think for a lot of women when they get older they tend to start to value themselves more... with more internal things... and not always looking for the external sort of acceptance... of who they are... having to come from the outside and having to be like everybody else... I don't know... I'm definitely not totally there... but I feel like I'm moving in that direction a little bit more... kind of you know having a little more compassion for yourself... because you're not gonna be in the perfect mold.

Participant 3

I don't think they've changed very much... I still see people who... if there's a warmth to somebody's eyes, even if they are standing next to someone who would be defined by most people as more physically attractive, I see them as more attractive, definitely more beautiful... its definitely hard for me to separate the material that way unless its somebody who I am totally separate from... like if I see an ad or a TV star or something then that becomes completely aesthetic because obviously I can't know them

### Self Perception of Female Beauty

Participants were asked to respond to the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree, "I am a beautiful woman." Participants generated responses of strongly agree (5= 42%), agree (5= 42%), and neither agree nor disagree (2=17%).

Participants were then asked why they rated themselves as they did. Again there was a theme that as women become more confident and self accepting they feel more beautiful. Even participants who expressed potential for further growth felt good about themselves but acknowledged they could do better.

Table 8

*Participant Responses to Statement, "I am a beautiful woman!"*

Participant	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	X				
2	X				
3	X				
4		X			
5			X		
6		X			
7	X				
8		X			
9		X			
10			X		
11	X				
12		X			

Participant 1

I think you become more beautiful as you mature and become older, kind of like a wisdom thing almost... so I think I definitely can be more confident and comfortable with myself... so I will leave room for improvement... but I would definitely say I... I don't know... I'm comfortable with how I look and I'm pretty fortunate in the genes that I got and that I think of beauty is not as much of being attractive and pretty... so I guess I would say a 2... yea a 2 because there is room for improvement and I think you get more beautiful.... I do obviously self doubt myself and have those moments of eww I am ugly and you know have those emotional moment.... So I need more confidence and to be more comfortable with myself... and not really care what other people think and I still have those want... like that want... because there is something about compliments and people saying that you are beautiful or you look pretty... I think everyone kind of gets a little boost of self esteem with things like that... and I think I would love to not get that or not want that because I feel like I should get to the point where I don't need reinforcement from other people, that I am beautiful... I still need to work but overall I am comfortable with myself

Participant 7

Because I feel confident... like I said I feel like I have come pretty far in terms of my career... and I feel like I'm an attractive woman and... like I take care of myself... and I try to do what I can... I mean there can always be improvements especially in terms of health and exercise and eating right and all that stuff... but I feel like I do the best that I can to take care of myself and I get affirmations about it at the same time.

Participant 8

I think I would have answered that question differently a few years ago... but I think today I would say that I am so much more confident... I feel that answering this question is something that is up to me... I'm not answering this... what I think other people will say... its just been the road from me... to actually not feeling that way at all to feeling

that way now... and its not something that I look in the mirror and say this... its more that... I don't know... there's qualities... I mean struggles... I've had to come over and just being able to really believe that... not just hearing it but believing it yourself has really been something... that I feel more strongly... that this is something that I am... that I feel this way about myself coming from more of an inside place

#### Participant 11

Well that's a hard question; I talk to teenagers about this all the time... you know how it's not ok to say in our society "you know well I've got it going on" and those that do say it you always kind of look and go... she's not all that... you know... but if I'm talking about that inner beauty thing then I would be very confident .... I am a beautiful woman.... because I do strive to be open-minded... I do care about people and how I come across and you know... I think smiling is such a huge factor in beauty... I think coming across and smiling instead of scowling... I mean it's huge to me and I think that I practice that all the time... well again what we do as psychologists... we try to build trust and rapport... and we try to do that gently through listening... you know... active listening and I just think that... I work really hard at doing that and when I think that is a quality that makes me a beautiful person because I try to be kind and gentle to the external world

#### Participant 4

I do embrace myself and who I am and where I'm at and what I look like and who I am meaning who I am as a person and the different roles I've taken on as anything from a wife to and eventually a mother... and I work really hard to be a really good social worker... so all those things the intentions are all good in there and so... and I see that... I don't think that... I think that someone is always striving to become fully their potential

#### Participant 12

I think I am a very caring and compassionate person... and I try my best to take care of myself and I... um... you know mind, soul, body... I think I am really and constantly working on self awareness and I have a bigger perspective of the world in that way... I don't know what else you want me to say about that... I have a lot of really good people in my life and I feel like I am very fortunate and blessed... and a lot of good girlfriends and you know... we are all very close and I've been very fortunate... not to say its all been external validation... but appreciation of qualities that are internal of me make me feel that I am that way... you know its more like... you know... I know who I am as a person but I think also having that validated from close friends that I respect the opinions of

#### Participant 6

I feel like... I... I feel... this is a difficult question to answer... because you know... we are always taught to be modest... but I feel like I do like my self... and I feel like I do possess a certain amount of confidence... I still feel like I have growth that you know... like with my idea of being beautiful... because I feel like it does come from within... I feel like there is always work to be done, like on myself so I wouldn't say like a 1, but I would say that I feel strongly that I am getting there

### Participants' Self Esteem Scores

Participants were verbally asked to respond to ten questions from the *Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale*. Responses were on a four point Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree (3 points) to strongly disagree (0 points). Participants' overall Self Esteem Scores ranged from 2.1 to 2.85, e.g. agree to strongly agree. It should be noted that the majority of participants average score was 2.5 points or higher; suggesting that, overall, the women in this sample had relatively high levels of self esteem (See Table 9).

### Other

At the conclusion of the interview participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add regarding their female beauty ideals. Most frequently noted (7= 58%) were participants' hopes for other women and society to broaden their definitions of female beauty ideals.

#### Participant 7

I mean I just try to be aware I think of how much society tells us, or how much the media more than anything how much the media tells us versus what it really means to be comfortable with yourself and that you're a worthwhile person, you know, and to be aware that ideal beauty is different in different cultures, that American culture/ western culture, we don't hold the same ideals necessarily as other cultures and I think its important to remember that there's not just one ideal in the world, there's not just one ideal anywhere but in general that there is not one ideal

#### Participant 12

I'm glad that dove... I don't know the whole piece but all I've seen is dove trying to make a statement out there... they've kind of had a few ads and commercials with things that kind of do the shock reality of trying to get people to be aware that there's beauty that comes in all shapes and ages and sizes and stuff... I just hope that there will maybe be sometimes be a little more of a turn

#### Participant 8

No, I don't think so, I'm sure I'll think of something tomorrow, No, I think, no not really, I guess just in terms of what we talked about you said that word acceptance and I think that if you can feel someone is accepting of themselves it just radiates something that is beautiful and I wish more women would do that.... its so sad, it makes me so sad, so I've thought about it more, we're sort of prisoners of our own minds that way and the whole media its a conspiracy.... It's driving me crazy

Table 9

*Participants' Responses on: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
"On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"	2	3	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	2.5
"At times I think I am no good at all"*	1	3	1	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3
"I feel that I have a number of good qualities"	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	3
"I am able to do things as well as most other people"	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	2	2
"I feel I do not have much to be proud of"*	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
"I certainly feel useless at times"*	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3
"I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on a level equal with others"	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
"I wish I could have more respect for myself"*	0	2	3	1	2	2	3	1	3	3	3	2.5
"All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure"*	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
"I take a positive attitude toward myself"	2	3	3	2	1	3	2	1	2.5	2	3	2.5
Total Score (highest possible 30)	21	28	28	25	23	28	26	23	28.5	26	28	27.5
Overall Self Esteem Score	2.1	2.8	2.8	2.5	2.3	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.85	2.6	2.8	2.75

*Note:* \* indicates these questions were scored inversely; 3= strongly agree, 2= agree, 1= disagree, 0= strongly disagree

#### Participant 4

I think it is important to understand society's ideals or ideas and thoughts but I think it's more important to accept your own and accept if they are different than society's... because I think that can be very hard to accept... because generally if it is different than what society thinks then you are always somewhat fighting... and that can get tiring and can get old really fast... that's why it helps to understand what you're not agreeing with... rather than being like... well I think this... you have a more general context of why... and why may be your fighting all the time with just living... so I think understanding is just really, really important... I don't think you have to accept society's ideas at all... ever... ever... but like I said that's more just me and how I've been raised and how I live my life

#### Participant 6

A lot of what we perceive, as beauty is a woman's confidence in herself... I think that that gets projected on some level and gets communicated unconsciously, like we don't necessarily think... I mean I suppose we do sometimes consciously think wow she is confident that makes her really attractive... but even if we are not consciously thinking that I think there is a lot to be said for unconscious communication and we as human beings I think are fairly receptive to the energy that people put out and really really beautiful women can be very insecure sometimes and I think that sometimes affects... its that inner sense of comfort with yourself that is a lot to do with beauty

#### Participant 11

I also respect that what somebody else considers beautiful and I may not like it for myself... I still get excited that somebody else sees something different than I do and think its beautiful... so just kind of a diversity... I appreciate diversity

#### Participant 9

I just hope that people's image of ideal beauty can be more broad than what it has been in the past... I think we're kind of starting on that trend a little bit with the runway and the fashion shows where they started to talk about body mass index for models... I think one thing that needs to happen is that they shouldn't... I think most magazines do this... like fitness magazines where they don't necessarily tell their weight but they say how many pounds they lost... I think it would be better to not put people's sizes down, you know... like now she's a size 2 or size 0, things like that... to get those numbers out of the media and also for the media to focus less on people's outward appearances... if someone looks really thin to not be just covering does she have an eating disorder, what does she eat when the person tells you that she eats in-n-out and they eat normally... to defend themselves and then the media doesn't buy that and... well... even for a person who is thin or a person who is overweight to talk about what their eating habits are, but you know... That's what people want to hear and that's what sells magazines but trying to get that out of the press a little bit more because women you know want to lose weight and see that these other waif models or actresses, not even actresses, waif celebrities are you know eating a certain amount of food and they think they should be able to... its all... its all smoke and mirrors, so you're never really know what's the truth and I think that probably for more impressionable women that that is sending a bad message

Participant 4

I'm one that never really accepts what society thinks or does, generally with almost everything... I usually have something to say about it... so no... I am not one to generally accept because that's what is... I'm usually one to define my own terms and fight if I have to fight.... I think some people don't know how to take it... like whether it's my openness with myself or like I don't make a big deal about anything... or I don't know... I'm trying to think of something really easy... there's some women who are like super shy to change in a room full of women or something and... I would change like on a train... I've changed in multiple areas in strange places because that's just what needed to happen at that point.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the relationship between personal ideals of female beauty, the self perceptions of female beauty, and self esteem in adult women. While a substantive literature has emerged in recent years exploring the relationship between cultural standards of beauty, body image and self esteem in women, most of this literature has been quantitative and conducted on samples of college age students that are transitioning to adulthood. Such research does little to capture the personal experiences and voices of adult women on this topic, i.e. the relationship between cultural ideals of female beauty and what women internalize as their personal ideals of female beauty; and, in turn, the relationship between women's self-perception of their own female beauty, the ideal(s) they have internalized, and self esteem, etc. Thus, this qualitative study was designed to make its contribution to filling this gap.

#### Major Findings

1. In terms of their ideals of female beauty, all participants made a distinction between internal characteristics and physical characteristics; and emphasized that internal characteristics were more important than physical characteristics.
2. There was far more consensus about what constitutes internal characteristics of female beauty than external characteristics of female beauty. The most frequently noted characteristics of internal beauty were confidence followed by self acceptance.
3. When asked to identify a person that exemplified their ideals of female beauty and tell why, two different lists of internal characteristics were generated differentiated by whether the person was personally known (friends, mothers, colleagues) or not (celebrities).
4. There was a positive correlation between the valuing of personal ideals of female beauty over cultural ideals of female beauty and self esteem. The more a participant relied on their personal standards of beauty, the greater their sense of self esteem.

5. There was a positive correlation between self acceptance/ feeling self confident (self esteem) and self perceptions of female beauty.

The idea of internal characteristics being more important than external characteristics has not been reported in the literature. Participants' responses were comprised of both internal and external characteristics to define their ideals of female beauty. A substantive amount of literature related to ideals of female beauty approaches beauty as primarily external characteristics, namely body image (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Lewis & Cachelin, 2001; Posovac & Posovac, 2002; Sinclair, 2006; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). While there is other literature that acknowledges beauty as both internal and external characteristics, no hierarchical value judgment is made. This may be a function of this being a sample of women squarely situated in adulthood as opposed to transitioning in or out of adulthood.

Also not reported in the literature is the idea that internal characteristics are mediated by whether the person is known or not. Another finding that has not been presented in literature is the fact that two different lists of female beauty ideals were generated to describe women that personified participants' ideals. These lists were differentiated by whether the person was personally known (mothers, friends, and colleagues) or not (celebrities) has also not been presented in the literature. The list describing women participants knew personally generated 14 additional characteristics that were not identified on the original list. No additional external characteristics were identified and that was true whether the woman was personally known or not.

In summary, participants' responses generated a correlation between valuing personal ideals of female beauty over cultural standards of beauty. This speaks to a common theme that participants expressed regarding a tension between cultural standards of ideal female beauty and personal standards. This tension is also acknowledged in the literature, however it is emphasized more in terms of the dichotomy of the body and the self (Clarke, 2001). Both aspects represent a divide between expectations of the external world and the inner struggles to reconcile a woman's

own ideals and those of the culture-at-large. However, the hierarchy and distinction given to internal characteristics of female beauty demonstrate a malleable perspective.

These major findings are collectively interrelated because they suggest, first having made the distinction of valuing internal characteristics over external characteristics and ideals of internal characteristics of ideal female beauty are far more flexible and mediated by knowing the person. The more women value internal characteristics over physical characteristics, the more positive the relationship between personal ideals of beauty, self perceptions of female beauty, and self esteem in women. Equally important is what did not happen. There was no additional list or expansion on physical ideals of female beauty.

#### Recommendations

We need to see if the findings of this study are replicated in more diverse samples of women that are more squarely situated in adulthood as opposed to college students that are transitioning to adulthood. This would be particularly true of the findings that have not been reported in the literature. Specifically, the women in this sample valuing internal characteristics over external characteristics of ideal female beauty and the personification of their ideals were mediated by whether the person was known or not. In adulthood, women might have an intuitive sense to value internal characteristics more than external characteristics of female beauty. It is not clear whether these findings are new because they capture women at a different point in time than traditional research. As women transition into adulthood (e.g. traditional college age), there might be more equal valuing of internal and external characteristics of female beauty as literature lends itself to the idea that women during this phase struggle more with their physical image. It is also unclear if these findings are an artifact of the skewed demographic composition in regards to education, occupation, and income. Therefore, more studies need to be conducted to see if these findings are sustained or further nuances are addressed. These studies should be conducted on

other sample of women who are squarely situated in adulthood as opposed to transitioning in or out of adulthood (e.g. traditional college age or menopausal women).

#### Generalizability

It is inherent to qualitative studies that findings cannot be generalized beyond the current sample. In addition it should be noted that this sample of convenience was skewed towards Caucasian women that were highly educated and relatively affluent when compared to the general population (See Tables 1 and 2). It should also be noted that there is typically a heterosexual bias in the research regarding female beauty ideals, unfortunately this study was no different.

## References

- Anastas, J.W. (1999). *Research Design for Social Work and the Human Services (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Anderson-Fye, E. P. (2004). A “Coca-cola” shape: Cultural change, body image, and eating disorders in san andrés, belize. *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry*, 28(4), 561-595.
- Banister, E.M. (2000). Women’s midlife confusion: “why am I feeling this way?”. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 21, 745-764.
- Berzoff, J., Flanagan, L.M., & Hertz, P. (2002). *Inside Out and Outside In: Psychodynamic Clinical Theory and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Settings*. New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Birtchnell, S. A., Dolan, B. M., & Lacey, J. H. (1987). Body image distortion in non-eating disordered women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 6(3), 385-391.
- Buunk, B.P., & Mussweiler, T. (2001). New directions in social comparison research. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 467-475.
- Chin Evans, P., & McConnell, A. R. (2003). Do racial minorities respond in the same way to mainstream beauty standards? Social comparison processes in asian, black, and white women. *Self & Identity*, 2(2), 153.
- Choate, L. H. (2005). Toward a theoretical model of women's body image resilience. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 83(3), 320-330.
- Davies, D. (2004). *Child Development: A Practitioner’s Guide*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- DeBord, K. (1997). Challenges and choices: Emotional well-being—women’s self esteem. Retrieved on March 26, 2007 from <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/hesguide/humanrel/gh6652.htm>.
- Dittmar, H. (2005). Vulnerability factors and processes linking sociocultural pressures and body dissatisfaction. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 24(8), 1081-1087.
- Engeln-Maddox, R. (2005). Cognitive responses to idealized media images of women: The relationship of social comparison and critical processing to body image disturbance in college women. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 24(8), 1114-1138.
- Erdwins, C.J., Mellinger, J.C., & Tyer, Z.E. (1981). A comparison of different aspects of self-concept for young, middle-aged, and older women. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 37(3), 484- 490.

- Evans, P. C. (2003). "If only I were thin like her, maybe I could be happy like her": The self-implications of associating a thin female ideal with life success. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27(3), 209.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117-140.
- Fingeret, M. C., & Gleaves, D. H. (2004). Sociocultural, feminist, and psychological influences on women's body satisfaction: A structural modeling analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 28(4), 370-380.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173.
- Gerrig, R. J. & Zimbardo, P.G. (2002). *Psychology And Life* (16<sup>th</sup> ed.) [Electronic version]. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Retrieved June 9, 2007 from <http://www.psychologymatters.org/glossary.html#s>
- Guaraldi, G. P., Orlandi, E., Boselli, P., & O'Donnell, K. M. (1999). Body image assessed by a video distortion technique: The relationship between ideal and perceived body image and body dissatisfaction. *European Eating Disorders Review*, 7(2), 121-128.
- Haworth-Hoepfner, S. (2000). The critical shapes of body image: The role of culture and family in the production of eating disorders. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 62(1), 212.
- Hurd Clarke, L. (2001). Older women's bodies and the self: the construction of identity in later life. *CRSA/RCSA*, 38(4), 441-464.
- Insel, L.E. (2005). *In their own words: An examination of the most influential factors in achieving recovery from anorexia nervosa*. Unpublished master's thesis, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.
- Jones, A. M., & Buckingham, J. T. (2005). Self-esteem as a moderator of the effect of social comparison on women's body image. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 24(8), 1164-1187.
- Josephs, R.A., Tafarodi, R.W., & Markus, H.R. (1992). Gender and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(3), 391-402.
- Kennedy, M. A., Templeton, L., Gandhi, A., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2004). Asian body image satisfaction: Ethnic and gender differences across chinese, indo-asian, and european-descent students. *Eating Disorders*, 12(4), 321-336.
- Kohler-Flynn, H. (2003). Self esteem theory and measurement: a critical review. *Thirdspace*, 3(1). Retrieved October 27, 2006 from <http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/kohlflyn.htm>
- Lewis, D.E., & Cachelin, F.M. (2001). Body image, body dissatisfaction, and eating attitudes in midlife and elderly women. *Eating Disorders*, 9, 29-39.

- Lin, L. F., & Kulik, J. A. (2002). Social comparison and women's body satisfaction. *Basic & Applied Social Psychology, 24*(2), 115-123.
- Lovejoy, M. (2001). Disturbances in the social body: differences in body image and eating problems among African American and white women. *Gender & Society, 15*(2), 239-261.
- Ludwig, M.R.& Brownell, K.D. (1999). Lesbians, bisexual women, and body image: an investigation of gender roles and social group affiliation. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 25*, 89-97.
- Matz, P. E., Faith, M. S., Foster, G. D., & Wadden, T. A. (2002). Correlates of body image dissatisfaction among overweight women seeking weight loss. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology, 70*(4), 1040.
- Mazur, A. (1986). U.S. trends in feminine beauty and overadaptation. *The Journal of Sex Research, 22*(3), 281-303.
- Monro, F., & Huon, G. (2005). Media-portrayed idealized images, body shame, and appearance anxiety. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 38*(1), 85-90.
- Noles, S.W., Cash, T.F., & Winstead, B.A. (1985). Body image, physical attractiveness, and depression. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 53*(1), 88-94.
- Ogden, J. & Elder, C. (1998). The role of family status and ethnic group on body image and eating behavior. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 23*, 309-315.
- Ogle, J. P., & Damhorst, M. L. (2005). Critical reflections on the body and related sociocultural discourses at the midlife transition: An interpretive study of women's experiences. *Journal of Adult Development, 12*(1), 1-18.
- Peralta, R. L. (2003). Thinking sociologically about sources of obesity in the united states. *Gender Issues, 21*(3), 5-16.
- Pompper, D., & Koenig, J. (2004). Cross-cultural-generational perceptions of ideal body image: Hispanic women and magazine standards. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 81*(1), 89-107.
- Poran, M. A. (2002). Denying diversity: Perceptions of beauty and social comparison processes among latina, black, and white women. *Sex Roles, 47*(1/2), 65.
- Posavac, S. S., & Posavac, H. D. (2002). Predictors of women's concern with body weight: The roles of perceived self-media ideal discrepancies and self-esteem. *Eating Disorders, 10*(2), 153-160.
- Rieves, L., & Cash, T. F. (1996). Social developmental factors and women's body-image attitudes. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality, 11*(1), 63-78.

- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Saucier, M. G. (2004). Midlife and beyond: Issues for aging women. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 82*(4), 420-425.
- Sinclair, S. L. (2006). Object lessons: A theoretical and empirical study of objectified body consciousness in women. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 28*(1), 48-68.
- Smith, D.E., Thompson, J.K., Raczynski, J.M., & Hilner, J.E. (1999). Body image among men and women in a biracial cohort: the CARDIA study. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 25*, 71-82.
- Snooks, M. K., & Hall, S. K. (2002). Relationship of body size, body image, and self-esteem in african american, european american, and mexican american middle-class women. *Health Care for Women International, 23*(5), 460-466.
- Soh, N.L., Touyz, S.W., & Surgenor, L.J. (2006). Eating and body image disturbances across cultures: a review. *European Eating Disorders review, 14*, 54-65.
- Spurgas, A. K. (2005). Body image and cultural background. *Sociological Inquiry, 75*(3), 297-316.
- Sypeck, M. F., Gray, J. J., & Ahrens, A. H. (2004). No longer just a pretty face: Fashion magazines' depictions of ideal female beauty from 1959 to 1999. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 36*(3), 342-347.
- Thompson, J. K., & Dolce, J. J. (1989). The discrepancy between emotional vs rational estimates of body size, actual size and ideal body ratings: Theoretical and clinical implications. *Journal of clinical psychology, 45*(3), 473-478.
- Tiggemann, M. (2005). The state of body image research in clinical and social psychology. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 24*(8), 1202-1210.
- Tiggemann, M., & McGill, B. (2004). The role of social comparison in the effect of magazine advertizezments on women's mood and body dissatisfaction. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology, 23*(1), 23-44.
- Wade, T. J., & Abetz, H. (1997). Social cognition and evolutionary psychology: Physical attractiveness and contrast effects on women's self-perceived body image. *International Journal of Psychology, 32*(1), 35-42.
- Walker, L. O., Freeland-Graves, J. H., Milani, T., Hans-Nuss, H., George, G., Sterling, B. S., et al. (2004). Weight and behavioral and psychosocial factors among ethnically diverse, low-income women after childbirth: I. methods and context. *Women & health, 40*(2), 1-17.
- Warren, C. S., Gleaves, D. H., Cepeda-Benito, A., Fernandez, M. d. C., & Rodriguez-Ruiz, S. (2005). Ethnicity as a protective factor against internalization of a thin ideal and body dissatisfaction. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 37*(3), 241-249.

Webster, J., & Tiggemann, M. (2003). The relationship between women's body satisfaction and self-image across the life span: The role of cognitive control. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 164*(2), 241.

Wiseman, C. V., Gray, J. J., Mosimann, J. E., & Ahrens, A. H. (1992). Cultural expectations of thinness in women: An update. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 11*(1), 85-89.

APPENDIX A

Human Subject Review Approval Letter

February 6, 2007

Megan Lynch  
710 S. Broadway, Suite 300  
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

Dear Megan,

Your revisions have been reviewed and all is now fine. We are happy to give final approval to your project.

*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 study.

Sincerely,

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

Cc: Mary Hall, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Flyer

***WHO DO YOU THINK BEAUTIFUL WOMEN ARE??***

**SEEKING WOMEN TO INTERVIEW BETWEEN THE AGES OF 23 AND 40!!!!**

***Join a research study to offer feedback on what you define as characteristics of beautiful women! Allow your voice to be heard and not be told what to think by the media or others.***

I am conducting a study on the current ideals of female beauty held by adult women and how they may have changed over time. I am seeking adult women between the ages of 23 and 40 to interview regarding your perception(s) on female beauty ideals. To participate in this study a woman must be between the ages of 23 and 40, English speaking, and willing to be interviewed. Participation is voluntary. Interviews will be held strictly confidential and scheduled at your convenience.

**If this sounds like you and you would like to participate in a research study that allows you to express your experiences please contact:**

**Megan Lynch at [mlynch2@email.smith.edu](mailto:mlynch2@email.smith.edu) or (925) 295-4870**

This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work.

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Megan Lynch. I am conducting a study on the beauty ideals held by adult women. Most studies on this topic have been survey research conducted primarily on undergraduate college age students that are transitioning to adulthood. Such research does little to capture their personal experiences and the voices of adult women. This study is designed to make a contribution to filling this gap by interviewing a small sample of adult women about their female beauty ideals. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree requirements at Smith College School for Social Work and for future presentation and possible publication on this topic.

The criteria for participation in this study are to be an adult female that is between the ages of 23 and 40 years of age, that is English speaking, and is willing to participate in a face-to-face interview with this researcher that will be tape recorded. You have been identified as potentially meeting these criteria.

If you agree to participate, we would schedule a meeting at a mutually agreeable time and location. The interview should take no more than one hour. The research schedule will contain some general questions about your demographic background, followed by a mixture of both open ended and structured questions that explore your views about female beauty ideals. You will be required to sign this informed consent before the interview beginning and you will be given a copy of the informed consent for your records.

Consistent with the mandates of the social work profession, strict standards of confidentiality will be maintained. A numeric code will be developed to identify interviews and your name and any other identifying information will be removed from all tapes and transcriptions. In future presentations and publications data will be reported, for the most part, in aggregate form. Any illustrations or brief quotations utilized will be sufficiently disguised so that it cannot be identified with a particular respondent. Tapes, transcriptions and any research notes will be kept secure in a locked file for three years in accordance with federal regulations. After that time this content will be destroyed.

In terms of risks and benefits, you will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may benefit from knowing that you have contributed to expanding our professional knowledge base about this important topic. You may also benefit from having this opportunity to reflect on your personal views and experiences connected with female beauty ideals.

There are few risks anticipated with your participation in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decline to participate with no consequences and you have the right to refuse to answer any specific question(s). However in any experience of self reflection strong feelings or memories may emerge that you might feel warrants additional exploration.

Thus a list of local mental health resources will be given to you at the time of the interview should there be a need for such additional support after the interview.

You may withdraw from the study anytime until April 1, 2007 when the findings will be written up. If you decide to withdraw, all data related to your participation will be immediately destroyed.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE 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: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:

Megan Lynch

710 South Broadway, Suite 300

Walnut Creek, CA 94596

(925) 295-4870

mlynch2@email.smith.edu

Please keep this copy for your records so you can contact me later or use the referral numbers!

## APPENDIX D

### Referral List

Kaiser Permanente, Walnut Creek  
710 South Broadway  
Walnut Creek, CA 94596  
(925) 295-4145

Kaiser Permanente, Oakland  
3900 Broadway, Building 2, First Floor  
Oakland, CA 94611  
(510) 752-1075

Alta Bates Mental Health Services  
2001 Dwight Way  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
(510) 204-4405

La Clinica  
1450 Fruitvale Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94601  
(510) 535-4000

Asian Pacific Psychological Services  
431 30th St # 6A  
Oakland, CA 94609  
(510) 835-2777

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I: Demographic Questions

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. How do you identify yourself racially or ethnically (please mark all that apply)?  
 White  
 Latina  
 African American  
 Asian/ Pacific Islander  
 Middle Eastern  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. What is your sexual orientation?  
 Heterosexual  
 Lesbian  
 Bisexual  
 Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What is your marital status?  
 Single  
 Married/ partnered  
 Separated  
 Divorced  
 Widowed
  
5. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_  
If you have children, what are their genders and ages?  Male       Female
  
6. What education have you received?  
 Grade 1-12 \_\_\_\_\_  
 High school diploma/ GED  
 Undergraduate Studies/ Degree(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Major/Minor  
 Graduate studies/ Degree(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Specialization(s)
  
7. What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
  
8. Which of the following ranges best describe your income?  
 0- \$25,000  
 \$26,000- \$50,000  
 \$51,000- \$75,000  
 \$76,000+

**Part II: Clinical Questions**

1. What do you consider to be the ideal when you think of female beauty or a beautiful woman?

---

---

---

2. Can you think of someone who exemplifies your ideal of female beauty or a beautiful woman? Tell me about this person.

---

What makes this person your ideal?

---

---

---

3. What has been the most significant factor(s) to influence your current ideal of the beautiful woman? (Listen for what & how) Have your views changed over time?

---

---

---

4. How would you respond to the following statement and why?

“I am a beautiful woman!”

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly
Disagree				Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

---

---

---

5. I am going to make ten statements and ask you to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a scale of 1-4. 1 being strongly agree, 2 being agree, 3 being disagree and 4 being strongly disagree.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**

Source: Rosenberg, Morris. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965.

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself

1      2      3      4

At times I think I am no good at all

1      2      3      4

I feel that I have a number of good qualities

1      2      3      4

I am able to do things as well as most other people

1      2      3      4

I feel I do not have much to be proud of

1      2      3      4

I certainly feel useless at times

1      2      3      4

I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on a level equal with others

1      2      3      4

I wish I could have more respect for myself

1      2      3      4

All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure

1      2      3      4

I take a positive attitude toward myself

1      2      3      4

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your views of the ideal in female beauty?

---

---

---

---