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## Oppression of Obesity

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## THE OPPRESSION of OBESITY

by

BRAD JOHNSON

(Under the direction of ROSEMARIE STALLWORTH-CLARK and  
WILLIAM REYNOLDS)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation study investigated the cultural influences and oppressive effects of obesity among 10 highly visible adults in contemporary USA media. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What are the influential cultural factors affecting the increase of obesity in the USA? (b) What are the oppressive effects of contemporary cultural biases perpetuated toward overweight/obese/fat people in the USA?

Participant characteristics assumed to indicate the cultural factors of influence on the development of obesity as well as the lived experiences of oppression were identified through the analysis of participant responses to constructed interview questions. The following cultural studies tenets guided the construction of the questions: (a) articulation; (b) hegemony; (c) ideology; and (d) representation.

Phenomenological analyses indicated that there are multiple cultural factors that influence the development of

obesity and that the lived experience of oppression is common among those who are obese, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or gender. The study indicated that the oppression of obesity began early in the participants' lives and continued into adulthood—at home, at school, and in the workplace. The analyses also revealed that the study participants were vulnerable to the effects of key cultural factors that affect the development of obesity in contemporary society. Specifically, these influences include the following: (a) misleading advertising; (b) sedentary lifestyles; and (c) increased consumption of processed foods.

INDEX WORDS: *Obesity, Cultural Studies, Overweight, Oppression, Phenomenology, Weight Bias*

THE OPPRESSION OF OBESITY

by

BRAD LEIF JOHNSON

B.S. North Georgia College, 1996

M.Ed. North Georgia College and State University, 1998

Ed.S North Georgia College and State University, 2003

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## THE OPPRESSION OF OBESITY

by

BRAD JOHNSON

Major Professor: Rosemarie  
Stallworth-Clark

Committee: William Reynolds  
Marlynn Griffin  
Joanne Chopak-Foss

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful family who supported and encouraged me throughout this journey. I would like to thank my late father, Herman Johnson, for instilling in me a passion for learning and for being a man I hope to measure up to one day. I would also like to thank my mother, Carolyn Johnson, for being an encouragement, motivator, and supporter. She has always encouraged me to simply do my best, and for that, I am truly grateful. I would also like to thank my nephews Jeremy, Zach, and Josh for reminding me to enjoy life fully and to keep everything in balance.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	07
LIST OF TABLES.....	11
LIST OF FIGURES.....	12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	13
Cultural Studies as a Theoretical Frame.....	17
Statement of the Problem.....	17
Purpose of the Study.....	18
Research Questions .....	19
Significance of the Study.....	19
Definition of Terms.....	23
Summary.....	25
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	26
Scope of Literature Review.....	26
Cultural Studies.....	27
History of Cultural Studies.....	28
Tenets of Cultural Studies.....	35
Present Day Cultural Studies.....	42
Cultural Influences on the Obesity Epidemic .....	46
The Obesity Epidemic.....	46
Cultural influences .....	54
Eating Habits.....	55
Processed Foods Consumed.....	61
Corporate Marketing and Food Advertising.....	61
Sedentary Lifestyles.....	71
Emotional Effects of Obesity.....	73
Social Effects of Obesity.....	77
Media Influence on Weight and Weight Bias.....	81
Television.....	85
Summary.....	86
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD.....	87
Phenomenology.....	87
Selected Population and Participants.....	89
Data Collection Strategies.....	90
Data Analysis.....	92
Assumptions and Limitations.....	94
Summary.....	96
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS.....	97
Description of Participants .....	98

Findings .....	101
Horizontalization of Data .....	102
Meaning Units.....	103
Themes.....	122
Thematic Textural-Structural Description.....	123
Early Influences.....	124
Diets and Eating Habits.....	128
School Experiences .....	132
Self Image .....	137
Experiences with Oppression.....	140
Discrimination for Women .....	148
Media Perpetuates Bias of the Overweight.....	153
Influences on Weight Increase.....	160
Summary/ Composite Textural-Structural Description .....	165
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMATION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	
Summary of Study .....	172
Procedures .....	177
Findings .....	179
Implications of the Study.....	181
Recommendations for Further Research.....	188
Conclusion.....	189
REFERENCES.....	192
APPENDICES	
A THE ELISA DONOVAN STORY .....	207
B THE DR. YVONNE SANDERS-BUTLER STORY .....	210

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Guiding Questions for Interviews.....	91
Table 4.1	Themes Associated with Participants' Experiences with Weight Bias.....	123

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	Income Related Obesity Levels .....	49
Figure 2.2	Adolescent Boys Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years).....	51
Figure 2.3	Adolescent Girls Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years).....	52
Figure 2.4	Increase in Overweight and Obesity Prevalence Among U.S. Adults by Racial / Ethnic Group .....	53

## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

As a teacher and wellness specialist, I am deeply concerned that the rapid rise in obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Current national estimates suggest that over 64% of adults are overweight, and 30% are obese (Brownell, 2004,). Further, researchers have shown that because obesity is seen as something that is controllable, many feel justified in making condescending remarks toward overweight/obese individuals (Rogge, 2004). Sadly, a negative stigmatization follows those who are obese causing emotional and social stress for innumerable individuals, including many students in USA schools.

Throughout my years in K-12 education, I have taught many obese students, and I have seen first-hand the effects of the negative stigmatizations that they have experienced. Many of my students have brought notes to me to be excused from physical education classes so that they wouldn't have to dress out in front of the other students or participate in activities where they would be chosen last, or not chosen at all. Some of my students have even avoided social activities (such as dances) because of their weight. And some of my students have created coping mechanisms such as

making fun of themselves so that others wouldn't make fun of them. I have watched as some of my students have experienced an accepted type of discrimination as they have sat alone at lunch or were called names, or weren't picked to be on a team in physical education classes. It has always saddened me to see these young students struggle with the burden and resultant oppressions of obesity.

Obviously, with 60% of adults in the nation either obese or overweight, the struggle with obesity is not an isolated problem. I have seen the same child-behaviors, stereotyping, and discriminations regarding obese adults. I remember adult clients at my gym who were always hoping to find the workout or diet food that would help them get into shape. Yet, many of my clients have indicated that they felt getting into shape is an insurmountable task and that they often felt as if their weight were their fault because society conditions them to believe they deserve contempt.

The media, as the mind and voice of society, are aware that many Americans are obese. Television and magazines are full of advertisements offering the latest fad diet or formulas that will make the consumer fit and feel good (Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992). And there is an abundance of advertising inundating the media and wellness fields

related to diets and supplements that purportedly help individuals lose weight quickly and effectively.

Noone is exempt from the impact of the media and the stress of busy lifestyles. Personally, for the past seven years, I have been in graduate school working on advanced degrees while teaching fulltime as well as coaching sports--practically year round. This means that I have worked all day, coached sports until evening, and then either worked until late hours on a research paper or attended classes. I have had little time to workout, or to prepare healthy meals--quite a task when living alone. Consequently, during the last few years, I gained about 50 pounds. Awareness of this weight gain was difficult to bear because I have always been very athletic and into weight training--even as an adult. As I have considered the causes of my weight gain, I have reasoned that if I could gain weight unsuspectedly, then perhaps there are many other people gaining weight without realizing it or without understanding that cultural influences may be affecting their weight gain.

My research has focused upon my life professionally and personally and extended to the inclusion of research participants because I want to understand why I have gained weight and why there has been such a rapid rise in obesity

in our culture over the past two decades. I hope to assist my students and others to make intelligent choices about their weight and health. I also believe that it is important to address the cultural stereotypes and stigmatizations associated with obesity in efforts to teach every student to make healthy food and lifestyle choices and to prevent the further escalation of obesity throughout the nation.

While there are many layers of issues associated with obesity, this dissertation review of literature focused upon the cultural influences that have affected the rapid increase in obesity in the nation over the past two decades as well as what are the effects that negative stigmatizations that have been placed upon those who are overweight or obese. In addition, because the negative stigmatizations associated with a *perception of fatness* provide no clear distinction between being overweight and obese (Brownell, 2005), in this dissertation research, the interview narratives of selected individuals who are *overweight* and/or *obese*, now or as children, were examined. *NOTE: During the course of this research, I decided to incorporate lifestyle and dietary changes to see what effects they have on my personal weight and health.*

### Cultural Studies as Theoretical Framework

The use of *cultural studies* as a theoretical frame for this study is especially appropriate as cultural studies research is concerned with critically analyzing the meaning and practices of everyday life within a culture (Sarder, 2004). These meanings and practices include "knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and other habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.4). Also, cultural studies allows the researcher to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to *power* (Canaan & Epstein, 1997). Thus, this study sought not only to discover the cultural causes of the rapid increase in obesity rates in the USA, but also, to discover what are the oppressive effects of such an epidemic. For example, the food industry, the mass media, advertising and other cultural factors may influence the rate of obesity as well as the social stigmatizations associated with obesity.

### Statement of the Problem

As stated above, approximately 60 percent of adults and youth in the U.S. are either overweight or obese (Brownell, 2004). This means that there are many people who are potentially not satisfied with their weight. Consequently, the desire to lose weight has created a 50

billion dollar a year weight loss industry in the United States (O'Connell, 2004). Furthermore, bias against the obese seems to be an acceptable form of discrimination in our culture. Obese people are often considered morally inferior, and it is considered to be socially acceptable to make condescending comments about obese persons without regard to embarrassment or humiliation (Rogge, 2004). Further, bullying of overweight children in the schools, as well as discrimination in the workplace, are not uncommon practices. Thus, the oppression of obesity appears to be rampant. Schools, homes, and communities need to be informed of the epidemic rise and oppressive effects of obesity. The health and well being needs of all youth and adults call for the transformation of societal attitudes, mores, and norms.

#### Purpose of the Study

With the primary purpose of discovering information concerning the rising epidemic of obesity in USA society for informing teachers, educational administrators, and other educators of the possible oppressive curricular environments of our growing children, this study was focused around the following two key objectives: (a) to identify the cultural influences of the rapid increase of obesity within USA society. The following factors were

examined—the USA food industry—marketing, advertising, and availability; consumer-eating habits; types of processed food consumed; the sedentary lifestyles of contemporary Americans; and other cultural attitudes and habits; (b) to investigate the oppression of obesity in terms of the oppressive social and emotional effects of *weight bias* toward individuals in USA society. The research was accomplished through interviews during which individuals shared their lived experiences with being overweight or obese. The interview questions were designed to reveal common themes associated with the experience of being overweight or obese. Importantly, the interviews were guided by research questions associated with cultural attitudes toward obesity.

#### Research Questions

The guiding research questions for this study were:

1. What are the influential cultural factors affecting the increase of obesity in the USA?
2. What are the oppressive effects of contemporary cultural biases perpetuated toward overweight/obese/fat people in the USA?

#### Significance of the Study

This study sought to make a rational assessment of the rapid rise in obesity in the USA by examining the cultural

influences in the daily lives of those affected by the epidemic. The focus of the study was to (a) identify influences of the obesity epidemic; and (b) analyze the oppressive consequences of obesity. An examination of cultural stereotyping and expectations is useful for identifying cultural influences on obese individuals.

Cultural stereotyping(s) and expectations form society's guiding ideologies that influence individual lives. One such ideology is the generally held belief that obesity is one's own fault due to personal laziness and low motivation (Oliver, 2006). Another ideology is related to contemporary society's adoration of fit, lean bodies. Still another ideology is the widespread societal ideology that boys should live up to a masculinity image that has been characterized by the action heroes of the movies, and that girls are supposed to grow up to be skinny supermodels. These unrealistic ideologies place tremendous pressure upon individuals to look thin, lean, even skinny in order to be accepted—all the while contributing to the ubiquitous biases toward those who do not fit the ideals of thinness.

From a cultural studies perspective, it is impossible to make a rational assessment of the rapid rise in obesity without examining the ideologies that influence the daily

lives of those within the culture. Questions that arose during the early stages of the study included the following: Does the food industry unfairly target children, or obese individuals, for certain foods or supplements? Does advertising affect our food choices? Does the media perpetuate a negative stereotype of obesity through television and magazines? If answers to these questions should prove to be related to society's perception of obesity, then it would be important to answer them clearly so as to make strong efforts to reverse the national obesity trend. Reversing the trend will be no simple task. Some have hoped for quick fixes and overnight success.

However, the research shows that 95% of people who lose weight gain it back. Nevertheless, individuals still continue to seek out diet products that will make them thin (Wansink, 2007). This has created a multi-billion dollar weight-loss industry in the USA where overweight people are targeted by the industry as having a defect that can only be corrected with their product (Linn, 2004). This study examined these issues.

As noted above, assuming that multiple aspects of power influence the ideologies, expectations, and stigmatizations of a culture, one of the goals of a

cultural studies inquiry is to examine its subject matter in terms of ordinary, everyday practices with relation to power within the culture (Canaan & Epstein, 1997). Many cultural studies theorists and philosophers have examined power relations within cultures.

Michel Foucault (1977), a French philosopher and author who examined power as demonstrated in society suggested that society is influenced by the beliefs of institutions or groups of individuals who dictate what is acceptable, or what is the norm, and thus, what (or who) has power. He stressed that power is imposed by agencies such as prisons, schools, and factories, and that individual freedom is denied through these agencies.

Also, Paulo Freire (2000) a Brazilian educator and philosopher who examined *power* within cultures contended that everyone has some level of power and that at certain times, *all* can be *oppressed*, or *all* can be the *oppressor*. In the case of weight bias, Foucault and Freire both provided understanding. For example, doctors (in a position of power) are expected to be empathetic to their obese patients (in an oppressed position); however, research shows that many doctors have very negative attitudes toward the obese and prefer not to treat them at all for weight issues; and when they do offer treatment, they have an

expectation of failure for the obese patients (Brownell, 2005). If these same doctors (in power positions) become obese patients (in oppressed positions), they assume the position of the oppressed.

Finally, from a curricular and educational perspective, it is important to examine the oppression of obesity to ensure that overweight and obese individuals are given ample opportunities to attend school in a safe environment and to participate in physical activities that will enhance their health and self-esteem. Unfortunately, discrimination toward the overweight and obese begins at an early age. One study has revealed that students listed as obese were also the ones who were least wanted as friends and who were assigned many negative social characteristics (Scrimshaw, 1995), including those ascribed to them in the schools.

#### Definition of Terms:

Articulation: the cultural studies principle by which the relationships between production, consumption, politics, and ideology are theorized.

Cultural Studies: an academic research framework concerned with examining and critically analyzing practices of everyday life within a culture.

Fat: a perceptive term often used to describe a person who has an unusual amount of body fat.

Hegemony: most powerful groups within a society.

Ideology: a set of beliefs expressed by a group of people.

Obesity: a condition characterized by the excessive accumulation and storage of fat in the body. For men, defined as 25% or more body fat; for females, defined as 30% or more body fat.

Overweight: weight over and above what is required or allowed. A Body Mass Index over 25 is considered overweight. Body mass index is calculated by dividing weight by height.

Oppression: unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.

Phenomenology: Research method concerned with the investigation of meaning making within everyday life and how those meanings are developed through social interactions. Phenomenology research attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation, or phenomenon.

Representation: a cultural studies tenet showing connection between meaning and language and culture.

Stigma: a severe social disapproval of personal characteristics or beliefs that are against cultural norms.

Weight Bias: unreasoned judgment or prejudice against individuals that are overweight, obese, or fat.

## Summary

Obesity in the USA is rising at alarming rates. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of this epidemic, including the cultural influences affecting the increase and the effects of the oppression of obesity on the individuals involved. The disciplinary tenets of cultural studies provided the theoretical frame for the study with the expectation that the cultural influences affecting the increase in obesity can be addressed in the schools, homes, and communities of USA society.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature concerning (a) the use of cultural Studies as a theoretical framework for the present study; and (b) a review of the research and scholarship that informs the field on the rising obesity epidemic as well as the oppression of those who suffer with obesity in USA society.

## CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature concerning the following broad research topics relevant to an obesity epidemic in contemporary USA society: (a) the use of *cultural studies* as a theoretical framework underlying the research of the present study; (b) the cultural influences affecting the current obesity epidemic; and (c) the oppressive cultural influences affecting negative stereotyping of obese individuals, including the weight bias influences perpetuated in USA mass media.

## Scope of Literature Review

The literature review for the present study was primarily focused on research and writings concerned with the definitions, characteristics, and research findings relevant to the current obesity epidemic in contemporary USA.

The review of the literature included the use of the Georgia Southern University Library, the **Georgia LI**brary **LE**arning **O**nline (GALILEO) databases and GALILEO Interconnected Libraries; textbooks discovered during my doctoral program of study; the websites of The Centers for Disease Control, QUESTIA, Advertising Age and the Heritage

Foundation, hand searches of bound journals were conducted and electronic resources were searched. Articles, chapters, and books located through Amazon online bookstore were found in their entirety and reviewed. Reference lists were checked on key journal articles to find additional sources. In addition, several dissertations concerned with the use of cultural studies as a theoretical frame for the present study were read in entirety. Other important journals and books, containing articles, chapters, and reports that provided extensive literature relevant to the present study of the epidemic of obesity in contemporary USA included the following: *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, *International Journal of Obesity, Pediatrics*, *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, and *American Journal of Public Health*.

#### Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is a diverse and multi-disciplined field. Thus, it is difficult to give one simple or resolute explanation for the use of the assumptions and techniques of cultural studies research in a study that is designed to analyze the cultural causes of obesity and the negative cultural influences toward obese individuals in contemporary USA society. Some view cultural studies as

the study of oppositions between elite and popular, hegemonic and marginal, theory and praxis (Miller, 1992).

*History of Cultural Studies*

Cultural studies emerged in the 1950s at the juncture of a number of complex historical events. Sometimes the focus was on the American influence within Great Britain and other times on the new forms which modernization was taking after the Second World War. However, "both descriptions pointed to the appearance of a *mass culture* made possible through the rationalization, capitalization, and technologization of the mass media" (Grossberg, 1993, p. 24). Cultural studies by its very nature has adapted and changed as society has changed in time, as Trend (1992) states:

The more integrated field of cultural studies began to emerge as a response to the generalized inability of humanistic disciplines to account for the complexities of everyday life...it argued that culture is not so much value that inhabits a particular commodity or sign but an event that occurs as such things are used. For this reason it is both a site of perpetual struggle and political possibility...a response to perceived social and political shifts (p. 17).

The field of cultural studies has strengthened its position within education because of the diversity and multidimensional characteristics of the scholarly approach to the study of phenomena. While its focus initially was on power struggles associated with class, gender, and Eurocentric influence, it has embraced other relevant aspects of culture that influence members of society. Cultural studies can not be compartmentalized or reduced to one belief or standard, for as Surber (1998) stated:

It is difficult to imagine a time at which human beings were entirely satisfied with the conditions of their lives. It is equally hard, if not impossible, to conceive of a state of affairs either natural or cultural to which every person or group would give its unqualified assent. In fact, the most archaic narratives we have, from mythologies to founding religious texts, to the earliest histories of world civilizations, are full of conflict, opposition, and revolt against established order. Since the beginnings of documented human association, human culture and its implicit critique seem to have developed hand in hand (p. 1).

The history of cultural studies is as complex and diverse as the definition itself (Barker, 2000). As Barker

explained, "to offer a truly comprehensive account of cultural studies would be to reproduce every single text ever written within the parameters of cultural studies" (p.3). But there are key concepts that have evolved and key individuals who cultivate the use of cultural studies as a research tool.

The foundation of cultural studies is based in critical theory, among the writings of the Frankfurt school --with key figures--writers, philosophers--such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse who developed critical theory aimed at the "social contradictions underlying the emergent capitalist societies of the time" (Strinati, 2004, p.47). Other individuals who have influenced cultural studies include Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, and Antonio Gramsci, as well as many other scholars (Storey, 2003).

It is within the framework of cultural studies that one has the opportunity to make an initial connection with *curriculum, hegemony, and power struggles* within a society--for cultural studies allows one to examine and critique local and global hegemony as well as resistances to the hegemony. In such a manner, cultural studies assists the researcher to critique power and power struggles within a society, allowing the examination of power struggles

between classes, ethnicity, and gender. The study of the struggle for power (hegemony) between groups is one of the major *tenets of cultural studies* (see definition of terms), extending into the disciplinary areas of anthropology, psychology, art theory, and literary criticism (Sardar, 2004).

The works of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall are considered by many to be the foundational texts of cultural studies (Sarder, 2004). Some of these founding figures of cultural studies actually started their careers in the educational field, including extramural departments and adult working-class courses. It was in adult education classes that Raymond Williams first started to look at the idea of culture. *Culture and Society* (1958), and *The Long Revolution* (1961), are two of Williams's most notable works and through these he defines *culture* (see definition of terms) as an "all inclusive entity, a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual" (Sarder, 2004, p.29). Culture from Williams's viewpoint "constitutes the meanings and practices of ordinary men and women or all lived experiences" (Barker, 2000, p.40).

Historically, Richard Hoggart's book, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), help to define and give shape to cultural

studies (Grossberg, 1997). Hoggart began his career as an adult educator at the University of Hull in Great Britain. Then as a professor of English literature at the University of Birmingham, he founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hoggart details the account of culture within the working class from his childhood in contrast to the commercial culture that had pervaded English society. It is commonly believed that Hoggart's experiences growing up in a working class home were integral to framing his definition of culture and the position of education within it. Hoggart regarded post war Britain's American television, magazines, the jukebox, and romance novels as "intrinsically phoney" (Turner, 2002, p. 38).

Another Englishman influential in early cultural studies research was E.P Thompson. Thompson's work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1978) was enlightening to the working class (Sarder, 2004). His writing as described in Baxendale (1992) was one of the first histories of popular behavior shared and created by working-class people without the oversight of political and economic organizations. Thompson's father was anti-imperialist and greatly influenced Thompson's early life. Thompson remembered growing up "expecting governments to be mendacious and imperialist and expecting that one's stance

ought to be hostile to government" (Dworkin, 1997, p. 17). Thompson argues with Marxists to contend, "class is a historical phenomenon that cannot be understood as a structure or a category" (Sarder, 2004, p.31). He believed that class was forged and created by people through social relations and experiences. Through his writings, Thompson sought to recover the agency, concerns and experience of the masses of English population often ignored by the dominant thought traditions (Sarder, 2004).

Other influential cultural studies researchers include Stuart Hall. Hall was a recognized figures associated with cultural studies as a theoretical foundation for research. Hall worked at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, England during the 1960's and headed the Centre during the 70's. The name *cultural studies* was derived from the CCCS and particularly from the 1970's when the Centre was directed by Stuart Hall (Probyn, 1993). Although Hall held certain Marxist views, he, like Thompson, didn't believe that class could explain and determine everything. He felt that society is propelled by conflict based upon multiple factors of race, religion, sex, region and other factors rather than class and economics (Sarder, 2004). One of the most important aspects of Hall's beliefs is that cultural theory and knowledge

must transcend the confines of the intellectual community and actually affect and shape the culture of the masses. Stuart's emphasis has always been on the balance between knowledge and the transference of that knowledge beyond the realm of intellectuals. He contended that this is how cultural influences can be understood and utilized, thereby creating change.

The tradition of cultural studies continues to expand and grow. Especially in higher academe, many educators are focusing upon the use of cultural studies to examine social and political issues as they relate to culture from a media and technology- driven perspective. For example, it would have seemed anti-intellectual to engage in educational debate through the use of media in the past. However, through the use of cultural studies and the use of *articulation* (see definition of terms) many ideas can be shown to have correlation that would initially seem to lack commonalities. Examples of these associated (articulated) concepts may be "Schools and sitcoms, fast food and faculty, science fiction and science curriculum... law and Lord of the Rings" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 44) which are examples of conjunction that now occur within the field of cultural studies (Reynolds, 2006).

### *Tenets of Cultural Studies*

While cultural studies is a diverse field, it does have certain traits or characteristics that help give form to it. These characteristics are important for determining the methodologies that are needful with regard to research within the field. The characteristics, or tenets of research, most appropriately applied in this cultural study are the following: (1) *articulation* (2) *hegemony*, (3) *ideology*, and (4) *representation*.

*Articulation* is a concept that was introduced by British cultural studies researchers and has become central to its practice (Kellner, 1995). Articulation allows two cultural texts, or practices, to be defined--within the context to each other; that is, articulation of concepts allows the researcher to form a contextual connection between two cultural texts or practices, as in metaphorical expression. However, articulated connections between different practices doesn't mean that there is one fixed articulated meaning, but rather that *meaning* is produced through the connection, or act of articulation of the texts or practices. Although the meaning of the articulated connection itself is not necessarily reflective of power, the meaning is based upon context and the people involved, and the connected meanings are predominantly viewed in

relation to power (Storey, 2003). Articulation is the means by which the researcher can characterize social formations without "falling into the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism" (Slack, 1996, p.122). Further, articulation is "the principal way in which the relations between production, consumption, politics, and ideology are theorized in cultural studies" (Grossberg, 1997, p. 10). For example, in our culture, Caucasians are usually considered reflective of the hegemonic power of white people; however when poor white people are examined, they are, more likely to be associated with a subordinate group rather than the hegemonic white race. This resonates with Reynolds view that "white working class men also have direct firsthand experience with oppression" (Reynolds, 2006, p.18).

For this research, articulation was used to address the contextual relationships, or connections, between individuals considered overweight/obese with those considered to be normal weight by peers and non-peers. Articulation was also applied to the examination of the relationship, or connections, between cultural influences such as media and the fast food industry on the etiology of increased obesity as well as what are the relationships between escalating obesity and the common oppression often

experienced by overweight/obese individuals in the USA. For example, in movies and television, there has been a "limited or absent representation of the plus-sized (which) reflect the tendency of mass entertainment to focus on a limited portion of American life" (Sternheimer, 2003, p.5-6). This is an example of how the entertainment industry has discriminated against the overweight and obese people within society and therefore has exuded power over them without appearing to do so. In the film "Super Size Me," Morgan Spurlock examines the health effects of eating a fast food diet for a month. He uses a cultural studies approach to demonstrate how children are conditioned by our culture to eat food that can be very harmful (Spurlock, 2004). The discussion includes the fact the McDonald's restaurants have playgrounds where parents bring their children to play, and they have kids' meals with toys that are desired by the children--influencing the parents to frequent their restaurant. Spurlock (2004) shows how fast food, and the USA food industries in general, influence how people eat. He also shows that the food industry doesn't take responsibility for the negative effects associated with eating unhealthy foods. Thus, corporations commonly practice power, yet often unnoticed by the average consumer.

*Hegemony*, by cultural studies definition, refers to the powerful influence of one societal group over another, or other societal groups and implies a struggle of power between groups within a society. It is an attempt to explain how dominant (most powerful) groups or individuals can maintain their power over subordinate groups so that less powerful groups embrace the norms and values of the dominant group. Hegemony is a concept, which "attempts to capture the complex nature of authority, which according to Gramsci *Hegemony*, by definition, refers to the powerful influence of one societal group over other societal groups and implies a struggle of power between groups within a society. It is an attempt to explain how dominant groups or individuals can maintain their power over subordinate groups so that they embrace the norms and values of the dominant group. Hegemony is a concept, which "attempts to capture the complex nature of authority, which according to Gramsci, cited in Holub (1992) is both coercive and dependent on the consent of those who are coerced into submission" (p. 45). Thus, hegemony, in one aspect, can be used to explain how governmental institutions can control groups such as the police, army, prisons, or even legislation. However, for purposes of this obesity study, hegemony is viewed as it is demonstrated within a framework

of civil society more so than a governmental one. Within this context, the ruling groups are aligned with education, churches, families, and even corporate structures that influence and give significance to certain values and norms. For example, even though most Americans are overweight or obese, cultural influences have stigmatized obesity to the point that obese people are seen as a subordinate group in USA society.

*Ideology* can be defined as a set of beliefs that is expressed by a group of people. Ideology has often been used to address the same terrain as culture itself, but it adds the component of politics, and without it, the study of culture becomes "a simple discussion of entertainment and leisure" (Storey, 2001, p.5).

Ideology, from a Marxist view, describes the power of the ruling class "as a kind of veil over the eyes of the working class, the filter that screened out or disguised their 'real' relations to the world around them" (Turner, 2002, p. 19). Ideology, from an Althusser view, describes the power of behavioral examples in everyday life encountered in routines rather than ideas about life (Storey, 2001). However, the best awareness of ideology regarding the oppression of the obese may be in relation to the meanings associated with obesity (Storey, 2001, p.5).

One example of ideology that pervades our culture is how negative connotations associated with being fat have come to denote a person that is lazy, lacking motivation, or even stupid (Oliver, 2006).

Through the use of texts and meanings, ideologies produce and reproduce the ideological structures of society, located in the state and in the institutions of civil society (churches, trade, unions, the family, the social, cultural apparatuses and so on) (Hall, 1992). Ideology then entails a power struggle to fix meaning, restrict meaning, and produce meaning within a culture (Storey, 2001).

Within any culture there are dominant ideologies that exist. For example, most people think to be successful that one must attend college, find a good job, buy a home, and start a family. Car dealers, mortgage lenders, and others rely on this ideology for their own success. Although everyone in a cultural context does not share in a singular ideology, there are certain ideologies that do influence other ideologies. For example, the food industry and fast food industry may not feel responsible for the increase in obesity because they ascribe to the ideology that obesity is a personal choice and people choose to be fat. In such

a manner, they subscribe to ideologies that align with their own beliefs and values.

*Representation* is a tenet of cultural studies that connects meaning and language to culture. Representation has to do with creating meaning and may be approached in three different ways; namely, *reflective*, *intentional* and *constructionist* approaches to making meaning. Reflective representation approaches refer to those meanings assigned to objects that already have existing meanings that most people understand, e.g., car. Intentional representation approaches refer to those meaning assigned by a speaker or writer who wants to express his or her own personal intended meaning. However, a constructionist approach to representation creates meaning through depiction, portrayal, or symbolism. This approach has had the most significant impact on cultural studies research (Hall, 1997).

Constructionist representation explores the textual generation of meaning. These meanings are embedded in sounds, objects, images, books, television, and even video games. Meaning through constructionist representation is produced, examined, and understood according to specific social contexts (Barker, 2000). For example, one of the most recognized symbols in the world is the Golden Arches

of the McDonald's restaurant. Physically, it is simply the letter M; however, to many people it represents a very different meaning. To a child it may be seen as a fun place to eat or play, while to an adult it may be seen as a cheap place to buy food for the family, and to another individual, it may be seen as an unhealthy source of food.

#### *Present Day Cultural Studies*

Today, the focus on cultural studies may include more media related areas such as music, movies, video games, and television because these are areas that have great influence on society and especially youth. For example, Reynolds (2006) in his analysis of the *Kill Bill* movies examines one scene where the main character discusses his fascination with superheroes. Reynolds states that Superman uses an alter ego named Clark Kent and that all the shortcomings that are engrossed in the character are actually a reflection of the human race. This is the type of creative and critical analysis that is indicative of cultural studies research and allows conversation to exist among students with topics that are of interest to them but that can incorporate philosophical ideology.

Another example would be Bach's (2006) examination of the movie *Napoleon Dynamite*. She examines the stereotypes that exist in teenage movies based upon social cliques. She

comments on the influence that media has on our culture in her remark, "It's important for educators and students to be aware of how the media shapes our idea of what it means to be cool or popular. As many researchers who point out the positive potential for films in creating new avenues for the marginalized, there seem to be twice as many researchers who remark on the dangers of the media in creating false mythologies or perpetuating stereotypes" (Bach, 2006). Her examination of this film and others is to illustrate the influence that media has on adolescents. Finally she ties the observations of the films back to education by discussing the stereotypes within movies and allows students to examine how the characters' identities were influenced. This, in turn, allows reflection by the students to examine how their own identities are influenced by movies, or by their peers. This type of reflective examination is important because media has such a strong influence on identity formation and teens often adhere to the lifestyles that the media portrays for them (Bach, 2006).

Research is showing that the media and pop culture now seem to be the most important means through which children are educated (Giroux, 2000). This is important to parents, educators and the community at large because it is

influential in the identity and development of children and all too often adults as well. Giroux writes:

“media culture influences what it means to claim an identity as male, female, white, black, citizen, or noncitizen as well as defining the meaning of childhood, the national past, beauty, truth, and social agency” (p. 109).

Because media has such an impact on people's perceptions, it is natural to assume that a negative portrayal of obesity in the media only perpetuates a negative image of obesity with the masses of society. Therefore it is important to understand and educate individuals about issues such as negative biases toward the obese that are perpetuated by the media, such as showing overweight people as dumb or the butt of jokes or by a “limited or absent representation of the plus sized (which) reflect the tendency of mass entertainment to focus on a limited portion of American life”, (Sternheimer, 2003, p.5-6).

Cultural studies, as a research method at home in the broad field of curriculum studies, is concerned with examining and making sense of individuals' lived experiences within a cultural context. Within this cultural framework, this study will examine the curricular forces and influences that affect what is valued and acceptable

and what are the norms within contemporary USA society concerning the oppression of obesity.

Because curriculum studies scholarship often appears as a critique of the status quo, this research may be perceived to be confrontational especially when there is exposure of injustice or inequality toward groups or ideas. Certainly, using the tools of investigation within cultural studies research as the framework for this curriculum studies research of obesity is appropriate. There are multiple factors that influence not only the increase in obesity but the cultural influences that affect the negative biases toward obesity as well.

This study will examine the culture of obesity as it is experienced through the lived experiences of individuals who have been overweight or obese. The study includes an examination of the power struggles between overweight and normal weight individuals as well as the media and corporate entities that may oppress them. For example, if the media perpetuates a negative stigmatization against the obese, then it may influence an individual's perceptions of those who are obese. As Giroux (2000) points out, the media influences identity and defines meanings within a given culture.

This cultural studies investigation will examine the relationship between corporations, the media, and individual structures as they relate to the hegemony, ideology, and representation of obesity within the curricular context of contemporary USA.

#### Cultural Influences on the Obesity Epidemic

One purpose of this research is to examine the rapid increase in obesity over the past two decades in contemporary USA. This is not an examination of the root cause of obesity itself, but rather an examination of cultural factors that may have influenced the increase in obesity. Therefore the purpose of this section is twofold, first to review the literature for terminologies of obesity and the statistics associated with it; and secondly, to review the literature for identification of factors that have influenced the rapid increase in obesity over the past two decades.

#### *The Obesity Epidemic*

Obesity is not only epidemic in contemporary USA; it is "arguably one of the gravest and most poorly controlled public health threats of our time" (Katz, 2006, p.135). One would think with health education and advances in science and medicine that the number of the obese in American society should be declining rather than increasing.

However, this study will examine other venues for causative factors, that is, what are the cultural factors that are influencing the rapid rise in obesity?

Stokes and Schultz (2007) define obesity in terms of body composition; that is, in terms of the ratio of lean body mass to fat. For males, obesity is usually defined as 25% or more body fat, and for females as 30% or more body fat. Others define obesity as a measurement referred to as the Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is not an estimate of body composition, but an indicator of obesity. Body mass index is an internationally used measure of obesity. The index is calculated by using a formula in which weight is divided by height (Vehrs & Hager, 2006). To calculate one's BMI, the individual should multiply his or her weight times 703, then divide that total by his or her height (in inches), then divide again that total by his or her height (in inches). That is, one's BMI equals one's weight in pounds times 703 divided by one's height in inches (squared). A BMI greater than 25 is considered overweight and a BMI over 30 is considered obese in adults. It is estimated that between 1999-2000, 64% of US adults were overweight and 30% of these adults were obese (Drewnowski & Specter 2004). In children and teens, there is no set BMI for overweight or obesity because these individuals are still growing and

developing (Vehrs & Hager, 2006). Therefore it is difficult to accurately determine if some students in classrooms are obese because of their specific patterns of growth and maturity. Nevertheless, it is possible to determine an estimated percentage of students who are overweight or obese when they are compared to percentile rank and other norm criteria of children within the same age group.

Importantly, the negative stigmatizations associated with obesity have less to do with a distinction between obesity and overweight but more with the individual's (and the culture's) perception of being "fat". Therefore the weight bias is not limited to individuals who are considered obese.

From a cultural studies perspective, it is important to examine the groups most susceptible to becoming obese because this may influence weight bias. For instance, while there are obese individuals in every socio-economic level there is a noticeable difference in obesity rates based upon income and education levels. There is a significant disparity between individuals with less education compared to those with advanced education, and women exhibit a higher incidence of obesity than men as income and education levels drop (Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). For instance, the obesity rate for females with less than 12

years of education is approximately 28% while the rate of obesity for females with higher than a college degree is approximately 11%. For men, the rate with less than 12 years of education is approximately 22% while the rate of obesity for males with higher than a college degree is approximately 12% (Drewnowski & Specter, 2004).

The same trends can be found with income levels as well. The higher the income levels the lower the incidence of obesity. However, there has been a greater percentage increase of obesity in the higher income levels versus poverty levels in the past 3 decades as Figure 2.1 suggests. For example, in the lowest income level, below annual incomes of \$25,000, there has been a 10-percentage point increase, while during the same time period those earning more than \$60,000 annually have experienced an 18-percentage point increase in obesity.

Income level-obesity prevalence statistics for 1971-1974	Income level-obesity prevalence statistics for 2001-2002
> \$25,000: 22.5%	<\$25,000: 32.5%
\$25,000-\$40,000: 16.1%	\$25,000-\$40,000: 31.3%
\$40,000-\$60,000: 14.5%	\$40,000-\$60,000: 30.3%
More than \$60,000: 9.7%	More than \$60,000: 26.8%

Figure 2.1: Income Related Obesity Levels (American Heart Association's 45th Annual Conference on Cardiovascular Disease Epidemiology and Prevention, Washington, April 29-May 2, 2005)

In 1992, wealthier families spent nearly \$2,000 per person on food which accounted for approximately 3% of total income compared to lower income families that spent only \$1,249 per person but accounted for nearly 19% of total income (Drewnowski 2004). In addition, the wealthy families bought food that was fresher, healthier, and of higher quality than the lower income groups that had a tendency to buy foods that were higher in sugar and fat. Obesity and poverty do seem to have a strong correlation, and it is strongest among women. Research shows that poor adult women are significantly more likely to be overweight than are non-poor women--47.3% of poor women are obese compared to 32% non-poor obese women (Rector & Johnson, 2004).

Although weight has increased for all children and adolescents over time, data from the Center for Disease Control indicate disparities among racial/ethnic groups especially among females. The following tables compare the prevalence of obesity by racial/ethnic groups of adolescent boys and girls aged 12 through 19 years. The first table reveals that obesity among all ethnicity groups has increased substantially. The prevalence of overweight by race and ethnicity among adolescent boys is reported in figure 2.2.

Adolescent Boys Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years)		
	Survey Periods	
	NHANES III 1988- 1994	NHANES 2003-2004
Non-Hispanic White	11.6%	19.1%
Non-Hispanic Black	10.7%	18.5%
Mexican American	14.1%	18.3%

Figure 2.2: Adolescent Boys Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years) (CDC, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey [NHANES])

The prevalence of overweight by race and ethnicity among adolescent girls is reported in figure 2.3 on the following page:

<b>Adolescent Girls Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years)</b>		
	Survey Periods	
	NHANES III 1988- 1994	NHANES 2003-2004
Non-Hispanic White	7.4%	15.4%
Non-Hispanic Black	13.2%	25.4%
Mexican American	9.2%	14.1%

Figure 2.3: Adolescent Girls Prevalence of Overweight by Race/Ethnicity (Aged 12-19 Years) (CDC, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey [NHANES])

The data reveal that there has been a dramatic increase in prevalence of overweight individuals by all ethnicities among adolescent boys and girls over the past two decades. The following Figure 2.4 shows that non-whites have the highest percentage of overweight and obesity. However, the increase in each group is considerable as the figures reveal.

<b>Increase in Overweight and Obesity Prevalence Among U.S. Adults by Racial / Ethnic Group</b>				
Racial / Ethnic Group	Overweight (BMI $\geq$ 25) Prevalence (%)		Obesity (BMI $\geq$ 30) Prevalence (%)	
	1988 to 1994	1999 to 2000	1988 to 1994	1999 to 2000
Black (non-Hispanic)	62.5	69.6	30.2	39.9
Mexican American	67.4	73.4	28.4	34.4
White (non-Hispanic)	52.6	62.3	21.2	28.7

Figure 2.4 Increase in Overweight and Obesity Prevalence Among U.S. Adults by Racial / Ethnic Group (CDC, Flegal et. al. JAMA. 2002; 288:1723-7)

These statistics show that there is a higher incidence of obesity among minorities, the poor, and less educated. Since these are groups who have traditionally experienced prejudice and discrimination, this may explain the apparent continuation of weight bias. But in a culture that highly regards individual success and perseverance, this may also explain why overweight individuals are stigmatized as lazy and having no motivation. Certainly there are common inferences drawn about those who are obese as well as poor and uneducated.

Oliver (2002) points out another alarming trend; that is, in addition to the stigmatization of the poor obese,

white women are more likely to be oppressed by weight bias. He states that "while public opinion on obesity is more likely to be defined by enduring social cleavages that anchor our political views, such as age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status" there is "one group that bears the brunt of our fat bias: white women" (Oliver, 2002, p.8; Oliver, 2006, p.79). Truly, an examination of the literature reveals that the oppression of obesity affects all females, which may explain why 90 - 95% of individuals with anorexia are females (Berg, 2004). Therefore it is particularly important to examine cultural factors that may influence weight gain for individuals in an effort to understand the possible underlying influences of weight bias.

#### *Cultural Influences*

With more than 60% of the population considered to be overweight, it would seem that there are many factors affecting the rapid weight gain over the past two decades (Drewnowski & Specter 2004). The question becomes--are people overweight because they are lazy, or are there cultural factors that influence weight gain? If one's culture influences weight gain, then weight bias may be based on false stereotypes. The assumption that people are overweight because they are lazy or have no willpower seems

to be common in our culture (Oliver, 2006). But a report released by the Institute of Medicine suggests that cultural factors are involved in the increase in obesity (1995). Therefore, eating habits, processed foods, media advertising, and inactivity (all elements of culture) may have impact on weight gain.

*Eating habits.* The literature reveals that weight gain is directly influenced by the number of calories consumed by the individual. And calorie consumption is up in the USA. Possibly the greatest culprit to weight increase over the past two decades has been *snacking*, specifically *highly processed* snacks (Oliver, 2006). During the 1980's, snacking became popular because it was thought that individuals, especially children, needed to eat more often than three times per day (Critser, 2003). This type of eating became known in the dieting world as "grazing" (p.39) and was thought to be the most effective way to manage weight. The problem with this concept is that over time, the foods that were consumed during snacking were predominantly processed foods that were high in high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), other sugars, and fats such as palm oil, rather than nutritious fruit and vegetables (Oliver, 2006,; Brownell, 2005,; Wansink, 2007; & Critser, 2003).

The evolution of processed foods began to appear in the late 1970's and early 1980's as certain nutrients such as HFCS were increasingly used in foods. As late as the 1960's and 70's meals were predominantly prepared and consumed at home in a family setting, but today, technological innovations, including vacuum packing, improved preservatives, and deep freezing have made foods more readily accessible (Cutler, Glaeser, & Shapiro, 2003). Consequently, the easy access of processed foods has made snacking a major part of the American lifestyle. Processed foods can be purchased in bookstores, drug stores, gas stations, and even retailers such as *Best Buy*, rather than limited to the traditional grocery store, which has been the major source of food supplies in the past. Accessibility allows Americans now to spend over *38 billion dollars* on snack foods annually (Oliver, 2006). In addition, since half of all meals are now consumed outside of the home (with 25% of those meals consisting of fast foods), and snacking has become such an integral part of our eating habits, it is clear that our eating habits have changed over the past two decades (Nestle, 2002).

The literature also reveals that weight gain is directly influenced by these eating habits. Studies show that there appears to be a correlation between television

viewing and weight gain (due to snacking). One study investigated the relationship between food intake and self-reported TV viewing in an effort to identify the impact of TV viewing on specific eating behaviors (Gore, Foster, DiLillo, Kirk, & West, 2003). Seventy-four overweight women completed questionnaires regarding television viewing and dietary habits. The results revealed that the participants may not have consumed meals while viewing television, but that they frequently snacked, which led to an overall increase in calories consumed and contributed to weight gain. Other studies concur (Crawford, Jeffery, & French, 1999; Critser, 2003; Stroebele, & De Castro, 2004). However, the issue is not just the food consumed but also the body's negative adaptation to the lifestyle of television viewing.

A study by Klesges, Shelton, & Klesges (1993) examined the effects of television viewing on resting energy expenditure of normal and obese children. The results concluded that children burn fewer calories while viewing television than they burn at rest. The difference in calorie expenditure, if extrapolated for a full day, would result in approximately 211 fewer calories expended per day, and the number for obese children averaged 262 fewer calories expended per day. If this were averaged for a

year, there would be a decrease in energy expenditure of approximately 95,000 calories or 27 pounds. This decrease in energy expenditure has been accompanied by a rise in television viewing from 2 hours per day in the 1970's to five hours per day in the 1990's (Berg, 2004).

Interestingly, a recent poll suggests that approximately 90% of individuals watch television while eating at home; therefore, the effects of high calorie foods and lowered metabolism related to television viewing may magnify the effects of weight gain (Wansink, 2007; Klesges, Shelton, & Klesges, 1993; Brownell, 2004).

Many studies show correlations between the amount of television viewing and weight gain. According to *Consuming Kids*, the incidence of obesity is highest among children who watch over four hours of television per day, and preschoolers with televisions in their room are more likely to have weight problems than those who don't (Linn, 2004). However, these correlations may have as much to do with the influence of products the children desire to eat as it does with sedentary activity. It is interesting that the corporations that spend millions advertising snacks that are high in fat and sugar are the same corporations that blame obesity on inactivity, conveniently shifting the responsibility from themselves (Linn, 2004). For example,

General Mills partners with the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Kraft Foods has sponsored *Get Moving* programs for children in the USA and abroad, yet according to *Advertising Age*, a company that reports on advertising, media, and marketing, General Mills spent approximately 920 million dollars on advertising last year and Kraft Foods spent approximately 1.40 billion dollars advertising foods which include high sugar cereals and high fat foods (Linn, 2004). Even Coca Cola has an outreach to help children called *Triple Play*, which encourages children to become more active, yet according to *Advertising Age*, Coca Cola spent over 740 million dollars last year on advertising in the USA.

Another important aspect concerning weight gain and eating habits deals with portion sizes. The USA is noted for its large portion sizes and the *all-you-can-eat* buffet, which is not common in other countries (Brownell, 2004). Some suggest that the motivation for offering larger portion sizes may have had less to do with the amount of food we eat at restaurants than it has to do with the potential to increase sales. An interesting phenomenon, reported by Critser (2003), is that a young movie theater executive, David Wallerstein, realized that people would never buy two boxes of popcorn at the movies because it

would seem piggish. Consequently, he decided to offer jumbo-sized popcorn boxes to see if people would pay a little more for extra popcorn. After the first week, not only did the jumbo-sized popcorn boxes sell very well, but soft drink sales increased, as well. Wallerstein, later as a director at McDonalds, introduced the same concept. He noticed that patrons would eat all the fries in a small bag of fries but would not purchase two bags of fries. He introduced the idea of a super sized serving of fries and within a few months, sales and customers increased (Critser, 2003). Thus, increased portion sizes increased sales.

Interestingly, since the cost of potatoes is about thirty cents per pound, an increase in serving size doesn't really hurt the profit margin of fast food fries--which is about six dollars per pound (Schlosser, 2001). The same is true for soft drinks, which can now be purchased in 32 ounces, 48 ounces, and even 64 ounces individual serving sizes. Sixty-four ounces of soft drink equates to about 800 calories (Brownell, 2005). From 1970 until 2000, there has been a tenfold increase in the number of larger sized food products offered to consumers (Wansink, 2007). Certainly, value and competition for consumers has played a

role in the super-sizing phenomenon in the USA (Wansink, 2007).

*Processed foods consumed.* Snacks and super-sizing aside, the consumption of processed foods has increased dramatically in the last two decades, to the point that now 90% of all money spent on food is used to purchase processed foods (Schlosser, 2001). The accessibility of processed foods (particularly snacks) is due mainly to one of the main ingredients in most processed foods--high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). This is a sweetener that was developed by food scientists in Japan as a cheaper alternative to sugar (Critser, 2003). This product was non-existent before the 1970's. Today the average American consumes more than 62 pounds of HFCS per year. The consumption of HFCS represents the greatest increase in consumption of any food source since that time (Oliver, 2006). HFCS is the sweetener of choice in processed foods because it is cheap to produce, it increases the shelf life of products, and it keeps products tasting fresher longer than other sweeteners (Critser, 2003). However, although HFCS seemed to be perfect for processed foods, there have been concerns about how it is metabolized in the body.

In a study by Bray, Nielson, and Popkin, (2004) the effects of HFCS were examined in relation to weight gain

with the following findings: (1) The use of HFCS in the United States mirrors the rapid increase in obesity; (2) HFCS is digested and absorbed differently than other sugars. For instance, it does not affect insulin, which aids in the regulation of food intake and body weight. This suggests that HFCS may contribute to increased energy intake and weight gain. Since it is digested differently, it is converted to triglycerides; consequently, HFCS increases fat intake (Bray, Nielson, and Popkin, 2004). Other studies have also concluded that HFCS consumption may have an influence on increased weight gain due to the process by which it is metabolized in the body (Aeberli, Zimmermann, Molinari, Lehmann, and l'Allemand, Spinass, & Berneis, 2007; Nakagawa, Hu, Zharikov, Tuttle, Short, Glushakova, Ouyang, Feig, Block, Herrera-Acosta, Patel, & Johnson, 2006).

Importantly, HFCS is not the only culprit associated with processed foods. Sugar and fats such as palm oil are also found within processed foods (Critser, 2003). The average American now consumes 152 pounds of processed sugar per year (Brownell, 2004). While the food pyramid guide suggests fats and sugar should be used sparingly, these two foods now account for 50% of the total calories consumed in the average American diet (Brownell, 2004, & Nestle, 2002).

The use of palm oil has been similar to that of HFCS because it is a stable fat that gives a longer shelf life to processed foods (Critser, 2003). Palm oil has been used for baking breads and cookies and frying french fries, and is tastier than other vegetable oils; but this may be due to the fact that it actually contains more saturated fat than even hog lard (Critser, 2003).

Soft drinks are another influence on food consumption and weight gain. Americans now consume an average of 53 gallons of soft drinks per year (Brownell, 2004). This averages to approximately 20 ounces of soft drink per day, which equates to fifteen teaspoons of sugar (Brownell, 2004). Soft drinks have now replaced milk as a dietary staple for most children and are the third most common breakfast food (Oliver, 2006). This trend is also evident in school districts, where from 1985 to 1997, milk purchases have decreased by 30% while the purchases of soft drinks have increased by 1,100 % (Nestle, 2002).

The problem with soft drink consumption is not just the increase in sugar and calories, but there is also the concern of excess calorie consumption from soft drinks. Soft drinks do not quench thirst well, and there is no caloric compensation associated with their consumption (Brownell, 2004). A study at Purdue University was designed

to determine if consuming liquid carbohydrates and solid carbohydrates would elicit the same compensatory response; in other words, the research question was...when extra calories are consumed, will fewer calories be consumed later to compensate? The research concluded that compensation occurred when the solid carbohydrates were ingested, but not when the liquid carbohydrates were consumed. This indicates that liquid carbohydrates promote increases in caloric consumption because there's no compensation for the extra calories consumed...leading to an increase in bodyweight (DiMiglio & Mattes, 2000).

In sum, over the past two decades, the average American diet has changed to include the following annual consumption: 41 pounds of potatoes, 40 pounds of white bread, 30 pounds of sugar and over two gallons of vegetable oil (Oliver, 2006; Brownell, 2004). It is even estimated that one-fourth of all vegetables consumed are french fries (Brownell, 2004).

One study by McCrory, Fuss, McCallum, Yao, Vinken, Hays, & Roberts (1999) was conducted to determine if variety within food groups impacts energy balance and increases weight. The study consisted of seventy-one men and women who reported their dietary intake and completed body-composition assessments. The results concluded "a high

variety of sweets, snacks, condiments, entrées, and carbohydrates coupled with a low variety of vegetables promotes long-term increases in energy intake and body fatness" (p.445).

As a result of such lifestyle dietary intakes which has included dramatic increases in snacking and the consumption of processed food, a corporate culture has been created that has greatly influenced the products available for consumption. In the 1960's and 1970's there were approximately 250 new candy and snack products marketed each year, but by the late 1980's that number had risen to over 2,000 new candy and snack products per year (Critser, 2003).

*Corporate marketing and food advertising.* Because processed foods have a long shelf life and can be sold virtually anywhere, there has been an explosion within the food industry. For example, in the mid 1980's, about 6,000 new food and beverage products were introduced annually, but by 1995 that number had risen to almost 17,000 new products per year (Nestle, 2002). The same growth occurred within the fast-food industry. In 1970, six billion dollars was spent on fast food, but by the year 2000, consumers spent over 110 billion dollars on fast food (Schlosser, 2001). While there may be multiple factors involved in the

increase in fast food consumption, it is difficult to overlook the influence that advertising has had on the industry.

Fast food consumption has become a part of everyday life for most Americans. By 1998, 89% of children under the age of eight had visited McDonald's restaurant at least once a month, and the vice president of marketing said his goal was to make it 100% by 1999 (Horovitz, 1998).

McDonald's is not the only fast food company that has experienced phenomenal growth over the past two decades. However, they have excelled in brand recognition, which serves them well in dominating the fast food business. Studies show that the McDonald's Golden Arch is more recognizable than the Christian cross, and that Ronald McDonald is the second most recognized fictional character in the world—second only to Santa Claus (Schlosser, 2001). Much of this recognition is due to the ubiquitous advertising of McDonald's. They have been the leader among fast food companies in advertising for several years, and according to *Advertising Age*, McDonald's spent approximately 1.75 billion dollars on U.S. advertising in 2006, compared to Wendy's 435 million, and Burger King's 380 million dollars. Obviously this type of advertising onslaught has an influence on consumers.

A study by Robinson, Borzekowski, Matheson, & Kraemer (2007), illustrates the impact that McDonald's has had on the food industry. The researchers examined the taste preference of young children (3-5 years old) based upon the influence of branding from a heavily marketed source. The children sampled identical foods that were either in McDonald's packaging or in plain packaging. The results of the taste test revealed the following: (1) Seventy-seven percent of the kids said the same French fries from McDonald's were better in a McDonald's bag than in a plain bag (13% liked the ones in the plain bag; 10% could tell they were the same). (2) Fifty-four percent of the kids said carrots tasted better in a McDonald's bag (23% liked them in a plain bag; another 23% could tell they were the same). (3) Sixty-one percent of the kids said milk tasted better in a McDonald's cup (21% liked milk in a plain cup; 18% could tell it was the same). (4) Fifty-nine percent of the kids said chicken nuggets tasted better in a McDonald's bag (18% liked them in a plain bag; 23% could tell they were the same). This shows the influence that fast food corporate marketing and advertising has on the attitudes of individuals, especially children, regarding food choices and consumption.

The above studies reveal the impact of advertising on the food choices of children and adults. Corporations spend exorbitant amounts of money on advertising every year because advertising works. Successful advertising campaigns over the years, for all types of products, have dramatically increased sales for the intended product. For example, the Clairol ad, "does she or doesn't she" campaign raised the number of women who used hair dyes from seven percent to as many as 70% just six years later (Linn, 2004), and the McDonald's *you deserve a break today* jingle which helped bolster sales from 587 million dollars in 1970 to 1.9 billion dollars by 1974" (Linn, 2004, p.2).

However, advertising regarding foods is focused upon processed foods rather than more wholesome foods such as fruits and vegetables. For example, one study found only 10 nutrition related advertisements compared to 564 food advertisements during 52.5 hours of Saturday morning television viewing, and the vast majority of these advertisements were for fast foods, soft drinks, sugary snacks and candy, which are the opposite of healthy food sources that are recommended (Kotz, & Story, 1994). The problem with advertising, especially the commercials geared toward young children, is that children can't differentiate between commercials and programming and therefore don't

understand the intent to sell products. Seventy percent of children ages 6-8 believe fast food is healthier than food prepared at home, largely because of commercials (Brownell, 2004). Since there are over 30 billion dollars spent on food advertising yearly (focusing mainly on processed foods high in sugar and fat), one can understand the influence on the amount of junk food that is now consumed (Brownell, 2004).

Another strong influence on food choices and a powerful strategy of major corporations has been to partner with television and movie companies to flood the market with brand name foods. A trip to any grocery store will quickly reveal food boxes graced with the characters from *Beauty and the Beast*, *Toy Story*, *Sponge Bob*, *Blue's Clues* and a multitude of other cartoon favorites. Children enjoy the cartoons and thereby assume the food products must be good as well (Brownell, 2004). Most of the products that are linked to television or movie characters are typically processed foods that are high in fat, sugar, and calories (Brownell, 2004; Nestle, 2002). Even the fast food industries have used this concept to ensure high consumption, as in the case of McDonald's and Burger King often including Disney characters with their children's meals. Even schools have partnered with companies such as

Coca Cola and Pepsi Co. to provide soft drinks either through vending machines or at athletic events.

One study that examined vending machines within schools found that of the drinks available, 70% were sugary drinks such as soda and juice drinks with less than 50% juice. Also, findings revealed that 67% of students purchased junk food or soda from vending machines at school (Hellmich, 2004). Shockingly, there are many school systems that actually have pouring agreements with the soft drink companies to serve only their brand of beverages in exchange for contracts that can be worth millions of dollars (Brownell, 2004). To understand the gravity of the situation, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2006), in a published report, expressed alarm that while advertisers insist their intention is only to promote brand selection, there is an unacknowledged increase in product consumption. The pediatricians stated that advertising directed toward children is deceptive and exploitive of children eight years of age and under. They also explained that several European countries either forbid or restrict advertising toward children and that the USA needs to follow this lead.

Another aspect of corporate manipulation of food choices is advertising that targets the obese through weight loss products. Within television, magazines, and

movies, USA culture has established thinness as the standard for health, beauty, and even morality (Stearns, 1997). This unrealistic expectation has led to a boom in the weight loss industry where citizens spend approximately 50 billion dollars annually (O'Connell, 2004).

Advertisements for weight loss pills and weight loss programs such as *Jenny Craig*, *Weight Watchers* and others not only inundate the consumer, but also target the overweight with the message that they have a defect that can only be cured by buying the product (Linn, 2004). This focus on weight loss has not gone unnoticed by the food industry either. Today there are literally hundreds of processed foods that are made to be low fat, low-carb, low calorie, light, or even diet to cater to an ever increasing number of dieters looking for a solution to their weight loss needs (Berg, 2004; Critser, 2003; Oliver, 2006;). Since most Americans view obesity as an individual moral failure rather than as the result of the food environment, obese individuals are often willing to try any weight loss method or fad diet to lose weight (Oliver, 2002).

*Sedentary lifestyle.* Although it appears that people have become less active, research shows that Americans work 163 hours more a year, or a month extra work yearly, than 20 years ago, but the work is more sedentary (Schor, 1992).

Sedentary lifestyles should be expected because the goal of capitalism (as in the USA) is to make life as convenient and easy as possible. So in effect, we are more sedentary because of the success of our culture. As early as the 1980's, it was evident that obesity was likely to increase through the increase in technology, the almost non-existent physical activity in many occupations, and the increase in passive leisurely pursuits (Allon, 1982). With the decrease in physically demanding jobs, most adults do not compensate by engaging in regular exercise. Approximately 15 % of adults in national surveys report that they work out regularly, which is a number that has remained constant since the mid-1980s (Farley & Cohen, 2001). In fact, a 2001 study revealed that over 50% of adult Americans get less than 30 minutes of moderate exercise (equivalent to a brisk walk) per day and 25% of participants said they get no moderate exercise at all (Okie, 2005).

Children are more sedentary in all areas of their lives compared to past generations. Thirty years ago more than 66% of children would walk or ride a bike to school compared to only 10% today (Berg, 2004). Even when it comes to leisure recreation, children ride their bikes 40% less than they did in 1977 (Berg, 2004). Although part of this decrease may be due to increased distances from school and

increased traffic danger as areas become more congested, it still impacts the amount of physical activity that children receive per day (Okie, 2005).

Within schools, physical education has practically disappeared because of budget cuts and focus on standardized testing. Around the nation, physical education time and even recess have received drastic cuts due to the increased pressure on schools to focus on academics and for students to perform well on standardized tests (Okie, 2005). National surveys have shown that the percentage of high school students who attended PE classes five days a week decreased from 42 percent in 1991 to only 15 percent in 1996; and in any given week 79 percent of adolescents did not receive any PE at all (Farley & Cohen, 2001). In fact from 1991 to 1999, high school physical education participation dropped from 42% to only 29% (Berg, 2004). These statistics reveal that inactivity is not necessarily caused by laziness, but rather it is a product of our culture.

*Emotional effects of obesity.* Since western culture idealizes thinness and devalues obesity, there is often a negative effect on the self-esteem of overweight individuals (Klaczynski, 2004). Depression is often a result of obesity (Sjoberg 2005). Children who are obese

tend to experience depression more than children who are considered normal-weight and are more likely to be ridiculed or degraded as well (Sjoberg, 2005). In a recent study, 164 grade school children who were either overweight or at high risk of becoming overweight were evaluated to determine levels of depression, trait anxiety, and weight-related distress (Young-Hyman, Tanofsky-Kraff, Yanovski, et.al, 2006). The results concluded that heavier children reported more psychological and weight-related distress, girls expressed more weight-related distress than boys, and depression was significantly associated with reporting of body size dissatisfaction.

The relation between depression and weight is not limited to children. In one study on depression, a group of 110 participants (80 women and 30 men) were evaluated to determine their depression/self esteem levels (Friedman, Reichmann, Costanzo, 2002). The *Multi-dimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire*, the *Beck Depression Inventory*, the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*, and the *Binge Eating Scale* were used for the study. The results of the study concluded that treatment-seeking men and women, those with more negative evaluations of their appearance, reported higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem. It

also revealed that the heavier participants reported even higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem

Many overweight children have "poor self-esteem and are subjected to teasing, discrimination and victimization and may be socially excluded outside of the home" (Katz, 2006, p.136). Self worth and feelings such as belonging and love can also be affected by obesity. For example, Brandon Bennett, a 16-year-old boy who weighed 411 lbs, was the focus of a documentary titled "*Obese at 16: a Life in the Balance*" (Gauche, 2006). Brandon was called "fat boy" and made fun of when he walked down the school halls. Even his friends said they felt bad for him because people would make degrading remarks when they saw Brandon. Brandon hated the fact that he couldn't go to ballgames or movies with his friends because he couldn't fit into the seats. He had low self-esteem because of his body size, and he turned to food as comfort, continually gaining more weight. Brandon felt that when people saw him, they only saw his weight and never took the time to get to know him as a person. Brian's experience with weight bias is not isolated.

In Minneapolis area schools, approximately 4,700 middle and high school students participated in a study to examine weight-based teasing from peers or family members, body satisfaction, self-esteem, depressive symptoms,

suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. The results revealed that peers teased 30% of females and 25% of males, while family members teased 29% of the females and 16% of the males. Fifteen percent of the females and 10% of the males experienced teasing from both peers and families. Furthermore, weight related teasing was associated with low self-esteem and high depressive symptoms, as well as thinking about and attempting suicide (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003).

It is apparent that western cultural values, which idealize thinness and devalue obesity, can have a negative effect on the self-esteem of obese individuals (Klaczynski, 2004). This finding reinforces the fact that culture may play a large role in the experienced oppression of the obese. In the USA, people take extreme measures to lose weight, which include succumbing to eating disorders, self-starvation, gastric bypass surgery, and the use of prescription pills (Oliver, 2006). Since many of these methods are unhealthy, it appears that Americans are dying to be thin (Oliver, 2006). Sadly, a woman at a "fat meeting" in Los Angeles once stated, "I wish I could get cancer or some other wasting disease, so I could die thin" (Mayer, 1983, p.10). Unfortunately, this obsession to be

thin and accepted has placed unwarranted emotional stress upon the overweight and obese individuals in our society.

*Social effects of obesity.* From a social perspective, individuals who are perceived to be fat deal with many stigmatizations. Obese individuals are viewed as bad or immoral— as if they choose to be fat (Allon, 1982). For instance, in two national surveys, 64% of participants believed people are overweight because they lack self-control, and 70% believed laziness is a major factor in being overweight or obese (Oliver, 2006). In addition, it is often believed that it is acceptable behavior to condescend toward obese people as in the following statement quoted by Rogge, “Because obese people are considered morally ‘inferior,’ it is socially acceptable to make slighting comments without regard to their feelings of embarrassment or humiliation” (2004,p.307). However, the oppression experienced by the obese is no joking matter. One study from the late 1960’s revealed that students listed obese children as the children with whom they least wanted to be friends and toward whom many negative social characteristics were associated (Scrimshaw, 1995).

Jean Harvey (1999) in her book, *Civilized Oppression* explains some factors related to the oppression of obesity. These factors include interactions that diminish and

control the recipient who has little recourse by posing cumulative acts of omission and commission that distort the relationship(s) and cause harm or disadvantage to the subject even though they may be without malicious intent. Many of these interactions are insidious and obscured in routine or daily encounters.

One area of weight bias that involves these oppressive factors is employment. In one study of job applicants for sales positions, the written descriptions of target applicants resulted in significantly more negative judgments for obese women than for non-obese women. The obese applicants were rated as lacking self-discipline, having low supervisory potential, and having poor personal hygiene (Rothblum, Miller, & Garbutt, 1988).

In like manner, children are not immune to the effects of weight bias (Scrimshaw, 1995). Obese school age children have difficult times finding clothes that fit and especially have trouble finding clothing in a variety of styles (Scrimshaw, 1995). According to the UK newspaper, *Daily Mail*, Professor Sattar at the University of Glasgow believes that oversize clothes should have an obesity help line number sewn on them to help individuals deal with the fat crisis (2006). Overweight children may also find it more difficult to make friends. In a study by Latner and

Stunckard, 415 fifth and sixth grade children were asked to rank drawings in order of likeability. The drawings were of overweight children, children with various handicaps, and normal weight children with no disabilities. The children were overwhelmingly more biased against the obese children than any other group (Latner & Stunkard, 2003).

The early stigmatization of obese children may explain their lower self-esteem, feelings of humiliation, and perceived teasing compared with their non-obese peers (Pierce & Wardle, 1997). Unfortunately, the feelings associated with childhood obesity are not alleviated by the transition into adulthood. Adults who were obese as adolescents have an extremely negative body image and feelings of low self worth even as adults (Scrimshaw, 1995).

The social effects of weight bias may be most experienced by females. According to studies, obese women often have few close friends, often marry later, and usually marry less desirable partners (Sobal, 2005). This type of discrimination may explain the previously mentioned fact that 45% of women are constantly dieting compared to only 25% of men. This may also make them a more susceptible target for the weight loss industry. Overweight white women are less likely to get roles in television, endure more

prejudice at work, and are even reported to feel five times more ashamed of their weight than other women (Oliver, 2006). The reason white women are targeted may be due to the possibility that culturally they are seen as part of the hegemony and have higher expectations from others of being thin and beautiful. Or as author Linda Nielson explains: "It's worth noting too that white standards of beauty increasingly became focused on a woman's thinness only after white women were granted the right to vote, started working outside the home in large numbers, and became equal to white men in terms of college graduation rates - a fact which might indicate that when a woman becomes well educated and enters male dominated professions, she is encouraged to look wafer thin, child-like, and as non-sexual as possible" (2000).

In a study by Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobol, & Dietz, (1993), the social consequences of being overweight were examined. Baseline data was taken in 1981. Seven years later, the participants were questioned regarding educational attainment, marital status, and household income. The results revealed that "women who had been overweight had completed fewer years of school, were less likely to be married, had lower household incomes, and had higher rates of household poverty" (p.1008).

However, the social stigma associated with obesity is not limited to females, and discrimination toward all those who are obese appears to be on the rise in USA culture. For example, seats in stadiums, busses, airplanes, and even restaurants are not designed for obese individuals which make it difficult for them to enjoy a movie, watch a sporting event, or to even take mass transit (Sobal, 2005). Even doctors are not excluded in discrimination against the obese. Surveys that have been conducted over the past 30 years all yield the same results, which is that doctors have negative attitudes toward obese patients (Brownell, 2004). In a survey of 620 doctors, 50% believed obese individuals were awkward, unattractive and non-compliant, while 30% also reported that obese individuals were lazy and sloppy (Foster, Wadden, Makris, Davidson, Sanderson, Allison, Kessler, 2003). It is possible that these biases influence the amount of healthcare treatment received by the obese since further discrimination by doctors would influence whether they sought medical attention.

*Media influence on weight and weight bias.* Mass media research suggests a distorted view of men's and women's body image (Greenberg, Worrell, 2005). There has been a "limited or absent representation of the plus sized (which) reflect the tendency of mass entertainment to focus on a

limited portion of American life" (Sternheimer, 2003, p.5-6). However, when obese individuals are present in television or film, they are portrayed as lazy and gluttonous, or they are ridiculed and shown disdain (Oliver, 2006).

One study analyzing over 1,000 television shows revealed that only a small fraction of the characters were fat and these characters were often the focus of jokes or portrayed in a bad way (Oliver, 2006). Another study revealed that from 1977 to 1997, the number of female characters on television with below average body weight rose from 38% to 76%, while only 24% of women in general population were considered below average weight in 1997 (Greenberg, Worrell, 2005). These statistics reinforce the media's desire to portray thin and beautiful females as the norm (Berg, 2004). When there are exceptions to this viewpoint in the media, it seems that it is usually a male that is overweight as opposed to an overweight woman (Greenberg, 2005).

Another study examined 135 scenes from television and movies to quantify and categorize the fat stigmatizations within the scenes. Results concluded that the commentary and fat humor were often verbal, directed toward another person, often presented directly in the presence of the

overweight target, and that men were three times more likely to make fat comments or jokes than women (Himes & Thompson, 2007).

The media bias is not limited to television. In one study of popular male and female magazines, it was determined that the women's magazines contained 10 times as many advertisements and articles promoting weight loss as the men's magazines. However, the men were subjected to advertising that suggested incentives to change body shape rather than simply lose weight. The study also supported the hypothesis that the frequency of eating disorders in males vs. females is more closely related to the reinforcement of related dieting behavior toward females than toward males (Andersen, DiDomenico, 1992).

In another study, 400 high school and college students were surveyed to determine the extent to which reading magazines had an impact on body image and eating disorders. Fashion magazine reading led to body dissatisfaction among the males, while the females related fashion magazine reading to higher rates of bulimic behavior. The reading of health/fitness magazines was related to increase in bulimic and anorexic behavior in the females but not in the males (Botta, 2003).

Media bias has a profound effect upon the body image of adolescents, especially females. A study of 214 high school girls was conducted to measure the impact of media images on adolescents' body image and thin ideal endorsement. The results revealed that media variables accounted for 15% of the variance for drive for thinness, 17% for body dissatisfaction, 16% for bulimic behaviors, and 33% for thin ideal endorsement (Botta, 1999). In another study, the influence of media on the weight concerns of girls was examined. The participants were 548 girls in 5<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grades. They answered a questionnaire that assessed body weight, body dissatisfaction, exposure to fashion magazines, the impact of media on body image, and whether they had ever gone on a diet. The researchers concluded that magazines have a strong influence on girls' perception of their weight and size. Sixty-nine percent stated that magazine pictures influence their idea of the perfect body shape, and 47% reported wanting to lose weight because of magazine pictures. There was also a correlation between the frequency of reading women's magazines and the prevalence of having dieted to lose weight (Field, Cheung, Wolf, Herzog, Gortmaker, Colditz, 1999). These studies illustrate that the media perpetuates weight bias and

influences one's perception of self, even if that perception is based upon unrealistic images.

*Television.* Besides the commercials for junk food and weight loss products, the volume of television viewed appears to have an influence on weight gain. By the time the average child reaches the end of her high school years, she will have spent more hours watching television than attending school (Neuman, 1985). Inactivity is related to the time that children spend watching television, but it is also related to surfing the Internet and working at computers. Children aged 2-18 spend approximately 38 hours per week watching television, surfing the Internet, and playing video games (Nestle, 2002).

There is evidence that children who engage in the least vigorous physical activities or the most television viewing tend to be the most overweight. Television viewing is thought to affect weight through several insidious ways: first, children are typically sedentary while watching TV; second, eating is often a complementary activity to television viewing; and, third, while watching television, children are exposed to many advertisements for foods high in sugar and fat that are thought to contribute disproportionately to weight problems (Anderson, 2003). Therefore, the evidence indicates that television has

played an influential role in the sedentary lifestyle choices of Americans as well as a role in increased weight gain.

#### Summary

In this chapter, extensive literature concerning the theoretical framework of cultural studies within the broad field of curriculum studies was examined as well as the multiple cultural influences on the increase in obesity in contemporary USA society over the past two decades. In addition, the oppression of obesity was examined from a social and emotional perspective as studies have revealed correlations between factors causing weight gain and the lived experiences of oppression. Chapter three will discuss the research method, participants, data collection, and analysis techniques used in the present study.

## CHAPTER THREE

## METHOD

The present study investigated the spreading epidemic and resultant oppression of obesity as it affects the lives of adults in contemporary USA. The general design of the study implies a qualitative study best met by *phenomenology* as the research method useful for obtaining information related to the experiences of selected obese individuals who volunteered to participate in the study.

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology connects well with cultural studies because it focuses upon how meanings are made within everyday life and how those meanings are developed through social interactions (Creswell, 1998). Resting on the assumption that there is structure and focus in shared experiences that allows individuals to be understood in relation to a more general worldview (Marshall, 1999), a phenomenological study attempts to "understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p.139).

Through analysis of shared experiences or stories, generalizations can be made about living life as an overweight/obese person. These generalizations can be helpful to someone who has shared similar experiences and

can relate to the experiences that have been described in the study.

Thus, this present study relied upon in-depth interviews with carefully selected participants using carefully designed questions to describe the essence of the experience of obesity in the cultural context of contemporary USA.

As DeMarrais & Lapan (2004) describe the phenomenological interview, the essence of an obesity experience is expected to emerge from interview data as participants describe the particular aspects of the experience of obesity as they have lived it. The essence, or structure, of the experience was discovered through interpretation of the rich, textual data provided by participants describing their particular obesity experience. Thus, the purpose of the phenomenological interviews was to "attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience" (p. 57), that is, the experience of obesity. I assumed the role of learner in that the participants were the ones who had the experiences. I considered my research participants to be experts on their experiences who were willing to share their experience with me, the researcher, interviewer, and phenomenologist. Although the questions used in the

interviews were carefully designed to obtain specific information, the interviews were designed as conversations with the participants. I allowed the participants freedom to describe their particular experiences in whatever ways they chose (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004)

#### Selected Population and Participants

In the present study, the participants were chosen based upon their shared experiences with being *overweight*. Thus, I identified adults in contemporary USA who have been overweight or obese at some point in their lives and who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences.

I sought out highly visible individuals to participate in the research. I contacted these individuals through their websites, agents, or publicists. Individuals in the mass media industry were sought because they are considered to be representative of those whose lived experiences are more likely to be culturally broad—with respect to contemporary USA culture—more so than a private citizen who would not, most likely, have experienced both public and private oppression. That is, these selected individuals are assumed to represent those who would possess first hand knowledge of bias experienced on a personal level but who would also have experienced the biases emanating from a media or cultural perspective as well. The interviews were

conducted at a time and place convenient to each interviewee. As Creswell (1998) suggests, a typical sample size may be five to twenty-five participants who have experienced the phenomenon (obesity) being researched. I sought to interview 10 participants since these participants were highly visible individuals and possibly more difficult to contact and interview.

#### Data Collection Strategies

Phenomenology, as the qualitative method used for this research inquiry, involved the use of taped and transcribed interviews with a selected group of adults who have experienced obesity at some point in their lives. It is expected that these selected adults reflected the larger community of individuals who have experienced the *oppression of obesity* at some point in their lives.

The interviews lasted for approximately one hour, providing in-depth information that was useful to answer the questions listed below. The following Table 1.1 shows the guiding questions for the interviews, based on cultural studies tenets, reported factors related to obesity, and research reported in the literature review.

Table 3.1 Guiding Questions for Interviews

Cultural Studies / Tenets	Cultural Studies/ Factors of Influence	Research Sources
1. Have you experienced weight bias as a child or as an adult? If yes, please explain. ( <i>Hegemony, Articulation</i> )	peer and non-peer influence social and emotional factors	Brownell, K. et al. (Ed.) (2005) <i>Weight bias; nature, consequences, and remedies</i> . New York: Guilford Press
2. What is your perception of culture in the USA toward overweight/obese/fat people? ( <i>Ideology, Representation</i> )	media and social factors	Garine, I. & Pollock, N. (eds.) (1995) <i>Social aspects of obesity</i> . New York: Taylor and Francis group
3. Are people overweight/obese/fat because they are lazy, or are there other factors involved? ( <i>Ideology, Representation</i> )	social and emotional factors	Oliver, J. (2006) <i>Fat politics</i> . New York: Oxford press.
4. How do you think the media portrays overweight individuals? ( <i>Hegemony, Representation</i> )	media influence factors	Greenberg, B. et. al "Portrayals of overweight and obese individuals on commercial television" <i>American Journal of Public Health</i> Aug 2003, Vol 93, No. 8
5. Do you think the media targets overweight consumers? If yes, explain how. If no, explain why not. ( <i>Ideology, Representation</i> )	cultural factors such as food industry, weight loss industry, magazines, etc.	Sternheimer, K. (2003). <i>It's not the media: The truth about pop culture's influence on children</i> . Boulder, Co: Westview Press
6. Describe any experiences where you have felt discriminated against because of your weight? ( <i>Hegemony, Ideology</i> )	cultural influences: peer or non peer factors	Eisenberg, M., Neumark-Sztainer, D., & Story, M. (2003) Associations of Weight- Based Teasing and Emotional Well-being Among Adolescents. <i>Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine</i> . v.157:733-738.
7. Do women experience greater weight bias in our culture than men? If yes, please explain. ( <i>Hegemony, Ideology</i> )	cultural influences: peer, non peer, and media factors	Oliver, J. (2006) <i>Fat politics</i> . New York: Oxford press.

## Data Analysis

Phenomenology allows for the analysis of rich interview data through analysis of the transcription of audio taped participant interviews. Through a process of sorting and defining data that is applicable to the research, the tapes were transcribed and coded (Glesne, 2006). After transcription, the following steps were followed (Creswell, 1998; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005):

1. *Statements were identified that relate to the topic.*

During this critical analysis of the transcriptions, I determined what information was relevant and what information was not relevant to the study. I did a compare and contrast of the participants' responses to the structured interview questions to look for similarities among the responses to the questions.

2. *Relevant statements were grouped into meaning units*

*and themes.* I identified any participant statements that stood out and/or revealed the essence or phenomenon of the guiding questions of the study.

These statements comprised what was referred to as meaning units. Techniques to identify themes included key words that appeared with frequency. A cutting and sorting technique was utilized which sorted similar

quotes by participants into common groups that emerged as themes and sub-themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

3. *Thematic Textural-Structural Description.* Next, I used the meaning units to develop themes and descriptions of those themes to construct thematic textural-structural descriptions of how the weight bias phenomenon was experienced by the participants.
4. *Composite Textural-Structural Description.* Finally, I developed a composite textural-structural description; that is, an overall description of the meaning and essence of the experience including an integration of the themes into a typical experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

As Marshall & Rossman (1999) have recommended, my final analysis included an exploration of all the meanings and perspectives present in the data and focused directly upon the essence of the oppression of obesity phenomenon as the participants in the study have experienced it.

One important aspect of qualitative research is the validity of the study. Since this is not a quantitative study there are no statistics to validate the process and work of phenomenology. Nevertheless, other procedures were utilized to ensure validity of the research. As suggested

by Glesne (2006) and Creswell (1998), the validity of this research was supported through the implementation of the following procedures: (1) Prolonged engagement--extended time learning the culture of the topic; (2) Clarification of researcher bias--reflection upon one's personal subjectivity to the topic; (3) Member checking--sharing transcripts with the participants to ensure their ideas and thoughts are represented accurately; (4) Rich description--writing that allows the readers to enter the research process or transfer the information to their own experiences because of shared characteristics.

#### Assumptions and Limitations

*Assumptions* inherent in conducting this study include the following: (1) It is assumed that the research questions, as included in the personal one-to-one interviews, represent a valid measure for identifying the contributing factors of obesity as well as for identifying the oppressive experiences of obese individuals in contemporary USA culture; (2) The interviewees were allowed to examine the self-report data to ensure the information is accurate and valid; (3) It was assumed that the influences and effects of obesity as identified in the study were the most relevant influences and effects

involved in the oppression of obesity in contemporary USA culture.

*Limitations* of the research include the following:

(1) Self-report data as reported in one-to-one interviews presents problems concerning social desirability and accuracy due to interest in making the socially-accepted response as well as the difficulty individuals have gaining access to information in their past that they not have directly attended to—causing them to infer rather than remember their experiences (Wilson & Nisbett, 1978; Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Simon, 1979); it is difficult for people to articulate the workings of their own mind (Ericsson & Simon, 1980); thus, the self-report data in the interviews may be erroneous to some extent. (2) The limited number of interviews (10 proposed) may not yield sufficient data for drawing valid conclusions concerning the cultural oppression of obesity in contemporary USA. (3) The interviewees selected may not represent a true sample of the obese population in the USA.

Besides limitations, the following are possible challenges as noted by Creswell (1998): (1) The researcher must have a solid foundation in the philosophical components of phenomenology; (2) The research participants must be

carefully chosen, since these individuals must have experienced the phenomenon under study.

#### Summary

In this chapter, the method of research was justified and the design of the study was described. This included a description of the population sample, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies. Methods for ensuring validity or trustworthiness of a qualitative study were also included. The next chapter involved the process of data collection, analysis and findings of the phenomenological interviews.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## ANALYSIS

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to describe and analyze the lived experiences of 10 highly visible individuals in the USA who reported in structured interviews the effects of weight bias on their lives. The research was inspired by cultural studies theoretical frameworks in which relationships and interactions, social stereotyping, and prejudices are viewed to be elements of a culture—often overlooked. Sections of this chapter describe participants' lived experiences with the oppression of obesity as they have experienced it in USA culture. Findings of the interviews are drawn from participants' responses to structured interview questions designed to gather qualitative data relevant to the experience of the oppression of obesity.

The phenomenological data analysis model used for this study made comparisons between and among participant responses that were categorized and reported as themes that emerged through analysis and triangulation of the interview data. First the participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy, and then triangulation of the data occurred as the researcher, major professor,

and a non-committee university professor examined the common themes indicated in the transcripts.

#### Description of Participants

I contacted and received consent from 10 highly visible individuals who are involved and/or employed in contemporary USA media areas. I contacted most of them through their publicists or agents in their given field. A brief biography of participants was collected to provide an understanding of the individuals' experiences and interactions within each of their particular media/cultural frameworks. Because participants in the study are considered to be public figures, each gave permission to use their real names in the research. Brief biographies of the 10 participants include the following:

*Mary Dimino* is a comedian from New York City. She has appeared on several national commercials and has been a guest on several television shows, including *David Letterman*, *New York Undercover*, and *Third Rock*. Mary reached a weight of 256 pounds as an adult. She often uses her weight struggles in her comedy routine.

*Richard Simmons* is a well-known fitness guru. He has produced many books, CDs, and DVDs related to health and fitness. He has helped millions of overweight and obese individuals deal with health and weight bias issues.

Richard was obese as a child and teenager while living in New Orleans.

*Alison Sweeney* is the host of the show *The Biggest Loser* and has appeared on the daytime soap opera *Days of our Lives* since she was a teenager. She was overweight as a teenager into her early twenties.

*Julia Havey* is the author of *Awaken the Diet Within*. She is a wife, mother, and author that lives in Missouri. She struggled with weight for many years and reached her highest weight of 290 lbs in her late 20's.

*Lindsay Hollister* was born in Ohio but moved to Hollywood after college to become an actress. Lindsay has been a recurring guest star on *Days of our Lives*, *Boston Public*, and *Joan of Arcadia*. She has also had guest appearances on *Scrubs*, *CSI*, *Law and Order*, and *Nip/Tuck*, as well as several other television series. Lindsay is one of the largest sized women in Hollywood.

*Jennifer Hasty* was born and raised in California. After college, she moved to Los Angeles to do comedy, then later became an actress, as well. She produced her own one woman show called *Wide Awake*. Hasty has guest starred on *Bones*, *The George Lopez Show*, and *The Unit*. She has also appeared in several theatrical productions and multiple

independent films. Jennifer was overweight as a child and an adult.

*Wendy Shanker* is the author of *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life*. She has been a guest on the *The View*, *Good Morning America*, and *CBS Sunday Morning*. She has also written articles for magazines such as *Glamour*, *Grace*, *Self*, *Shape*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie-Claire*, and *Seventeen*. She wears a size 18 to 20 dress.

*Layla Morrell* starred in the premiere episode of *How to Look Good Naked*. She decided to try out for the show after prompting from her mom to quit living like a hermit because of her weight. She is a native of southern California. During her 20's Layla reached her highest weight of 220 lbs.

*Ivory Kalber* is one of the top plus-size models in the industry. Kalber doesn't like to be classified as *plus size*; she prefers to be considered as *just healthy size*. She has done extensive work in print modeling, spokes modeling, and runway modeling. She has also interviewed other celebrities as a spokesperson for a television station in Los Angeles. Ivory's dress size averages between a size 14 and 16.

*Abby Ellin* is a journalist and the author of the book *Teenage Waistland: A Former Fat Kid Weighs in on Living*

*Large, Losing Weight, and How Parents Can (and Can't) Help.* She has written articles for the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Marie Claire*, *More*, *Self*, and *Glamour*. She is originally from Massachusetts but resides in New York City. She struggled with her weight through her early 20's even attending a fat camp when she was a teenager.

#### Findings

The steps of interview transcript analysis were the following:

1. *Horizontalization of Data.* I sent each participant his or her transcript to review and verify that information in the transcripts was accurate. Then I read every participant transcript several times and remained open to every statement. Every participant statement had equal value and weight. This process is known as horizontalization of data.
2. *Meaning Units.* I identified any participant statements that stood out and/or revealed the essence or phenomenon of the guiding questions of the study. These statements comprised what is referred to as meaning units.
3. *Thematic Textural-Structural Description.* Next, I used the meaning units to develop themes and descriptions of those themes to construct thematic

textural-structural descriptions of how the weight bias phenomenon was experienced by the participants. Only the portions of interviews that most powerfully reflect the theme were used.

4. *Composite Textural-Structural Description.* Finally, I developed a composite textural-structural description; that is, an overall description of the meaning and essence of the experience including an integration of the themes into a *typical experience* (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

#### *Horizontalization of Data*

The process of horizontalization of data began by reading the participants' transcripts multiple times and reflecting upon the meaning of each participant's experiences. All statements were considered equal in weight and value. Each participant was given the opportunity to make changes or additions to the transcripts during the process of reading, submitting for review, and making changes to clarify. Analysis triangulation of the data occurred as the researcher, major professor, and a non-committee university professor examined the common themes indicated in the transcripts.

*Meaning Units*

The meaning units were identified after multiple readings and reflecting upon the transcripts in order to reveal or capture the essence of the phenomenon that was being studied. Subsequently I clustered the meaning units according to the guiding questions, being careful not to take any statements out of context. The following responses were identified as most relevant to each guiding question:

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*Have you experienced weight bias as a child or as an adult?*" include the following statements:

**Mary:** I remember once that I had left my mom after talking to her and drove to a nearby park. It was a Friday evening and I just sat there in my car and I was crying. I was crying because my mom had cancer and was dying and I was the only one to take care of her. Suddenly a car pulled up near me with two Italian guys, I now call them the Guido brothers, and they started talking about me. They were talking to each other but made sure it was loud enough for me to hear. One of them said I wonder why she is crying? The other one said it is probably because she is fat and can't get a boyfriend. I sat there and cried even more because of their hurtful comments. I will never forget that moment.

**Richard:** By 8<sup>th</sup> grade I weighed 200 lbs. All the boys made fun of me because of my weight.

**Alison:** I still remember one letter I got at age 16 from someone that simply said fat cow in big letters.

**Julia:** I remember once I was going to an aerobics class wearing red tights, and a man came up to me and told me that I shouldn't wear red because it made my butt look big. I hate anything with the color red even to this day.

**Lindsay:** I was made fun of all the time during school. It was probably every day of my school life.

**Jennifer:** I remember my elementary PE teacher really had a disdain for me and would humiliate me in front of the other kids. For PE he'd weigh us in front of each other and when it was my turn he'd scream out my weight.

**Wendy:** I remember that I couldn't find clothes that fit, so my step mom had to take me to the store where large ladies shop.

**Layla:** I remember guys saying things like where are you going, fat burger? After being on *How to look Good Naked*, I did get some mail from people saying things like I was fat.

**Ivory:** As a plus size model, I still have people who won't work with me because they think I am too big for a shoot.

**Abby:** I was called names like *Flabby Abby* when I was in school. I also remember around the age of 12 or 13 years

old, my grandmother was always telling me that I was too fat, and she didn't let me come visit her one Christmas because she said I was too fat.

These experiences with weight bias show a clear articulation with weight bias and the predominant feelings associated with being obese. Even at a young age we are conditioned to make fun of fat people. Average weight people feel like they are better than obese people and have the right to make fun of them or tell them that they are fat.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*What is your perception of culture in the USA toward overweight/obese/fat people?*" include the following statements:

**Mary:** Fat people are seen as lazy, fat, sad.

**Richard:** I have learned that many people judge others by the pound. And isn't that a shame. People are discriminated against everyday for what they weigh. I think many people look at overweight people as lazy with little self worth. And once you are told you have no worth you start believing it. In many instances, the media has portrayed overweight people as unhappy, emotional, and sad. It has shown overweight people just sitting around doing nothing and

that is why Americans feel that way about overweight people. This is a very sad comment for our culture.

**Alison:** People are often judged by their size... I remember that I would get letters from people that would talk about me being overweight and would call me nasty names.

**Julia:** Obese people are seen as dumb, lazy, gluttonous, or possibly funny.

**Lindsay:** society views people as worthless because of their weight. They are seen as disgusting and lazy, it is outright discrimination. It is the last discrimination because everyone fears it... It is a shame that people allow others to dictate how they live their life. We don't tell other people about flaws they have, for example I would never tell someone that they have a gigantic nose, yet people feel like they can tell you when you are fat. We reduce an entire person's being and self worth to how much they weigh. It is just crazy.

**Jennifer:** I think we perceive obesity as one of the worst things you can be. A young girl would rather starve herself to the brink of death instead of being overweight. It's impossible to hide and everyone sees you for who you are on the outside first. Your dazzling personality is hidden under layers of fat. Ironically, however, overweight people are pretty invisible.

**Wendy:** I think the media bias against the overweight reflects the cultural bias against people who are overweight. The fact that we have a show called *The Biggest Loser*--and people are WATCHING IT--is indicative of a culture that is negative about overweight.

**Layla:** I think that people in society emulate what is seen on TV and in the movies, so when we see overweight people portrayed as weird, lazy, strange, or the butt of jokes, then that is how we perceive them to be as well.

**Ivory:** We all have some bias toward obesity; for example, at a size 14, I still look at someone that is a size 20 and think they are too big.

**Abby:** We associate obesity with gluttony, sloveness, and it's like the seven deadly sins. You are lazy, fat and lazy. You have no self-control.

The cultural tenets that related to this section focused upon ideology and representation. From an ideological perspective, obese people are believed to be lacking in self-control or lazy. It is their own fault that they are fat. Because this is the ideology, it is how obese people are often represented. Most obese people are portrayed in a very negative way on television, if they are portrayed at all.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*Are people overweight/obese/fat because they are lazy, or are there other factors involved?*" Include the following statements:

**Mary:** Food is readily accessible, it is available everywhere... You could just finish eating a lunch, and when you walk outside, you see a 40 ft. billboard for a sundae, so it makes you want to eat a sundae.

**Richard:** Frankly the American consumer is confused. They don't know what to do or believe in. Because of this confusion, it is easy to understand how individuals who are unsuccessful with weight loss can begin to blame themselves for their failure.

**Alison:** I think that the amount of food that we eat is too much; for instance, at an Italian restaurant, a serving of pasta is enough for 2 or 3 meals. The portion sizes are so large. But there are so many changes that need to be made.

**Julia:** Most people say it's the fatties' own fault. Our culture has given us fast food and cheap foods. Soft drinks can be purchased as large as 64 oz. sizes.

**Lindsay:** I think portion control is one of the biggest problems with weight gain. For example, if you go to the Cheesecake Factory and pay 15 dollars for a meal, you are

going to finish it even if it is too much because you don't want to waste food.

**Jennifer:** I think fast food and processed foods contribute to the problem of obesity. There are corporations that make so much money with processed foods.

**Wendy:** I believe that the increase in diet foods has actually influenced the gain in weight. I remember all the 100-calorie food packs, but they were processed foods.

**Layla:** I think advertising is a major influence. If you turn on the TV, there are all these food commercials.

**Ivory:** I think that dieting overtime actually harms your body rather than helping you and perpetuates weight gain.

**Abby:** I think the media has an impact on what we consume. You get totally mixed messages by the media... The message of corporate America is Eat! Eat! Eat! but don't get Fat!

As previously stated, our culture has created an ideology that overweight people are lazy and slovenly. Therefore if people are unsuccessful in losing weight, they begin to think it is their fault and that maybe they are lazy or unmotivated and that their laziness and lack of motivation to lose weight is the reason they can't lose weight. So, they actually buy into the false ideology. Overweight people are represented as having a defect and that is why the diet pills and diet foods are such a big

industry. Advertisements tell people to eat more and more, but don't even imply that when eating more and more, they will gain weight.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*How do you think the media portrays overweight individuals?*" include the following statements:

**Mary:** Women who are fat are seen as evil or sad. They are tragic characters. People like Oprah, Roseanne, and Delta Burke are always under scrutiny by the media... As a comedian, it's ok because the fat people are funny, but as a TV role it is purely stereotype, to be made fun of, looked down upon. There is not much depth for fat roles on TV. They are just there to be made fun of, or put down.

**Richard:** I believe that the media only perpetuates the stereotypes against overweight people. For as long as I can remember, people have laughed at fat people. They laugh at fat people in the movies and television. That has been a perception of people who are overweight. In many instances the media has portrayed over weight people as unhappy, emotional, and sad.

**Alison:** I think that maybe some of the weight bias has to do with fantasy and escape. People don't want to see what they deal with everyday, but want to watch fantasy. People want an escape.

**Julia:** The fat character is usually a crazy woman or one of strange character, odd story line, never the town matriarch and pillar of the community! nor the rich one!... The media portrays the overweight and obese as dumb, lazy, gluttonous, and funny.

**Lindsay:** Overweight is considered disgusting, gross and unfeminine... Look at popular TV shows like *Still Standing* and *King of Queens* where you see a large, overweight man paired with a skinny wife. The opposite has NEVER been shown on American Television. Heavier characters on TV show are shown as lonely, outcast, etc. It feels like obese people are viewed as slobs, lonely, and disturbed; and overweight people are pathetic.

**Jennifer:** The bias toward overweight women in Hollywood is that they must be evil or crazy. Because they are seen as lonely, then they are crazy or self-loathing. No leading man in a role would find them attractive. People watch TV for escapism or fantasy so they don't want to watch people that look like themselves. People don't want to watch overweight people because it reminds us of our own mortality.

**Wendy:** I think the media bias against the overweight reflects the cultural bias against people who are overweight. We see very few people who are overweight in

highly esteemed media positions - news anchors, TV/movie actors, talk show hosts - and often those figures are trying to lose weight, get gastric bypass surgeries, makeovers, etc. That filters down to us regular people.

**Layla:** People in society emulate what is seen on TV and in the movies, so when we see overweight people portrayed as weird, lazy, strange, or the butt of jokes, then that is how we perceive them to be as well.

**Ivory:** In the media, if a guy is big he can be funny, but if a woman is big, then she is gross or looked down upon. The big guys, even if they are funny, may be insecure, and that's how they deal with being overweight.

**Abby:** Part of what makes Ugly Betty "ugly" is that she is overweight. Overweight women are usually portrayed as the funny neighbor or asexual. They are not portrayed as appealing but usually lazy, pathetic or bad.

As the participants report, the media portrays overweight people very negatively. Surely, this media portrayal of the obese as lazy, gluttonous, strange, weird, asexual, and depressed, contributes to similar views within the society. Thus, when an obese person is represented on television, viewers associate all the negative characteristics they have been persuaded to believe-by the media.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "Do you think the media targets overweight consumers?" include the following statements:

**Mary:** Magazines are especially unfair to women. Magazines tell guys to get bigger and tell women to disappear. They want us to get smaller until we disappear. By showing a size zero they want women to not be there.

**Richard:** I remember seeing Jack Lalane on television, but turning the channel because I felt like I was being judged. There are weight loss products, diets, and even by-pass surgeries.

**Alison:** I also equate the targeting of overweight much like how brides are targeted as well. For example wedding flowers may cost three times as much as normal. I think most in the weight loss industry are trying to make people skinny rather than healthy.

**Julia:** I think they target them by NOT showing them in their ads; for example McDonald's shows healthy weight/size attractive people eating their foods, they show slender mothers with their thin daughter in the part sharing a happy meal with apple dippers, milk, and salad--by this I mean they show the "Dream" or the desired lifestyle while incorporating their food into the mix; however, reality is much different.

**Lindsay:** I would have to say that I think most diet companies, weight loss pills, etc., target everyone, actually. Because I feel like most of the pills, equipment, etc., is meant to make those who are only slightly overweight feel like they need those products to take off the last few pounds.

**Jennifer:** Overweight people don't feel good about themselves usually and those dark hours when you're seeing yourself as a monster, anyone advertising in that moment, offering a way out will seem like the answer. The money is already spent. The industry literally creates commercials that make the consumer feel inadequate. Without their great product, you'll remain a loser. It's a fear factor.

**Wendy:** I think the media targets all consumers and makes them think they are overweight - especially women, especially ages 18-44... The weight loss industry makes money because people gain weight back from diets. People think it is their fault when they gain the weight back, so they will try the diets again to get it right. People say the diets work because people are losing weight, so if you aren't, then it's your own fault; you are the loser that can't make it happen.

**Layla:** People are targeted by diets, diet pills, etc. Nutrisystem wanted to sponsor the show, *How to look good*

*Naked*, but they were told no because it didn't fit into the theme of the show. However, on the night when I was on the show, Nutrisystem still bought an advertising slot during the show. I believe it was the first commercial break, and I was offended by it because of the nature of the show was to be happy with yourself.

**Ivory:** We are setup where as kids we see all the good foods on TV and we are targeted when we are young. Then in the evenings, it is the weight loss pills for adults, or buy this equipment to lose weight. I was looking at a Shape magazine the other day, with all the pills with ephedrine, caffeine, etc. They make it seem simple to do and say something like *act now. Get thin quick* works and gets people to buy the products.

**Abby:** I wrote a magazine article in *Mademoiselle* about my experiences in fat camps and how to love yourself, but on the next page was an advertisement for a weight loss product. There are articles on how to be thinner, and then on the next page there is an advertisement for hostess cupcakes. It is almost schizophrenic. I remember listening to Nell Carter, who said she couldn't watch TV while she was trying to lose weight because of all the advertisements for food, especially at night.

Since the weight loss industry has become a multi billion-dollar industry, it is safe to assume that overweight consumers are targeted. Consumers are persuaded to believe that if they want to look like the thin and happy people in the media advertisements, then they must buy the advertised product. The interesting, yet contradictory aspect, to this advertising is the relentless advertising of highly processed foods to be *good for you*. This makes food even more attractive to buyers who are seduced to eat more, and of course, to gain weight although this is not part of the advertisement, Certainly this information is not included in the advertisements showing thin or normal sized people rather than large or obese people.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*Describe any experiences where you have felt discriminated against because of your weight.*" include the following statements:

**Mary:** I also remember going to the doctor and stepping on the scales. I didn't want to get on the scales, but the doctor insisted. I said but I just have a sore throat, I don't need to weigh do I? He said, 'Yes,' and I weighed 256 pounds. He kept saying 256 over and over. He said, 'Mary you are 256 and you are 27 years old!' He said, 'By the

time you are 30, you will be on blood pressure medication for the rest of your life. I will never forget stepping on the scales that day.

**Richard:** My father had to make some of my clothes, especially my pants, for I did not fit in the uniforms that were sold at Sears's husky department.

**Alison:** I remember when I didn't get certain roles that producers would tell my agent or mother that I needed to lose weight. It was difficult for me to deal with because I wanted to be successful in my career. I was aware that other girls were thin in magazines, on TV, and trying out for roles that I auditioned for as well so I was aware of the emphasis placed upon being thin.

**Julia:** I was a flight attendant and when I started gaining weight, they would bring me in and weigh me. They would put me on something called weight check. So I would starve and take laxatives to lose weight.

**Lindsay:** I have a hard time walking down the street because I've had people yell insults out of cars at me before, randomly, for no reason. I don't let it stop me, of course, but it's always in the back of my mind if I hear a yell or a shout that it might be directed at me.

**Jennifer:** I was not the "pretty girl" so I made up for it by being really funny, outgoing, and thank goodness,

talented. When I was a kid, I was a pretty good basketball player, but my coach never wanted to play me, and I always knew it was because I was heavier than the other girls.

**Wendy:** I felt pressure to be a certain weight when I was in the television industry, so I was constantly trying to lose weight.

**Layla:** When I was 15 years old, a boy told me that I needed to lose weight to be perfect, even though I didn't think I was overweight yet... people would look at me differently, would say hurtful things to me and act very differently around me when I was really overweight.

**Ivory:** I remember being a nanny for a famous couple and they thought I looked like a former nanny. But when I saw a picture of her, I thought the girl was really fat, and I said, 'Ewww do they think I am as big as her? Because I don't think or feel like I am that big.' I think I have tried to block out all the bad memories associated with being overweight.

**Abby:** My mother and grandmother were constantly telling me how a woman needs to be thin and how I needed to lose weight. A girl in fat camp wrote a letter to a boy in camp and said Abby Ellin is a fat shit, so when someone said my name at a camp fire that night one boy added...'is a fat

shit.' I turned around and said, 'What?' He then told me what the girl had written. I was humiliated.

As reported by the participants, there are often extreme discriminations, even brutal biases covertly and openly expressed toward the obese. Thus, unfortunately, the oppression of obesity often begins very early in life when identity and self-esteem are at critical developmental stages. Being called a *fat ass* as a teenager by your peers, or feeling success as a television actress--only to have someone send you a letter calling you a *Fat Cow* can have devastating effects on one's identity development and self esteem. Regardless of success, or ethnicity, or any other factor, people who are overweight are perceived as a sub class to people who are normal weight, or thin.

The meaning units that are most relevant to the question "*Do women experience greater weight bias in our culture than men?*" include the following statements:

**Mary:** Women who are fat are seen as evil or sad, they are tragic characters. Fat men are a little more acceptable. On TV, for instance Jackie Gleason, John Candy, Chris Farley, John Belushi, so especially the classic comedians were often overweight and were more acceptable.

**Richard:** I believe that women are judged more based upon appearance, such as their weight than men typically seem to be.

**Alison:** Men generally have a wider window of weight that is permissible because of their taller and larger frames. Women are generally smaller and have less weight that they can gain to look overweight.

**Julia:** Women base their self worth mainly on their body, their sex appeal, and if a man loves them. The media has given us that image in countless shows, the sexy little woman gets taken care of by the successful man, just watch ANY daytime soap opera to see what I mean.

**Lindsay:** I think women experience a much greater bias than do men. It has always been "acceptable" for a man to have a beer gut or be a "bear." We find that cozy, cute, and endearing. For a woman to be overweight is considered disgusting, gross and unfeminine.

**Jennifer:** An overweight man (depending on how overweight) can be perceived as cuddly and even sexy, for example, John Goodman on "Roseanne." Even Russell Crowe in some of his flicks was chunky but hey...he's sexy. An overweight woman is a walking billboard that she doesn't care for herself, she's inconsistent, she eats too much, she's unhealthy and she's unattractive.

**Wendy:** I think women experience more bias when overweight than do men. A woman's value is based so much more on how we look than what we do. So if we make a million dollars, find the cure for cancer, win a Nobel prize, the question is still: How come she looks fat in that suit?

**Layla:** The focus on TV, magazines and movies, is small women, there are rarely large women in these mediums. Think about the overweight girl in the movie *Cant Hardly Wait* and how she is portrayed as the weird high school kid. She is the overweight kid in the movie. She is different and weird compared to the other kids because she is fat.

**Ivory:** Women get judged about weight more than men. For example, a man may say I would go out with her if she wasn't fat, and the guy saying it may be fat but doesn't think about being fat himself.

**Abby:** Women aren't supposed to take up personal space and that they should be small. Maybe people believe size equates to power. I think that women are not supposed to take up space. But women who do take up space are miserable. They are not sexual, objects of desire, or taken serious. They make less money, are less likely to date, etc... Overweight women are seen as having no control, or discipline.

These participants' statements clearly illustrate that women endure the greatest public bias because of their weight. This may be due to a patriarchal hegemony mindset that women should be thin and beautiful and that men who are overweight can still be strong and powerful. The media idealizes women as very thin and beautiful so women who don't fit into that mold are seen as undesirable. Regardless of the achievements a woman attains, she is ultimately measured by her waist size and not her successes.

### *Themes*

I began the process of identifying themes by analyzing and reflecting on the meaning units from each participant. I engaged in the process of triangulation with my major professor and a professor with a background in qualitative research to ensure credibility of the themes. Both professors read through the transcripts to ensure they were reflective of the themes and sub themes. By reading and reflecting on the verbatim transcripts, and comparing the meaning units to transcripts, I validated that the meaning units supported the themes. On the following page, Table 1.2 illustrates the themes and the sub themes or descriptors that are associated with each theme.

Table 4.1: Themes Associated with Participants' Experiences with Weight Bias.

Themes	Sub-themes/descriptions
Early influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental support</li> <li>• Eating habits</li> <li>• Dealing with stress</li> </ul>
Diets and eating habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fad diets</li> <li>• Dealing with issues</li> </ul>
School experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Puberty</li> <li>• Peer relations</li> <li>• PE</li> </ul>
Self image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self esteem</li> <li>• Obsession</li> <li>• Acceptance by others</li> </ul>
Experiences with oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences with peers</li> <li>• Accepted discrimination</li> <li>• Experiences as celebrity</li> </ul>
Discrimination for women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender expectations</li> <li>• Roles</li> <li>• Personal space</li> <li>• Invisibility</li> </ul>
Media perpetuates bias of the overweight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fantasy</li> <li>• Stereotypes</li> <li>• Targeting</li> </ul>
Influences on weight increase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Food addictions</li> <li>• Corporations</li> </ul>

*Thematic Textural-Structural Description*

I reviewed and reflected on the participants' transcripts to verify the meaning units that support the identified themes. Within the themes there were descriptors or sub-themes that reflected the overall essence of each theme. I constructed and analyzed textural and structural

descriptions of what the participants experienced and how they experienced it. This process included a comparative analysis, key word association and a cutting and sorting technique, which arranged the interview responses into themes. The following is a thematic textural-structural description, which describes the most relevant experiences of participants through a personal narrative that is representative of each theme. Each theme was introduced and only those statements from participants that best reflect the theme and descriptions were documented.

*Early influences.* The descriptions associated with early influences examine how perceptions were formed and molded toward eating, being overweight, and dealing with weight bias as a child and as an adult.

**Mary:** My father was a baker and would bring home cookies; brownies, macaroons, and I ate them every night. There was dessert after every meal. Dessert was a part of everything. Growing up, the meals we ate would be a lot of frozen dinners that were easy to make. My mom wasn't a great cook, so she made pasta or frozen meals that were quick to make and eat. We ate foods full of preservatives and fast foods. I didn't eat salads or vegetables growing up.

**Richard:** I was overweight from the time I came out of my mother's womb. It seemed I was born with a fork in my hand.

Because New Orleans is known for its Cajun food, battered, and deep fried, which is considered love, I ate the food that my parents lovingly made for me. Food even became a comfort to me because I struggled with issues of being overweight. My parents were always there to "feed" my self-esteem. My parents were both wonderful cooks and put a lot of love into their recipes.

**Julia:** I was chubby as a child. I was constantly teased about it. My last name was Griggs so I was called names like *Griggs pigs!* I felt like I was really overweight. So I had a perception of fatness. My father was in the Vietnam War so I would stay up with my mom at night to watch the news about the war, and I would eat ice cream. Ice cream has always been a comfort food for me through adulthood and I guess it stemmed from my childhood. My mom cooked healthy foods. She cooked elegant foods. I became a fan of junk food because mom made it seem such a chore to cook good meals. When I was young, I would break into the freezer and eat the food that my mom had prepared. I had a lot of closet eating issues. Food blocked out a lot of pain in my life. Food was a source of dealing with and blocking out pain. My mom left when I was young, so part of my issues with food may be linked to that fact.

**Lindsay:** My mom used to tell me to clean my plate because there was starving people somewhere. I remember that second helpings of potatoes or pasta were my weakness growing up. Some eating habits from my youth that still affect me today is that my biggest meal is in the evening and I usually eat while watching some television show.

**Jennifer:** I love comfort foods like pasta. Growing up, I would overeat because my family ate that way. We did not eat in moderation. We were very disciplined (in other areas), so food seemed to be our one vice, escape, or outlet. Food was my comfort.

**Wendy:** My mom passed away when I was 10, and she always emphasized that a woman should be thin, so when I started gaining weight I felt really bad because I knew it was something my mom wouldn't like, so it made it double hard for me.

**Layla:** My mother told me that a woman has to be beautiful, but to be beautiful a woman has to be uncomfortable. I remember that my mom dieted a lot, and it was a focus in our household. I didn't think I was really overweight as a child but with my mom emphasizing weight and magazines telling me I needed to be thin, it did impact my perception of myself and food.

**Ivory:** I was raised to eat very healthy and my parents were vegetarians. I remember one night when my parents dropped me off at my grandparents. They weren't vegetarians, so I tried some of the steak they had cooked for dinner. When my parents arrived to pick me up later that evening, I said to them "I love steak". So when I visited my grandparents, I would eat hotdogs, bacon, and all the fat good stuff. My love for food is even revealed in my diary. Around age 13, I remember writing about food all the time. It was an obsession. I would write about what I ate, or maybe write that I needed to lose 5 lbs. I would actually write about the food that I ate, like for breakfast I would eat a cranberry English muffin with cream cheese and butter so I would write it down in my diary. I was overeating at each meal, and eating desserts most night. Especially at my grandparents, I would watch TV and eat M&M's and other snacks.

**Abby:** I was always told as a child that women needed to be thin and beautiful. My mother and grandmother constantly told me this. I felt a lot of pressure placed upon me to be thin and was told that weight was bad. I even remember at about age 7, I called home to see if I could put sugar in my tea instead of sweet-and-low because real sugar was bad for you. My mother and grandmother placed so much focus on

their own weight and staying thin that my sister and myself became obsessed about weight as well.

The pressure to be thin was felt at an early age by many of the participants. But there also seemed to be a relationship with food and family, or comfort with many of the participants that may have influenced their perception of food.

*Diets and eating habits.* The next theme focused on dieting and eating habits. This included sub themes related to fad diets, dieting to be accepted, and dealing with issues related to dieting and eating.

**Mary:** I have tried several different diets over the years, but none of them were effective. Some of the diets included the *cabbage soup diet*, the *eat anything you want for one day a week diet*, and the *all fruit but no bananas diet*. But after gaining back more weight when I stopped the diets, they all became frustrating to me.

**Richard:** A girl in my elementary school told me that her mom was losing weight on diet pills, so she stole some and brought them to me and I got hooked. But she got caught, and I didn't have anymore to take so I began throwing up and taking laxatives. While in high school, I continued to lose weight all the wrong ways, taking diet pills, laxatives, throwing up and starving. During one starvation

diet, I lost 137 pounds and nearly ended up dead. I tried all the wrong ways and almost lost my life. It took me 6 months to go from being anorexic and bulimic to finding a healthy weight and maintaining it.

**Alison:** I battled my weight from my teenage years into my early twenties. It was hard to figure out how to lose weight and especially how do to it for yourself. I tried many different fad diets over the years but none were successful. I have tried low calorie frozen foods, low fat foods, and other crash diets. I remember literally trying to starve myself once, only to wind up bingeing on ice cream after a few days.

**Lindsay:** I was already in weight watchers by age 10 or 12. I remember trying Jenny Craig, but it was hard because the serving sizes were so small that I practically starved. The calories on those types of programs are so low that it's hard to get through the day especially if you are active. I have literally tried every diet on the market, and when I say every diet, I mean every diet.

**Jennifer:** When I was losing weight, all I did was think about food. I would even eat in front of a mirror to make sure I wasn't eating too fast or too much. I tried certain diet like slim fast around 15. I even remember my mother

passing out in a store once because of the strict diet she was on. I thought I needed to be like her, so I dieted too.

**Wendy:** I was always on a diet during my teen years. There were a lot of diet foods coming out during that time, and I would over consume or binge on them. At age 12 or so, I was in kids' Weight Watchers. I was weighing in and dieting and measuring food. I also did the quick weight loss center, and other diets with pre-packaged foods. I think all the dieting screwed me up pretty badly. When I was 16 or 17, I began to binge eat.

When I turned 30, I was so fed up with myself that I went to an obesity center, which I saw as a grown up fat camp. I spent a month and \$10,000.00 there and lost only 2 pounds. I spent that month working hard, measuring food, working out hard and didn't get results I thought I should. It cost me 5,000.00 per pound... When I was standing on the scale at the weight loss center, it was like a lightening bolt struck me when I saw I had only lost 2 pounds. I tortured my self for a month and spent \$10,000.00, and I lost only two pounds! I decided I was done with trying for 20 years to look a certain way.

**Layla:** I started weight watchers when I was 12 years old. In my early twenties, I started yo-yo dieting, and I tried everything. When I say I tried everything, I mean I tried

everything. I tried every over the counter diet pill, I tried fen phen, Meridia, and even tried a 400 dollar a month diet supplement to lose weight. I did *the zone gourmet*, which was 1400 dollars a month. I eventually began to starve myself during this time as well. Looking back, I wonder what effect that fen-phen had on my metabolism and body. I wonder if it actually caused me to gain weight after I used it. I remember thinking that I must not be sticking to the diets right, or I'm not motivated enough everyday. I felt like I wasn't doing enough or following the diet plans right. I remember just giving up and saying I am tired of dieting and I am not going to do it anymore. (This is the point she began to eat and gained almost 80 pounds.)

**Ivory:** I started doing diets from the age of 13.. I was always interested in fashion so I probably saw something in a magazine that said I should eat a certain food, and I remember trying it at age 13. Throughout college, I did herbal life and cabbage soup diets. I have gone to a hypnotist and tried everything to control and lose weight. I am obsessed with food. Eating is my favorite thing to do. I believe the majority of overweight people have issues with food, like some people turn to alcohol. Food is readily available, and people use it to deal with issues of

life... Eating is fun, but exercise is not fun so we eat and don't balance that with activity. I also believe it is related to how we feel. When things are going well for me, and I feel good, then I don't eat as much as I do when I am stressed or feeling bad about myself. Then I may eat out of control.

Overwhelmingly, the participants tried multiple diets or diet pills to control or lose weight, only to realize that the weight didn't come off, or didn't stay off very long. This reinforces the assumption that most diets are ineffective and not a long-term solution to weight control. This also illustrates that weight control is more complex than simply eating less or eating a certain diet to be thin. There are other factors involved.

*School experiences.* The next theme examined how school and school life influenced weight and weight bias. This focused specifically on puberty, peer relations, and physical education in particular since it is an area where weight bias may be most conspicuous.

**Mary:** I was one of the biggest kids in every class and every grade level. I didn't like to play or participate in physical education activities. I was afraid of jiggling; I was ashamed of my fat body and didn't even want to move. I eventually got out of gym because I cried every day. I got

a Dr.'s notes to get out of PE classes. I didn't get the note just because I hated PE, but I did have knee problems and arthritis. The pain would keep me up at night, and it was so bad that I did get notes to get out of PE. I didn't like the competition of PE because I didn't want to be the one to lose for the team and didn't like being in the spotlight and judged. When I came home everyday, I would eat, watch TV, and study. I didn't have a lot of friends because I was so self-conscious about her weight. SO I spent most of my time in the house. Even my play was not active; it would be sitting in my room playing with a doll... Playing wasn't running around playing on monkey bars or anything like that.

**Richard:** I was very turned off by any PE in school because it was based on competition. It is like this...is somebody really better than you because they can throw a football or catch a fly ball? I did not buy into the whole thing. When I saw people running, I wanted to call the police because I thought they were running from a crime. By 8th grade I weighed 200 pounds. No one could really relate to my weight problem because I was the only kid in school that was really overweight. I was never chosen for the teams so I didn't enjoy PE at all, and besides I had asthma and some knee and feet problems so I always watched and never

participated. All the girls became my friend, and the boys made fun of me, but I wouldn't let the remarks control me because I knew that no matter what I weighed, I was a good person. My father had to make some of my clothes, especially my pants because I did not fit in the uniforms that were sold in Sears's husky department.

**Alison:** It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realized I was overweight. I struggled with my weight. As a girl and hitting puberty, I realized that I was no longer getting taller, but I was starting to gain weight. I was not popular in school, but I am not sure if this was because I was overweight or because I was on television. I hated activities such as running, mainly because I hate to spend my time working out thinking about how much weight I need to lose or how many calories I have burned.

**Julia:** (In high school, a guy called Julia *buffalo butt* in the cafeteria so she dumped a bowl of chili on his head. She hurt on the inside but didn't show it outwardly. Guys wrote in their yearbook, *Shamu the killer whale*, which is what they called her.) Julia reported, "I hated PE during school. I hated dressing out for PE and I got out of PE as much as possible even if it meant skipping class. In college, I didn't get into the sorority I wanted and had dieted all summer so I would get into it. I stayed in the

dorm and ate all week. That set the pace for my college years. I would eat donuts, ice cream, etc., all the time.

**Lindsay:** I have been overweight all my life. When I was a child, I felt like I was chubby but not fat. As a youth, I got out of PE by taking it in the summer. I was overweight in middle school, but I was active. Everything seemed to be about popularity at that age; so, being overweight, I was different from the normal weight kids, so it showed my shortcoming. I was made fun of every single day of my life in middle school. I hated PE because of everything I had to do, that is, dress out, do sit-ups, and run. Running laps was the worst thing about PE.

**Jennifer:** I was tall and was overweight. I struggled with being larger than the other kids. I was overweight by around 12 years old. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a bad year that really stood out because I felt like I was constantly mistreated for being overweight. There were girls that were really mean to each other and it was a tough year. Before 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, I lost some weight during the summer. By then, I had shed any chance of conformity, and decided to just be myself. I had biases from teachers, especially my PE teacher. I hated PE in elementary and middle school. I had the same teacher; he had been a drill sergeant. He would put a scale out on the floor and have all the kids

weigh, and he would yell out our weight in front of everyone. I remember one student in 5<sup>th</sup> grade that weighed over 150 lbs and he called out her weight to everyone, and how brutal it was to her. I also had other teachers who were biased against me because of my weight.

**Abby:** Around 13 I started gaining weight because I had quit gymnastics by then and so I would come home after school and eat. It was during this time that I was called names and made fun of at school, even though I didn't think I was that big.. It was around age 16 that I decided to go to a fat camp.

All of the participants experienced weight bias. Unfortunately, many even experienced bias or discrimination by teachers. It also appears that their self-awareness of weight issues began around the time of puberty, which for females means no more height but increase in weight. There was also a disproportionate amount of participants who hated their physical education classes. This could be because they were overweight and weren't good at certain activities, or because they felt like they were placed under the spotlight during class, but either way, it would appear that physical education classes didn't address the needs of the individuals who were overweight or obese.

*Self image.* The following theme involves self-image and specifically relates to self-esteem, an obsession with weight and need for acceptance by peers.

**Mary:** I was not active because I was so self-conscious. I was ashamed of being so big, so I didn't do anything to draw attention to myself. I would help people by giving them answers or help them with schoolwork so I would be accepted.

**Richard:** I have learned that many people judge others by the pound and isn't that a shame. People are discriminated against everyday for what they weigh. I took extreme measures to lose weight because I wanted to be liked. I wanted to be accepted and wanted to be a normal size and would do anything to lose the weight.

**Alison:** I was overweight from my teens through my early twenties. I was always complaining about my weight and had low self-confidence about it... Even as an adult there are still times that I still struggle with it. There was a time when I was totally fixated on my weight. If the scale didn't read a certain number, I would absolutely freak out. My happiness or lack of it was dominated by my weight.

**Julia:** I sought approval and love despite the fact that I was fat. I became extroverted rather than introverted, so I was a little promiscuous. There are people that turn to

promiscuity to be accepted. It derives from low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is going to exhibit itself in some form or another. Even as an overweight person in the career world, I didn't really respect myself because of my size even though I was successful at my job.

**Lindsay:** Everyday I think that I need to lose weight. I think about my weight every single day. Don't you think that overweight people wake up every day thinking about their weight and how they need to lose weight? We don't tell other people about flaws they have, for example I would never tell someone that they have a gigantic nose, yet people feel like they can tell you when you are fat. We reduce an entire person's being and self worth to how much they weigh. It is just crazy. I realize how short life is, and I don't want to spend every day of my life feeling that I need to weigh a certain amount, or feel bad for what I am eating. I wish I could have just one day without that pressure.

**Jennifer:** I have been obsessed with weight since I was a kid. A couple of years ago when I got really heavy, weight was the first thing that I thought about when I got up. I was very depressed and it controlled everything I did.

**Layla:** I hated being really overweight. I didn't go out or socialize at all. I would go to work and come straight

home, I would never go out with co-workers or friends. On the weekends, I would stay home as well. I didn't want the hassle of going out and trying to meet people. When I gained weight, I felt horrible. I remember once, I was in a nutritionist's office. I thought I was huge, and I didn't know that I would gain another 30 lbs. I was so depressed and so unhappy.

**Abby:** I felt isolated and lonely in school because people made fun of me and called me names like *Flabby Abby*. When I am stressed, I want to eat. Food is my drug of choice. Some people like to drink, but I like to eat to deal with stress. Over time, I became depressed, and I would eat, and I would become more depressed because I ate so much, and it became a cycle. Weight does impact one's self-worth, even to this day, if for instance, a relationship doesn't work out, I believe it's because of my appearance, even though I am no longer overweight.

All of the participants appeared to attach their self-esteem, or self-image, to how much they weigh. It's interesting that the number on a scale could have such an impact on self-image. It is no wonder that the weight loss industry is making billions of dollars. Everyone thinks that being thin is the only way to be accepted by others. Sadly, with such a weight bias in our culture, it does make

individuals go to extremes to be what they think is acceptable by others. There is an obsession to be thin and accepted.

*Experiences with oppression.* As expected, a key theme that emerged in the research was articulated around the experience of the oppression of obesity that the participants experienced even though some were already celebrities at the time.

**Mary:** I remember once that I had left my mom after taking care of her and drove to a nearby park. It was a Friday evening and I just sat there in my car and I was crying. I was crying because my mom had cancer and was dying, and I was the only one around to take care of her. Suddenly a car pulled up near me with two Italian guys, I now call them the *Guido brothers*, and they started talking about me. They were talking to each other but made sure it was loud enough for me to hear. One of them said I wonder why she is crying? The other one said it is probably because she is fat and can't get a boyfriend. I sat there and cried even more because of their hurtful comments. I will never forget that moment... I began to use humor early as a way to hide the pain I felt about my weight. I knew if I showed the pain such as crying that they would make even more fun of me. I wanted to be liked or loved so I would try and make

them laugh. I would make jokes about myself and call myself fat and a clown. I thought if I started it then it would be ok. Because I knew that at some point someone would make fun of me. I tried to imagine what people thought of me and I would say it first so it wouldn't hurt so badly. Even in comedy, people see fat as part of the act. They think the fat girl is funny.

I also remember going to the doctor and stepping on the scales. I didn't want to get on the scales but the doctor insisted. I said but I just have a sore throat, I don't need to weigh do I? He said yes and I weighed 256 pounds. He kept saying 256 over and over. He said Mary you are 256 and you are 27 years old. He said by the time you are 30 you will be on blood pressure medication for the rest of your life. I will never forget stepping on the scales that day.

**Alison:** I felt such a struggle as a teen on TV and being overweight. I would get letters from people that would talk about my weight and would call me nasty names. I still remember one letter I got at age 16 from someone that simply said, "you fat cow" in big letters. It was very hard to feel judged by people as a teenager. It was hard enough being a teenager, but a teenager on TV was much tougher because everyone saw you and some people were really cruel...

I remember when I didn't get certain roles that producers would tell my agent or mother that I needed to lose weight. It was difficult for me to deal with because I wanted to be successful in my career. I was aware that other girls were thin in magazines, on TV, and trying out for roles that I auditioned for as well so I was aware of the emphasis placed upon being thin.

**Julia:** I remember once I was going to an aerobics class wearing red tights and a man came up to me and told me that I shouldn't wear red because it made my butt look big. I hate anything with the color red even to this day. I don't wear red and I don't even decorate with the color red.. I was a flight attendant and when I started gaining weight, they would bring me in and weigh me. They would put me on something called weight check. So I would starve and take laxatives to lose weight. Then I got pregnant so they couldn't weigh me anymore, so I ate everything I could. I even had a boss who offered trips as incentives for high sales, but he offered me \$10 per pound to lose weight. If it had happened today, I would own the company, but at the time, I was embarrassed, and said I would do it. On way home I started crying about it and stopped by the bakery and bought a dozen donuts. One of the final straws was one day at work when I came dressed in purple leggings, purple

shirt, and walked into conference room where someone said, 'Hey look Barney is here!' I believe that weight discrimination happens daily, inappropriately, painfully, and abusively. When someone is overweight, it is assumed to be FATTY'S fault.

**Lindsay:** Some people have written me about shows I have done and told me that I am fat and disgusting. There are even things written on the Internet that may not be seen by me personally, but kids may read it and feel like there is no hope because I am made fun of even though I am in Hollywood. There have been several roles that I have tried out for when I was told that I was too big to play the fat girl. I was too big to play the role of a fat girl; can you believe it? Even now as an adult, I have a hard time walking down the street because people yell insults out of cars at me, randomly, for no reason. I don't let it stop me, of course, but it's always in the back of my mind if I hear a yell or a shout that it might be directed at me.

**Jennifer:** Most of the roles I get for television focus on weight. All the "fat girl" roles are funny, angry lesbians, angry housewives, or crazy stalkers. I was not the "pretty girl" so I made up for it by being really funny, outgoing, and thank goodness, talented. When I was a kid, I was a pretty good basketball player but my coach never wanted to

play me, and I always knew it was because I was heavier than the other girls. He really had a disdain for me and would humiliate me in front of the other kids. In PE he would weigh us in front of each other, and when it was my turn he would scream out my weight. Later, kids would surround me like I was some kind of circus freak: "You weigh more than my mom." Looking back, I weighed 110 in the 5th grade and was a good 4 to 5 inches taller than the other kids... I was quite healthy looking but believed I was hideous. Years ago I was heavier than I am now, and I went out with some friends and my husband. My friend and I were laughing, and this group of young guys was saying something about me and my husband became angry and ready to defend me. One of the men in our group had a temper and soon the energy was being directed at him, and he told one of the women in our party there was going to be a fight. I was at a table facing these guys, and they were scowling at me with such hatred, trying to get me to egg my friend on to fight them. I felt like a little girl just frozen with fear. There was a fight, a bloody one. My friend was jumped by about 7 guys and was bleeding everywhere. I was shaking and crying so hard and felt the worst thing of all...responsible. If I were thin, my friend would be okay, and my husband wouldn't have to defend me. I often

think how hard it is for other people, especially men, to be around me. It's very painful. Those are the moments a weight loss ad would have me by the throat.

**Layla:** I remember guys saying things like where are you going, fat burger? People would look at me differently, would say hurtful things to me and act very differently around me when I was really overweight. I am treated very differently when I am smaller than when I weigh a lot. For instance men open doors or want to help me in stores when I weigh less, but when I was at my largest, I was basically invisible to guys. After being on *How to Look Good Naked*, I received positive mail and emails from people saying that I had inspired them, but I also got responses where people called me fat or made very negative remarks about me. One lady wrote an article that was just down right mean.

**Ivory:** I remember being a nanny for a famous couple, and they thought I looked like a former nanny. But when I saw a picture of her, I thought the girl was really fat and I said, 'Ewww do they think I am as big as her? Because I don't think or feel like I am that big.' I think I have tried to block out all the bad memories associated with being overweight. But just the other day, someone said I looked big as I walked across the street to the store. As a plus size model, I still have people that won't work with

me because they think I am too big for a shoot. When I am around the smaller models, I feel like they are judging me for my size. What's sad is that I feel like I do the same thing with very large women like a size 20, I look at them and think they are too big. But weight has been such a focus for so long that now I don't weigh myself anymore. I go by how I feel not by what I weigh.

**Abby:** I was called names in school like *Flabby Abby*.. I remember in Spanish class that we learned the Spanish name for stewardess, which was *azafata*, and one boy transposed it and called me *fata assa*... Around the age of 12 or 13 years old, my grandmother was always telling me that I was too fat, and she didn't let me come visit her one Christmas because she said I was too fat. She said she couldn't reward me by letting me visit her if I was overweight. When I was 16 years old I went to fat camp. My grandfather died and left me some money, so I used some of it to go to fat camp... I went to fat camps for 6 years. I was deprived of food at these camps, so I focused on what I would eat when I left the camp. I remember there was a girl in fat camp who wrote a letter to a boy in camp and in the letter she said that Abby Ellin is a fat shit, so when someone said my name at a camp fire that night and one boy added "is a fat shit"... I turned around and said what? So the boy told me

what was written about me, and I actually became friends with the boy and have been since that time..

My grandmother was very hard on me about my weight. She passed away when I was around 23 years old. I am not sure, but there may have been some correlation between her passing away and my not focusing upon my obsession with food. During this time, I stopped weighing myself and decided I won't weigh myself when I go to the doctor now. I refuse because why would I need to weigh?... Obesity is the last accepted form of discrimination. I even find myself looking at obese people judgmentally. I don't have a discrimination against races or anything, but I do look at obese people differently. I don't think they are lazy, gluttonous, or that they don't have control, but I wonder why they are that way and why they don't try to change.

These experiences illustrate that weight bias, or discrimination against the obese, is often demonstrated in cruel and oppressive ways. Participants revealed that people can be vicious and relentless in oppressing those who are overweight. These experiences also reveal that even celebrities are not safeguarded from malicious and spiteful attacks. Such cruelty may be the last accepted and tolerated form of discrimination in our culture.

*Discrimination for women.* The following theme is revealed through dialogue that expresses gender expectation and roles. These were important elements to the overall theme as was personal space and the belief that obese women endure an invisibility issue even though they are overweight.

**Mary:** I think even in the media that men encounter less bias than women. Fat men are a little more acceptable... On TV, for instance Jackie Gleason, John Candy, Chris Farley, John Belushi, the classic comedians were often overweight and were more acceptable... There are older guys that have gained weight like John Travolta, but they are still accepted and not targeted like women. You will never hear that Tom Hanks gained another 5 lbs or show pictures of him at a heavier weight at the beach in a bathing suit. But people like Oprah, Roseanne, Delta Burke, are always under scrutiny by the media. When they gain a few pounds it is talked about in the media... Women who are fat are seen as evil or sad, as tragic characters. I think part of the bias is evolution. When a man is overweight you think, well he is big and strong, so he can protect me. However, women are supposed to be thin and beautiful, anything that exhibits fertility. A fat guy can represent power, to some extent, but when a woman is fat they don't like the

perception of her being big or having power. They see her as evil. Think of Mimi on the Drew Carey Show when they put makeup on her like a clown and made her an evil character. I believe that overweight in women may exhibit some kind of power that people don't like... it's like women should only take up very little space.

**Alison:** I think men have a different attitude about their bodies than women do. When a woman feels unhappy with her body, she takes it so personally, and she loses so much self-confidence. She relates her worth to how she feels about her body... Even now, I still struggle with it myself... Men see it as a tool, so they eat and workout and don't worry about it so much... Men separate their self worth from their body, but women seem to associate their self worth with their body... Men generally have a wider window of weight that is permissible because of their taller and larger frames. Women are generally smaller and have less weight that they can gain to look overweight.

**Julia:** Men base their self-worth largely on their productivity, income, and stature in the community. Women base their self worth mainly on their body, their sex appeal, and whether or not a man loves them. The media has given us that image in countless shows, the sexy little woman gets taken care of by the successful man. Just watch

any daytime soap opera to see what I mean, and the fat character, if there at all, is usually a crazy woman or one of strange character, odd story line, but never the town matriarch and pillar of the community! nor the rich one!

**Lindsay:** I think women experience a much greater bias than do men. It has always been "acceptable" for a man to have a beer gut or be a "bear". We find that cozy, cute and endearing. For a woman to be overweight is considered disgusting, gross and unfeminine. Look at popular TV shows like *Still Standing* and *King of Queens* where you see a large, overweight man paired with a skinny wife. The opposite has NEVER been shown on American television. I think roles for heavy people, especially women, may have people only a few pounds overweight trying out for the role. Producers think that a size 10 is large. A size zero seems to be the trend, like wasting women away to where they don't even look like a woman. I feel like minorities can be heavier than white women. There is less tolerance given to white females.

**Jennifer:** Overweight men experience less bias, but if a man is morbidly obese and looks like he's about to have a heart attack like John Goodman now, then no, they aren't sexy or acceptable. However, they still have the edge over women. Men can still be perceived as hardworking, funny, sexy,

charming, intelligent, and carefree if they are overweight, but an overweight woman is a walking billboard that she doesn't care for herself, she's inconsistent, she eats too much, she's unhealthy and she's unattractive. When a man is not attracted to a woman, it's hard for them to have a conversation. I should say "some men" but I've met plenty. Why these prejudices exist might have something to do with reproducing. Men seem to prefer women who appear healthy and therefore can have healthy children. I was slender when I met my husband. I was slender for many years and worked hard at it. If I had been overweight when I met him, I really believe things would be different. I think overweight men can still seem confident and healthy. But overweight women can appear depressed and usually are. What man wants that? A young girl would rather starve herself to the brink of death instead of being overweight. It's impossible to hide and everyone sees you for who you are on the outside first. Your dazzling personality is hidden under layers of fat. Ironically, overweight people are pretty invisible. Just walk with someone who is thinner than you are and notice that every person sees them, not you. It's a cloak. I think we have conditioned ourselves to not see an overweight person.

**Wendy:** I think women experience more bias when overweight than do men. It's not that men aren't held up to certain beauty standards - or handsome standards, you could call them - it's just that a woman's value is based so much more on how we look than what we do. So if we make a million dollars, find the cure for cancer, and win a Nobel prize, the question is still: how come she looks fat in those clothes?

**Abby:** In other cultures big women may be better received, but I believe that in countries with western influence, and especially in the USA, that women have the most pressure placed upon them to be thin. Women aren't supposed to take up personal space, and they should be small. I think that women are not supposed to take up space. But women who do take up space are miserable. They are not sexual, objects of desire, or taken seriously. They make less money, are less likely to date, etc... Overweight women are seen as having no control, or discipline. Maybe people believe size equates to power and so they don't like large women.

These responses indicate that obese women's experiences are often far more oppressive than those of obese men. Some believe that gender roles may play a part; e.g. in the USA culture, men are expected to be big and powerful, and women are expected to be small and feminine.

The participants also believe that society's expectation for women is that they should take up a small amount of personal space. A large size is reflective of power so women should remain small and fragile. The irony is that large women aren't necessarily seen as powerful, but are invisible to others and usually go unnoticed in society. The only time they are acknowledged is in a negative manner whether they endure discrimination of some type or are made fun of because of their size.

*Media perpetuates bias of the overweight.* Another theme that emerged within the participants' interviews dealt with media bias toward the overweight and obese. These biases included stereotyping the overweight, targeting them either as consumers of all sorts of diet products and supplies, as well as the use of fantasy and escapism to perpetuate biases.

**Mary:** Magazines only show beautiful thin women. Even in teen magazines like *Seventeen*, there is no reality reflected in the ads, it is fantasy. So, girls are exposed to more unrealistic expectations of how they should look. Magazines tell guys to get bigger and tell women to disappear. They want us to get smaller until we disappear. By showing a size zero they want women to not be there. It is still part of the stereotypes such as women should be

quiet, petite, and beautiful. Boys can be big, strong, and powerful. As a comedian, it's ok because the fat people are funny, but as a TV role it is purely stereotype, to be made fun of, looked down upon. There is not much depth for fat roles on TV. They are added to shows to be made fun of or to be put down. There is more realism in TV than movies so that is why you might see an overweight person on television but rarely in the movies unless they are the focus in some unflattering way. Movies have a very narrow view. They aren't intended to reflect society but are for fantasy and escapism. So there aren't many overweight people. Mainly beautiful people are in the movies. Movies don't want to take the risk of putting fat people in movies because the budget is large and it is a hit or miss, so they want the people that will draw the money.

**Richard:** I believe that the media only perpetuates the stereotypes against overweight people. For as long as I can remember people have laughed at fat people. They laugh at fat people in the movies and television. That has been a perception of people who are over weight. In many instances, the media has portrayed overweight people as unhappy, emotional, and sad. It has shown overweight people just sitting around doing nothing and that is why Americans

feel that way about overweight people. This is a very sad comment for our culture.

**Alison:** I think that maybe some of the weight bias has to do with fantasy and escape. People don't want to see what they deal with everyday, but want to watch fantasy. People want an escape so there are less overweight people represented. However, I think that there is some change occurring for average women to be shown and for health to be focused upon rather than being too thin. Reality shows have more diversity.. I also equate the targeting of overweight people much like how brides are targeted as well. For example wedding flowers may cost three times as much as normal. I think most in the weight loss industry are trying to make people skinny rather than healthy.

**Julia:** The media portrays the overweight and obese as dumb, lazy, gluttonous, and funny. I think they target them by NOT showing them in their ads; for example McDonald's shows healthy weight/size attractive people eating their foods, they show slender mothers with their thin daughter in the part sharing a happy meal w/ apple dippers milk and salad--by this I mean they show the "Dream" or the desired lifestyle while incorporating their food into the mix, however, reality is much different. The obese eat there, order slightly different meals--quarter pounders, fries and

coke and aren't walking in the park. They assume the food must not be why they are FAT because the ads show healthy people eating there. If the ads had to show an obese woman and her chunky daughter sitting in a car eating their quarter pounders, fries and soda...the ad probably wouldn't get the desired results.

**Lindsay:** I would have to say that I think most diet companies and weight loss pills target everyone. Most of the pills, equipment, and meals are meant to make those who are only slightly overweight feel like they need those products to take off the last few pounds. And even more so for people who need to loose 20-30 pounds, which kind of encompasses everyone. There are very few people who don't feel like they need to loose a "few" pounds. Any sort of fast food company is going to heavily advertise to children and in more "poor" areas because the food is cheap. As far as television shows, heavier characters are shown as lonely and outcasts. But we are not to the point that we can have an overweight woman as lead in a show and have them in romantic roles. Obese people are viewed as slobs, lonely, disturbed, and overweight people who are pathetic. I think society views people as worthless because of their weight. They are seen as disgusting and lazy. It is outright discrimination. It is the last accepted discrimination

because everyone fears it. And the reason is because everyone has the potential to be fat. That is why people hate it so much.

**Jennifer:** People watch TV for escapism or fantasy so they don't want to watch people that look like themselves. People don't want to watch overweight people because it reminds us of our own mortality... the bias toward overweight women in Hollywood is that they must be evil or crazy. They are seen as lonely, crazy, or self-loathing. No leading man in a role would find them attractive. Every role I have gotten has had to do with my weight in some manner. The industry is very biased. I am pregnant, and yet I feel like after I have the baby and lose that weight that I will still be considered obese by the industry. At a size 10, I am still considered overweight by the media. Because of my size, I look even larger on the screen because the other women are so much thinner than average.

**Wendy:** I think the media targets all consumers and makes them think they are overweight- especially women, especially ages 18-44. The latest trend in weight loss advertising from companies like Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig is based on "This is not a diet" or "Diets suck," trying to make the consumer feel like a pal instead of a client. It's actually very smart, because instead of

embarrassing us, it purports to empower us. But the diet is still the same diet, and the client is still spending money that will ultimately not help them lose weight and keep it off. I think the media bias against the overweight reflects the cultural bias against people who are overweight. The fact that we have a show called *The Biggest Loser* - and people are WATCHING IT - is indicative of a culture that is negative about obesity. We see very few people who are overweight in highly esteemed media positions - news anchors, TV/movie actors, talk show hosts - and often those figures are trying to lose weight, get gastric bypass surgeries, makeovers, etc.. This filters down to us regular people.

**Layla:** People are targeted by diets, diet pills, etc. Nutrisystem wanted to sponsor the 'How to look good Naked' but they were told no because it didn't fit into the theme of the show. However, on the night when I was on the show, Nutrisystem still bought an advertising slot during the show... I believe it was the first commercial break, and I was offended by it because the nature of the show was to be happy with yourself. All you see in magazines and TV has to do with losing weight, diet ads, etc., you constantly see ads to lose weight. There are very few large people on television or in the movies not to mention if there is a

picture of an actress who has gained weight in a magazine that such a big deal is made about her gaining the weight. People in society emulate what is seen on TV and in the movies, so when we see overweight people portrayed as weird, lazy, strange, or the butt of jokes then that is how we perceive them to be as well.

**Ivory:** We are setup where as kids we see all the good foods on TV and we are targeted when we are young. Then in the evenings it is the weight loss pills for adults, or buy this equipment to lose weight... I was looking at a Shape magazine the other day, with all the pills with ephedrine, caffeine, etc. They promote things in a way that make it seem simple to do and say something like act now... get thin quick, works and gets people to buy the products. As far as companies like McDonalds, I don't understand why they still spend so much money on advertising, since there is a McDonalds on every corner and everyone knows who they are. It must be because advertising works. You see the picture of the glistening burger on TV so your next stop will be at McDonalds. Today, they now even advertise their healthy choices, like the salad or the yogurt, but how many people go there just to eat a yogurt, I wonder how many also buy a burger, or fries, or something else. You might go to get a yogurt and you think well while I am here I might as well

get a Big Mac or a small fry... that is how consumerism works.

Most of the participants believed that contemporary media elements limit the representation of the obese because the obese watch television and movies for escapism. Producers know that the obese don't want to watch what they experience everyday but rather want to watch fantasy. When the obese are portrayed in the media, it is in a negative way.

Participants were painfully aware of the media stereotypes that exist for the obese. They are shown as lazy, lonely, crazy, or self-loathing. They are almost never shown in a positive manner. Finally most of the participants believed that the media targets the obese as consumers. Advertisers try to make the consumer feel defective and in need of their product to be a happy person. One participant commented that even the fast food industry now offers healthy choices in an effort to get people into their stores, knowing they will probably buy the unhealthy items there as well.

*Influences on weight increase.* The final emergent theme illustrates some of the perceived *influences on weight gain* in our culture. This includes corporate

influence, food addictions, and confusion about dieting and weight control.

**Mary:** I also think advertisements play a large role. You could just finish eating a lunch and when you walk outside you see a 40 ft billboard for a sundae, so it makes you want to eat a sundae. Other factors that I think have impacted weight gain are television, video games, and no family dinner. Kids eat when they want or when mom will fix something just for them, rather than fixing a meal for the whole family to eat at once. Kids are indoors more than outdoors playing and riding bikes, so kids are much more sedentary and gaining weight. There is food everywhere. I have reconditioned myself to not think of processed foods as food at all. When I go to a convenience store, I don't even think that the food is real. I think of what goes into the food for it to be able to stay on a shelf for one or two years. It cannot be healthy or nutritious for us to eat.

**Richard:** I believe there are more overweight people now than ever before because of lack of activity and not enough knowledge to help them change their eating habits.

Processed foods have also greatly influenced the rapid increase in obesity over the past two decades. Frankly, the American consumer is confused. They don't know what to do

or believe in. Because of this confusion, it is easy to understand how individuals who are unsuccessful with weight loss can begin to blame themselves for their failure.

**Alison:** I think that adults and children are eating too much food and unhealthy food that is affecting their metabolism. I worked with Gerber on children's food and found out that parents weren't giving their children the proper amount of fruit and vegetables. I was also surprised to find out that 70% of children's first vegetable was a French fry. I also believe that the sugar free foods still make you crave sugary foods.

**Lindsay:** You get to a point where you are so overwhelmed by the amount of weight you have to lose that you really don't know how to do it or even where to begin. There is such confusion about what works and what doesn't. It's easier to continue doing what you have been and just hate yourself because you don't know how to change. Its not always easy to fit exercise into your schedule and good food is not always convenient to get when you are on the go. When you are stressed, you just want to eat, and you don't care what is that you are eating.

**Jennifer:** I think fast food and processed foods contribute to the problem. There are corporations that make so much money with processed foods. Even the "natural" foods may be

a problem because of all the injections and hormones in foods.

Overweight people don't feel good about themselves usually and those dark hours when you're seeing yourself as a monster, anyone advertising in that moment, offering a way out will seem like the answer. The industry creates commercials that make the consumer feel inadequate. Without their great product, you'll remain a loser. It's a fear factor!

**Wendy:** I think the increase in diet foods has actually influenced the gain in weight. I remember all the 100-calorie food packs, but they were processed foods. I have learned to stay away from the processed foods. If it is food you buy at the drugstore or gas station, then it shouldn't be eaten. There is danger in the vending machines. The convenience of food should be a warning sign to us. If you want a cookie, make or buy a real cookie made with real ingredients, not all the processed foods that exist. Don't eat the Oreos or other foods that are processed. The weight loss industry makes money because people gain weight back. People think it is their fault when they gain the weight back, so they will try the diets again to get it right. People say the diets work and people are losing weight, so if you aren't, then it's your own

fault. You are the loser that can't make it happen. But losing weight isn't about lack of will power. It drives me crazy that people think that.

**Abby:** I think the media has an impact on what we consume. You get totally mixed messages by the media. I wrote a magazine article in Mademoiselle about my experiences in fat camps and how to love your self but on the next page was an advertisement for a weight loss product. There are articles on how to be thinner and then on the next page there is an advertisement for hostess cupcakes. It is almost schizophrenic. I remember listening to Nell Carter, who said she couldn't watch TV while she was trying to lose weight because of all the advertisements for food, especially at night... The message of corporate America is *Eat, Eat, Eat but don't get Fat.*

The last statement sums up corporate America's influence on weight gain, *Eat Eat Eat but don't get Fat.* Corporations make money by selling their products, and they don't care if their products are healthy, as long as their profit margin is healthy. No one knows how addictive all the processed or diet foods can be; processed and diet foods may have a tremendous influence on weight gain. Finally, most of the participants feel that most consumers are confused about what is healthy, and what is not

healthy. Many feel that the diet foods are not a healthy source of nutrients.

#### Summary/Composite Textural-Structural Description

A composite textural-structural description was constructed which reflects overall the participants' experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) with the oppression of obesity. This description is the synthesis of meanings and essences of the participants' experiences with the oppression of obesity--integrated into a typical experience of the phenomenon.

Most experiences with weight issues began around the time of puberty. This was especially true of the females who intimated that around the age of 12 or 13 they began to be conscious of their weight or weight gain. Even if they were overweight before this age, puberty seemed to be the time that it came to the forefront as an issue.

There were several influences on weight perception and weight control that were developed within the participants' home life. A couple of the participants shared that their parents, and especially the mom, strongly influenced their perception of how a woman should look. The woman should be thin and beautiful even if it took a lot of work or meant that you were uncomfortable. There were also the eating habits that the individuals developed. Many remember eating

too much because there were people starving somewhere else in the world, so it was responsible to eat everything on your plate. Besides overeating, many claimed that they ate unhealthy foods such as desserts or processed foods. Food was also used to deal with stress, boredom, or was even entertainment to the participants.

Most of the participants were already on diets by their early teens or were at least aware that many people were on diets and were influenced by a pressure to be thin. Some of the participants took extreme measures like taking prescription drugs or trying fad diets at an early age. Bulimic and anorexic tendencies were noted in several of the participants' descriptions of throwing up or starving themselves. Almost all the participants have tried a variety of diet programs, diet pills, and weight loss gimmicks. Most have struggled with dieting throughout their teen and adulthood years.

School seemed to be a difficult period for most of the participants. This included relentless teasing by peers. Some commented that they were constantly teased and some even learned to make fun of themselves (as a coping mechanism so it wouldn't hurt as bad). Physical education was overwhelmingly seen as negative to the participants. They were chosen last, made fun of, and often teachers

perpetuated the negative environment by attitude, comments, or activities, such as weighing the students in front of other students. A couple of the participants noted that health issues arose from being overweight such as knee problems that kept them from participating in PE, but most of the participants skipped PE or tried to get out of PE because it was a very stressful time for them during the school day.

The self-image of the participants was influenced by a need for acceptance by peers as well as a resistance to negative biases associated with being overweight. Some took extreme measures to lose weight, while others participated in promiscuous activities just to feel a sense of acceptance. Many commented that their weight dominated their feelings and self-perceptions. The weight on a scale is an obsession for the participants and happiness is often influenced by what number is on the scale. Even as adults many still struggle with relating happiness or success with how much they weigh. Depression, shame, low self-esteem, lack of self-respect, obsession, unhappy, and controlled were all feelings that the participants experienced in relation to being overweight.

All of the participants in the study reported that they had experienced bias because of their weight. Many

shared multiple stories of the oppression of obesity operationalized as bias, stereotyping, pain, hurt, and shame experienced at the hands of others. These experiences began in childhood and spanned throughout adulthood and are still experienced today if the participants are still overweight. Participants could recall incidents that happened decades ago as if they had occurred recently because of the deep emotional impact. Many have repressed certain memories rather than try to deal with them. Peers, coworkers, employers, teachers, and even family members produced the experienced biases and/or oppression. Even doctors, whom one would assume are empathetic and patient in helping the obese, often perpetuated the same types of bias as other peer and non-peer groups. Many participants pointed out that the oppression of obesity is the last form of accepted discrimination, but it would seem that no other group of individuals has endured the aggressive bias of obesity that occurs daily, inappropriately, painfully, and abusively for those who are overweight and/or obese.

The participants agreed that women endure the greatest bias for being overweight—both in the media and in USA society. In the media overweight men still endure stereotypes and bias but not to the extent that women endure. Examples of unfair bias were expressed in shows

such as *King of Queens* or *Still Standing*, where overweight men are married to thin beautiful women. Participants stated that the opposite would never occur in television, where a fat woman would be married to a thin handsome man, at least not in the foreseeable future. Some of the participants explain that a woman ties her self worth to her weight more than men. Some explained that men see their bodies as a tool and not as defining their totality as do many women. Several explained that biology may also play a role, where men are physically taller and therefore can carry extra weight where women who are generally shorter have less extra weight that can be carried without looking overweight or fat. The participants agree that women who are overweight do experience greater bias when it comes to advancement in careers and opportunities for dating as well. Many of the participants discussed women's size in terms of personal space, noting that society expects women to take up very little space. Large women are looked down upon and many suggested the irony of women becoming more invisible to others as they gain more weight.

The participants felt that the media is rampant with examples of bias toward the overweight in our culture. Participants noted that overweight people are often limited on television and movies because people want to watch

fantasy, not real life, where over 60% of the population is overweight. When overweight or fat people do appear in television or movie, they are often shown as evil, lazy, weird, asexual, or the butt of jokes. The participants believe that since overweight people are depicted in this manner by the media that this bias influences individual opinion as well. Overweight individuals are also often portrayed as unhappy, emotional, depressed and sad. However, the bias was not specific to television and movies, examples were given of magazines that show thin women with the suggestion that if you want to be happy then you have to be thin as well.

Participants also believe that advertising specifically targets overweight people by making them think they are defective and the only way they can be accepted is to buy the product. Examples were given of magazines with multiple advertisements for weight loss products, especially targeted toward females. Some commented that even on commercials for fast food restaurants that thin beautiful people are used rather than overweight individuals. Overwhelmingly, the participants believe that processed foods have influenced the increase in weight over the past two decades. The convenience and easy access of food was also associated with the processed foods that have

been developed and available everywhere. Other influences that were associated with weight gain included inactivity, large portion sizes, food addictions, and even consumption of diet foods and diet pills were perceived as actually influencing weight gain.

Chapter 5 will bring the research study to a conclusion and will lend suggestions for similar and needed research in the future regarding the effects of the oppression of obesity on overweight and obese children and adults. Implications for educators for the safeguarding of overweight children's health, self-esteem, and education will be presented. Implications as they relate to gender issues, such as increased bias toward women as well as the incidence of eating disorders related to weight bias will also be discussed. The rising incidence of obesity among children and adults and the oppression that accompanies this rise can be mitigated.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter five completes the dissertation. In this chapter, a summary of the purpose of the research precedes a discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions that guided the investigation. The chapter is divided into five major sections. The first section provides a summary of the research. The second section reviews the procedures of the study. The third section reports the findings of the study. The fourth section includes important implications that emerged from the findings of the study for educators engaged in supporting the physical and emotional development of contemporary USA youth, as well as implications for parents, teachers, counselors, school administrators, and the contemporary society-at-large. The fifth section includes recommendations for future research concerning the relation between findings of the study and contemporary socio-cultural contexts that influence the development of obesity and also contribute to the oppression of those who are obese.

## Summary of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify and to investigate the oppression of obesity in contemporary USA

society through the examination of the lived experiences of highly visible obese adults who work in media fields. To achieve such a purpose, a carefully designed, phenomenological examination of weight bias in USA culture was conducted with ten famous adults in the media who agreed to respond to personal interviews. Constructed interview questions were based on an extensive review of the literature for discovery of the cultural factors found relevant to obesity. Participants' answers to the interview questions were assumed to represent these relevant influences toward obesity as well as to reveal the effects of the oppression that often accompanies the condition. The research was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are the influential cultural factors affecting the increase of obesity in the USA?
2. What are the oppressive effects of contemporary cultural biases perpetuated toward overweight/obese/fat people in the USA?

Currently, approximately 64% of the USA population is considered overweight or obese (Brownell, 2004). This disturbing phenomenon leads researchers to question why there has been such an increase in weight over the past two decades when at the same time, there has been a tremendous

increase in diet foods, diet plans, and diet pills-- creating a near 50 billion dollar weight loss industry (O'Connell, 2004. Another disturbing phenomenon is the rapid increase in weight gain among children. Cultural influences on weight gain were examined in the literature review as well as in the interview transcripts of participating adults.

Results of the study reveal how obesity is portrayed in USA culture and how peers, nonpeers, and contemporary culture treat overweight and obese individuals. The lived experiences of famous, highly visible individuals were investigated through one-to-one, transcribed interviews to determine if these individuals had encountered bias; and if so, I wished to discover the extent to which they had experienced weight bias. The study also revealed the perceptions of the media toward the obese as well as the biases encountered by participants in school, home, work, or other more personal interactions.

Obesity among children and adults is a rising and tragic problem and the oppression of obesity is just as tragic. Participants in the study revealed that their struggles with their weight represented only one aspect of being overweight. The oppression of obesity was often considered to be as harmful to the participants as their

weight itself. While some experienced the physical issues associated with weight gain such as knee problems or other health related problems, all of them experienced emotional distress as a result of the oppression and discrimination associated with being overweight. This bias was evident as early as elementary school where participants were called names and even experienced bias from teachers. The bias was also experienced at home, whether or not it was intentional. For example, some of the participants recalled that their mothers were influential in forming their perceptions of weight and the need to be beautiful and thin. This may have been out of a desire for their children to be happy and successful, but it placed pressure on the young females to be thin so that they would be accepted in a world that cruelly stereotypes the obese.

As overweight adults, the participants endured discrimination at work, in getting jobs, in their social lives, and even though some were well known celebrities, it didn't deter people from sending a couple of them nasty letters or emails informing them of how fat and disgusting they were. The experienced bias extended into everyday life, such as clerks not wanting to assist them in a store, or doctors reprimanding them when they stepped on the

scales (sometimes causing them to refuse to go the doctor, even when sick, because of the dreaded scales).

Because of the participants' highly visible, public positions, they were keenly aware of weight bias in the media, especially toward women. Some shared examples of roles they didn't get because of their weight. Other participants discussed the roles in television and movies where overweight people are often portrayed in a very negative manner as asexual, deviant, or lazy. It is clear from the research that the participants in the study experienced oppression or bias from peers and non-peers, employers, doctors and the media. In addition, participants concurred with one another that corporations target overweight people with weight loss products and that processed foods are targeted to certain demographics based upon programming. For example, Saturday morning advertisements are targeting young children with processed foods that are high in sugar and fat.

Findings showed that weight bias is not restricted to a race or socio economic class and even celebrities are not immune. These experiences reveal that people can be vicious and relentless in oppressing those who are overweight. These experiences also reveal that even celebrity does not safeguard someone from the malicious and spiteful attacks.

It also appears that the reason people feel empowered to oppress the obese is because they have been conditioned to believe it is their own fault, as one respondent said, it's "*fatty's fault*".

The reason for such bias toward weight may be because everyone can be susceptible. As Lindsay said, "It is the last accepted discrimination because everyone fears it. And the reason is because everyone has the potential to be fat.. that is why people hate it so much."

#### *Procedures*

This examination of the lived experiences of the oppression of obese individuals in our culture was conducted through a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Ten highly visible individuals who are in media fields (either as celebrities, authors, models, or comedians) were interviewed about their experiences with obesity, that is, with being overweight or obese. Individuals in the mass media industry were selected because they were considered to be representative of those whose lived experiences were more likely to be culturally broad—with respect to contemporary USA culture—more so than a private citizen who would not, most likely, have experienced both public and private oppression. That is, these selected individuals were assumed to represent those who would possess first

hand knowledge of bias experienced on a personal level but who would also have experienced the biases emanating from a media or cultural perspective as well. I contacted several highly visible individuals who were not willing to discuss their weight gain or weight bias. Therefore, the 10 participants chosen weren't the only individuals contacted but the only ones who were willing to discuss their issues with being overweight.

Themes emerged as I compared and contrasted the participants' responses to the structured interview questions to look for similarities among the responses to the questions. Key words that appeared with frequency were noted. A cutting and sorting technique was useful, not only for identifying themes, but sub-themes, as well. This technique was used to sort similar quotes by participants into common groups that emerged as sub-themes and themes.

To ensure reliability and validity, I used a triangulation technique that included receiving input on themes and sub-themes by a university professor with experience in qualitative research as well as my major professor. I also had each participant read their transcript to ensure that it accurately reflected their experiences. Then I read and reread the transcripts, themes

and sub themes, to ensure that the most appropriate coding had been utilized.

### *Findings*

Each of the 10 participants in the study had experienced some type or level of oppression or bias when they were overweight. That is, regardless of whether they were overweight as a child, as adult, or both, they had experienced discrimination or oppression based upon their weight. Even if the famous individual had become a household name such as *Alison Sweeney*, she still received letters calling her names such as *Fat Cow*. Even if there were valid reasons for weight gain, as *Julia Havey* said, "I believe that weight discrimination happens daily, inappropriately, painfully, and abusively."

An interesting finding revealed that even though every participant had experiences with discrimination, some of them admitted that they also had felt the same way toward people that were larger than themselves. They don't think the people are overweight because they are lazy, but wonder why they are so large. For example, *Ivory* said, "Right now I am a size 14. I still look at someone that is a size 20 and think they are too big."

Another finding revealed in this study and strongly supported in the literature is that puberty is a pivotal

age for females in relation to weight, body image, and self-esteem. This is the age when females begin to develop and gain weight, so it is a time that can be very daunting if they experience bias because of the weight gain.

Finally, findings revealed that there are complex, yet possibly simple, relational influences between the increase in weight among adults and children in the USA over the past two decades and the cultural factors that affected the weight gain. The contents of processed foods and the accessibility and convenience of continuous snacking were two of the major cultural factors that were identified. Processed foods are profitable for corporations and therefore foods that taste good and are marketable are emphasized, which usually means foods high in fat or sugar. There was also research that suggested the amount of television viewing and snacking while watching television were also factors for increased body weight. Decrease in physical activity was also found to be a factor, not necessarily because people are getting lazier, but rather technology, population growth, and increased sedentary jobs all contribute to a culture that is less active than in the past. Finally the targeting of consumers through advertising and marketing were well documented as well. For instance, Saturday morning television is filled with

commercials for processed foods that are high in fats and sugars but are appealing to children because the products are connected with characters such as *Toy Story*, *Sponge Bob*, and *Blue's Clues*. Even the weight loss industry does little to help with the weight epidemic. Most fad diets seem to contradict each other, and since most diets are unsuccessful, obviously the diet pills are ineffective as well. It appears that the weight loss industry much like the major food corporations are more interested in a healthy profit margin than they are in healthy individuals.

#### *Implications of the Study*

Since weight is such a pervasive issue, there are likely to be many mitigating factors, such as corporate influence, processed foods, and even technological advances, which produce a more sedentary lifestyle. One reason these factors are often not addressed may be the cultural perception that obesity is a personal choice. Julia best expressed this sentiment when she responded in the interview, "it's fatty's fault." Often, weight biases and discrimination go largely unaddressed, as do issues such as anorexia and bulimia, which may stem from weight bias. See Appendix A for story of Elisa Donovan, a well-known actress who was so afraid of getting fat that she became anorexic.

There are multiple implications for schools and curriculum that should be addressed if the epidemic of obesity and the oppression of obesity are to be prevented. First, as previously mentioned, are eating disorders and pressure placed upon females to be thin. A greater focus in the health curriculum on health might lessen some of this pressure. Also, since all of the participants faced discrimination or oppression due to their weight, there needs to be more emphasis placed upon bullying in the schools as it relates to weight bias as well. Obesity is not always understood to be a major component of bullying because of the acceptance of discrimination toward obese people. However, there were examples given in the research, such as Jennifer explaining that even a teacher showed bias toward her because she was overweight. Obviously, if teachers exhibit biased behaviors against students, their other students will feel that it is acceptable as well.

Thirdly, physical education curricula can be revised to support health and fitness rather than competition and rivalry. Overwhelmingly, the participants in the study hated physical education, found ways to skip it, or simply endured it as a necessary evil, indicating that the students who need the positive effects of physical education are the least likely to benefit. In addition,

while I believe that competitive activities such as team sports have their place, the research shows that physical education needs to focus more on personal fitness.

Overweight or obese students don't want to participate in team sports because of their size. So, they get very little exercise. If physical education were restructured to focus on personal fitness, with facilities such as a cardio center, or weight machines, students wouldn't have to always compete with other students. They could set and attain personal goals.

When I taught at a public school, I was able to acquire the funding to set up a weight room with cardio and machine weights for the students. The students loved working out much more than running around the track or going out to play certain activities. I think that a shift in curriculum would be beneficial to students who are otherwise left out of physical education and who, in fact, need the positive benefits.

Finally, the foods offered in schools need to be changed. As the research revealed, soft drink companies and fast food companies have entered the public schools and have greatly influenced the food choices for our students. See Appendix B for the Yvonne Sanders-Butler Story for one

person who understands the need to change the food choices of schools.

The irony within schools is that there is a continual decline in physical education and recess due to increased standardized testing and yet students are given the choice to eat unhealthy foods and soft drinks at school without regard to their need for healthy food. In 1997, 30 percent of public high schools sold food from one or more of nine different fast food chains, and "at least one high school is actually licensed as a fast food franchise; it pays royalties to the parent company and keeps the profits, which are said to be \$100,000 annually" (Nestle, 2002, p.194). As previously stated the same is true of soft drinks, where some systems actually have pouring agreements with the soft drink companies to serve only their brand of beverages in exchange for contracts that can be worth millions of dollars (Brownell, 2004). Many school systems to sacrifice the health and well being of their students just to increase revenues by teaming up with the corporate leeches that want students to become life long consumers of their products.

This research has implications that are relevant to the larger societal realm as well. While the focus of this study was on the oppression or discrimination of obese

individuals, there are several extraneous issues that arose through the research. There are three specific areas in which changes could be influenced which include gender bias, corporate targeting, and education of consumers.

The participants vastly agreed that women endure greater bias than men. While obese men do experience bias, it is not to the extent that women experience. Many of the women referred to personal space and the fact that women should be small, or almost invisible. Mary Dimino said "Magazines tell guys to get bigger and tell women to disappear. They want us to get smaller until we disappear-- by showing a size zero they want women to not be there." The smaller women are, the more acceptable they become. The irony as expressed by many of the participants is that the larger a woman becomes, the more invisible she becomes as well. One major implication may involve being weighed at the doctor's office. If women are worried about their weight or the potential bias endured by a doctor toward their weight, then some women may not seek medical attention until a health problem reaches a more advanced or even critical stage. Another aspect with women has to do with the eating disorders, which predominantly affect women. I believe these issues warrant further research from a cultural as well as a gender studies perspective.

Based upon this research, there appears to be a corporate paradox that exists. In essence, Corporate America is perpetuating the increase in weight gain, blaming the consumer for the weight gain, and then offering solutions to overcome the weight issues, only to again blame the consumer when the solutions are ineffective. For example one study revealed a total of 564 food advertisements during 52.5 hours of Saturday morning television viewing and the vast majority of these advertisements were for fast foods, soft drinks, sugary snacks and candy (Kotz, & Story, 1994). However these same corporations are not willing to admit that their processed foods may influence weight gain but rather suggest that children just need to be more active to maintain healthy weight.

Millions of dollars are spent on advertising, often to a targeted group, and obsession with weight has created a market for specialized foods, such as diet foods that are targeted toward the overweight, with the intent of making you buy the product to make you a healthier person. Many of the participants expressed that diet foods are not even healthy foods. As some of the participants believed, corporations target the insecurities of consumers, but especially those that are vulnerable such as the overweight

and obese. As Abby said, the message of corporate America is "Eat Eat Eat but don't get Fat". If you do get fat, then it is your own fault because you lack self-control. When people do gain weight, the same corporate culture is there to offer the quick fix of a diet pill, fad diet, diet foods, or other items that will help you to become acceptable to society. As long as we allow the stereotype to exist that people are overweight because they are lazy or it's their choice, Corporate America will continue to target and exploit a vulnerable group. As Richard Simmons said, "It is easy to understand how individuals who are unsuccessful with weight loss can begin to blame themselves for their failure".

The question then becomes how do we stop this vicious cycle and attack on consumers? Education is one of the keys to changing the culture. There are organizations that work to end discrimination against the obese; however, I believe they are marginalized since they are made up of obese individuals who aren't given due respect. Therefore, these issues need to be mainstreamed into educational curriculum. For instance, in health class, there is little or no discussion about the ease with which food is acquired in vending machines, or the preservatives and other harmful ingredients in processed foods. Corporations would rather

focus on kids doing more exercise than admit the foods they offer are unhealthy and a reason for weight gain. These issues need to be discussed and addressed before any change in the weight epidemic will occur.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

While qualitative research is not necessarily designed for large sampling, a population of non-celebrity individuals or individuals in other developed countries should be studied to discover if their experiences were similar to those in this study. Celebrities are not easily available or accessible. Several celebrities that I tried to contact were either not interested in sharing their experiences with weight, or didn't respond to the invitation at all.

There are a multiple concepts that arose in the research that would benefit from further study. It would be interesting to see if sickness or diseases were worsened because overweight individuals experienced too much bias even from their healthcare provider to visit the doctor as often as needed.

Another interesting topic that arose was food addiction and diet foods. While food addiction is not necessarily a cultural influence, it was a factor that many of the participants voiced as a possible reason for weight

gain. The reasoning given was that people could be addicted to alcohol, or drugs, so why can't they be addicted to food? Some of the participants also pointed to the weight loss pills and diet foods as potentially causing an increase in weight as well. Since there is debate about artificial sweeteners and how they affect the body, I think further research regarding this topic is warranted.

Many of the participants discussed experiences of bullying in schools because they were overweight. I believe that this is an area that needs further research. Physical education was also an area where negative experiences were expressed. This occurred because the students felt singled out and made fun of because of their size, or even teachers created an environment where the students felt discrimination. This area may be one of the most beneficial to educators because these children need to be active and look forward to physical education, not hating it and dreading going to class.

#### Conclusion

As I began this research and journey, one of my goals was to determine what are the cultural influences that affect weight gain in order to be aware of those influences within my own life. I wanted to do research that is important to me personally and to make changes in my

lifestyle and diet that would assist me to maintain a healthy weight. I also wanted to learn so that I can become a more effective teacher for my obese and overweight students. As a teacher, coach, and former bodybuilder, I knew that I wasn't lazy or that it was totally my fault that I had gained weight over the past several years. I was working out fairly regularly, eating diet foods, and drinking diet drinks, yet I was still gaining weight. My research has had a profound affect on my lifestyle and diet. Over the past six months I have stopped consuming all diet drinks, eating diet foods, and most processed foods. I eat mostly fresh vegetables, proteins, nuts, and dairy products. I haven't drastically reduced my caloric intake, but I have changed the quality of the food I eat. I still train regularly and actually don't train much more than I did before. I don't snack while watching television now, and I eat off of smaller plates. I have, to this date, lost over 40 pounds. The changes I have made have not been guided by a fad diet, or super weight loss program, but rather, I am changing my food and environment based upon the findings of my research. The lived experiences of the participants in this study provide strong support for the assumption that weight gain is less about laziness or motivation, and more about cultural influences for

overeating *and* that the choice to live sedentary lifestyles is conducive to weight gain. Educating individuals to understand how these cultural influences affect their health is an important incentive for me as a fitness coach and teacher. Hopefully through education, students can become less confused about diet misinformation and make informed choices to improve their health. Certainly, cultural understandings of the dynamics of weight gain and obesity can assist to decrease the prevalence of stereotyping and biased behavior toward those who are overweight or obese.

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## APPENDIX A

## THE ELISA DONOVAN STORY

A perfect example of how weight bias is related to anorexia is the experience shared by Elisa Donovan. Elisa is a well-known actress in Hollywood, appearing in movies such as *Clueless*, *A Night at the Roxbury*, *Wolves of Wall Street*, and *Shark Swarm*. Elisa was never overweight, but she has experienced the unrealistic pressure to be thin by Hollywood and the media. Elisa said in the early 1990's that she felt such pressure to be thin that she starved herself. She said she had bouts with anorexia for several years.

Elisa was having lunch one day with a friend and during the meal she pushed the food away from her and just stopped eating and she felt such power and control from simply pushing the food away. So, she learned that when she was eating that if she stopped, it gave her control that she didn't feel like she had in other areas of her life. She would eat less and less and see her body get smaller and smaller so she felt good about herself. The weight loss started before she went to Hollywood, and then she started getting work, so she felt like it was because she was smaller. She said because there is no security or control

in the industry that controlling her eating habits and weight was her source of power and control.

Because of these eating habits she developed anorexia. Even though she wasn't eating much, food was an obsession with her. She thought about food all the time. In fact, she didn't think she was anorexic because she thought about food so much. she didn't weigh herself very often on the scales, but remembers that previously she had normally weighed around 120 pounds. During this time she did step on a scale because she was worried she weighed too much, but she weighed only 102 pounds. She felt good about what the scale said but in her mind she would say that it isn't enough. Her anorexia worsened over time. She began by cutting down her food to just one individual container of yogurt, but by the end, she was consuming only half of a teaspoon of yogurt per day. She would also take laxatives to help keep the weight off although she wasn't really eating anything. She finally started the long road to recovery after a health scare in which her heart was racing and she was taken to the emergency room. Se was scared for her life. Although she had the support of friends and professionals, it took a long time to overcome the eating disorder. It wasn't a quick fix, but there came a point

when she realized being thin wasn't worth all the focus and attention.

Her story unfortunately is not isolated, but in fact many young women struggle with eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia because of the pressure placed upon women in our culture to be thin. Elisa said "there is an unrealistic standard for women. Our culture says women should be emaciated with big boobs. I challenge you to find one magazine that does not mention weight loss, diet, or body image on the cover, especially the magazines designed toward women". So whether women are discriminated against because they are overweight or they develop eating disorders to prevent becoming overweight, these are issues that need to be more openly discussed, especially in health classes for girls around the age of puberty.

## APPENDIX B

## THE DR. YVONNE SANDERS-BUTLER STORY

Dr. Yvonne Sanders-Butler is the principal of Browns Mill Elementary School, in Lithonia, Georgia. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Butler, Browns Mill elementary is the only sugar-free school in the nation.

When Yvonne first started as principal of the school, she walked through the cafeteria one day and realized that many of her students were overweight or obese. She knew from personal experience that she needed to make changes for the benefit of the students, because Yvonne at one point was obese and was rushed to the hospital because she woke up with a bloodshot eye and massive headache. She almost had a stroke with her blood pressure 200/140. Yvonne said it was a surreal experience to realize that she almost died. She changed her lifestyle because she realized food was her drug of choice and if she was going to see her children grow up and realize her own goals in education that she needed to be healthy.

She decided to make a change in her school and made it a sugar free school. She said the biggest obstacle was the parents because they had to deal with their own eating habits and lifestyles at home. She removed all the sugar and processed foods from the school, she didn't allow the

children to bring junk food to school, and she changed the food that was served in the cafeteria. Part of the problem is that there is a lot of money involved with producing processed foods. She said brand loyalty starts at 2 years old. So if someone drinks a certain drink at 2 then guess what drink she is going to drink as an adult. Yvonne says that money has been cut from schools, so they look for ways to get money, such as making deals with soft drink Companies or allowing vending machines in schools. This could be changed if priorities about our children and education could be changed. Yvonne said by changing to healthier foods in the cafeteria, they have saved approximately \$379,000.00 over the last 8 years.

Yvonne also said that before the changes, a large portion of the school would bring permission slips to skip PE and the kids didn't like to go outside and play. She knew PE wasn't working so they changed the programs to involve more movement and dance that the children would enjoy. She said they start everyday with 10 minutes of music and everyone in the school, even the administrators and staff have to stop and move or dance to the music. Now children enjoy PE and love going outside to play as much as possible. She said test scores have also improved significantly over the past 8 years as well, and she is actually doing a study now

with the National Institute of Health to examine the benefits of her sugar-free school. Therefore, if schools would utilize the model developed by Dr. Butler, there could be dramatic changes in the health of students through changes made at school.