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## Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues among College-Age Women: An In-Depth and Written Interview Study of the Mind-Body Dichotomy

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## **Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues among College-Age Women: An In-Depth and Written Interview Study of the Mind-Body Dichotomy**

### **Abstract**

In this article we investigate college-age women's body image issues in the context of dominant femininity and its polarization of the mind and body. We use original data collected through seven in-depth interviews and 32 qualitative written interviews with college-age women and men. We coded the data thematically applying feminist approaches to the analysis. We conclude that the current standard of femininity disproportionately associates women's worth with their bodies. Differing from literature that suggests femininity is associated with physicality and masculinity is not, our research suggests that masculinity is also partly associated with physicality, but in a way that is linked to power and does not reduce masculinity to only physicality.

### **Keywords**

Body Image, Eating Disorders, Femininity, Masculinity, and Mind-Body Dichotomy

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# **Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues among College-Age Women: An In-Depth and Written Interview Study of the Mind-Body Dichotomy**

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## **Introduction**

In this article we explore college-age women's perceptions of femininity and masculinity, and the participants' related body image issues. A smaller sample of college-age men is also included. This qualitative interview research is grounded in the feminist literature on body image and social constructionist scholarship as well as feminist theory on the mind-body dichotomy, suggesting ways in which this long-standing dualism shapes women's and men's attitudes and related behaviors.

The Cartesian mind-body dichotomy that has dominated knowledge construction for centuries assumes an artificial separation and constructs a hierarchy between the two categories (Harding, 1986; Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2004). Mind, and those things associated with mind are placed on a higher plane than its oppositional form: body. As many feminists have argued (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990, 1993; Weitz, 2003; Wolf, 1991), the mind-body binary puts men and women, masculinity and femininity, in opposition to each other; masculinity is located in mind qualities and femininity is located in the flesh (Hesse-Biber, 1996, 2006). As Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) writes, "Woman's space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which

she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined” (p. 30). Conceptions of women’s spaces delineate a common idea of enclosed space, of power/powerlessness, and of the body as a site of gendered performativity (Butler, 1993). As gender is an achieved status (Connell, 1995; Weitz, 2003), both males and females perform gender. For males, gender is less confined to the physical body, but also involves attitudes, perception, and intelligence (Connell). Historically, intelligence itself was a quality linked only to males, particularly in fields such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, and medicine (Connell; Martin, 1987; Martin, 1996; Pateman, 1988). Calculation, competence, and logic appeal to the capabilities of men to exercise institutional and personal power over women, which render them inferior to their male counterparts. Historically, men have controlled cultural constructions of femininity and have positioned women’s bodies as sites of objectification (Bartky, 1988; Foucault, 1977, 1978.) Even when men’s bodies are thought of in physical terms, they are most often situated in contexts pertaining to power over women, or in comparison to women’s bodies, separating the powerful from the less powerful (Lorber, 1993). Through the sexualization of women’s bodies, the physical body itself becomes the site of sexuality in which personality and emotion are removed or ignored (Berger, 1977; Wolf, 1991).

Debate regarding the extent to which the Cartesian conception of the mind-body dichotomy continues to inform the performance of gender has again become the subject of considerable theoretical work among feminists as a result of postmodern and poststructuralist thought. The Cartesian tradition presents a constituting subject (agency), while a non-Cartesian viewpoint may posit a constituted subject (product of social forces) (Cosgrove & McHugh, 2002; Hekman, 1991). The feminist critique of the Cartesian subject is twofold: First, the Cartesian subject has been conceptualized as inherently masculine (Hekman) and second, it falsely segregates the mind from the body. Feminist scholars have attempted to construct a subject that integrates the mind and body and “eschews the sexism of the Cartesian subject while at the same time retaining agency” (Hekman, p. 44). In this regard, we turn to French feminist thought. In particular, Julia Kristeva, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, provides a model of subjects in process (and bodies in process) that operate within the context of the symbolic order, which has been discursively gendered masculine (Kristeva, 1980, 1987). Put differently, the realm of media and language are patriarchal constructions and women must subvert them from within, as we can never stand outside of social constructions (Kristeva).

It is within the context of these ongoing theoretical and epistemological discussions within feminism that we have undertaken this investigation of the mind-body and masculinity-femininity dichotomies, examining the ways in which these dualistic conceptions impact college-age women’s body image. Our guiding questions are: What are college students’ perceptions of femininity and masculinity and how does our cultural conception of femininity as bodily impact young women’s body image attitudes and related body behaviors?

Drawing on previous research we have found that there is a matrix of socio-cultural sources from which young women (and men) learn binary constructions of femininity and masculinity in ways that mediate how young women in particular think about their bodies (as linked to their femininity) and impact their body image and related behaviors (Leavy & Ross, 2006). The conception of femininity as body-based, and the individual pursuit of a particular body, is deeply ingrained within our culture (Hesse-

Biber, 1996, 2006; Kilbourne, 2004; Leavy & Ross, 2006; Wolf, 1991) and many college-age women have internalized cultural notions of femininity as body-driven, a view that is reinforced by societal institutions and the ideology of advertising (see Jhally, 1990). Many of these women learn that their participation in the mind-body dichotomy locates them in a system of rewards making them “the other” within the system which, at an age of critical transitional markers, may seem more appealing than being the other on the outside. There are social rewards for conforming to femininity ideals which influence young women. In other words, young women’s participation in this system is logical as long as the system remains predicated upon narrow oppositional conceptions of femininity that locate femaleness within the body (Bordo, 1993).

### **Research Purpose**

In this study our main research objective is to contribute to the body of knowledge about college-age women’s perceptions of femininity and related impact on body image. Our goal is to yield descriptive data that illustrates, problematizes, or refutes existing theoretical scholarship regarding the mind-body dichotomy and its relationship to female body image. A great deal of body image research focuses on women with eating disorders: However, body image can involve various dimensions of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Additionally, feminist research on the mind-body dichotomy is primarily theoretical. Therefore, there is little evidence of the ways in which hegemonic femininity, and its polarization of the mind and body, impacts women’s body image development. Accordingly, we are interested in: (a) our participants’ conceptions of femininity and masculinity, (b) how family, peers, and media transmit messages about femininity, and (c) our participants’ perception of their body image attitudes and behaviors. Gathering descriptive data is a particularly useful way of addressing highly theoretical issues such as the mind-body dichotomy (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

### **Body Image and the Social Construction of Femininity: A Review of the Literature**

In reviewing the vast repository of literature on body image and femininity, we are situating our analysis in feminist scholarship on the social construction of gender as it intersects with body image. This research explores how the social construction of the mind-body dichotomy is related to the construction of dominant femininity and masculinity, and how, in turn, this aspect of the social world impacts our participants’ body image issues. Feminists have not only brought the mind-body dichotomy to our attention, thus making this artificial conceptualization visible (Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 1996, 2006; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993; Spry, 2001), but much work has also been done to rethink this dualism by reconceptualizing notions of the body as a physical location of gendered enactment, destabilizing former rigid understandings of the mind-body dichotomy. Additionally, feminists have been at the forefront of constructionist research since the second wave of feminism (Marshall, 2008). Gender as a social construction largely defines the project of feminism and is “the closest thing to a unifying concept in feminist studies” (Glenn, 2000, p. 5).

Our understanding of femininity as a contingent, mass-mediated construct enacted by women, has developed out of sociological constructionist scholarship. Stephen Pfohl (2008) theorizes the core of constructionism as follows

For language-dependent humans, things are never simply present in a direct and unadorned fashion. Things are, instead, partially shaped and provisionally organized by the complex ways in which we are ritually positioned in relation to each other and to the objects we behold materially, symbolically, and in the imaginary realm. The ritual historical positioning of humans in relation to cultural objects and stories that we both make and are made over by—this, perhaps, is the elementary form of an effective social construction. This elementary form casts a circle of believability around artificially constructed accounts of the world. At the same time, the believability of the social constructions that lie inside the circle depends on what the circle expels to the outside. In this sense, social constructions are, at once, constituted and haunted by what they exclude. (pp. 645-646)

We apply this conception to the study of femininity as a set of rules for doing gender that are defined as feminine and contrasted with the masculine. In this regard, Judith Lorber (1993, 2008) contends gender is a culturally and historically specific organizing principle for creating a gendered (and hierarchical) social order.

Based on our reading of constructionist scholarship a few key questions emerge. First, what is the prevailing dominant conception of femininity? Second, what is the relationship between the femininity ideal and the prevailing dominant construction of masculinity? Finally, how is the femininity ideal communicated to young women? We present a brief literature review addressing these questions followed by a presentation of our research, which extends this body of knowledge by exploring the links between the femininity ideal, the mind-body dichotomy, and body image among college-age women.

### **Hegemonic Femininity**

Hegemonic femininity prescribes both appearance and behavior. Research shows significant socio-cultural pressures on women to be thin (Ehrenreich & English, 1979; Ewen, 1976; Hansen, Reed, & Waters, 1986; Hartmann, 1976; Hesse-Biber, 1996, 2006; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006; Silverstein, 1984; Wolf, 1991). Women attempt to achieve this ideal through self-imposed body-based controls (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). In contemporary American society fat is equated with “a devaluation of the feminine” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2004, p. 611). Dworkin and Wachs found the pressure to be thin and fit has increased so dramatically in recent years that even women’s bodies pre, post, and during pregnancy are now judged based on the appearance of fitness, which is associated with femininity. Women are thus constantly engaged in a process of “bodywork” (Dworkin & Wachs, p. 618). The importance of body type with respect to achieving femininity cultivates appearance-driven attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to a slim body, there are femininity norms regarding wearing makeup. Dellinger and Williams (1997) found institutional pressures on women to wear makeup

appropriately at work as a means of establishing heterosexuality and credibility in the workplace. Women's hair is another marker of femininity, with long, young-looking hair as the ideal. Koppelman (1996) suggests bald women and women with gray or white hair defy the social construction of female beauty and are thus subject to social punishments (because they are viewed as threatening).

This dominant, appearance-based version of femininity prescribes a range of behaviors with which women must comply in order to signal their femininity. These behaviors, which all feed capitalist interests by promoting consumerism, include cosmetics, fashion, hair dyes, fitness clubs, cosmetic surgery, and special or restrictive diets (Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Kilbourne, 2004).

Considering the femininity ideal alone only takes us so far. In order to understand dominant femininity it must be analyzed in relation to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. The relationship between femininity and masculinity is one of polarization and exclusion. According to Pfohl (2008), all social constructions are partially defined by what they exclude. Therefore, dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity are partially constituted by what they push to the peripheries. In the case of gender, a dichotomous conception dominates, one that posits femininity is inclusive of traits deemed feminine and exclusive of those traits deemed masculine (with the converse true for masculinity). The mind-body dualism, with male as mind and female as body, is one component of this oppositional dichotomy. The polarization of femininity with masculinity is particularly well-evidenced in empirical research on girls and athletics.

Evans (2006) proposes that girls' experiences with sports manifest in relation to the performance of femininity and the fear of masculinization. Similarly, Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer's (2004) research on female athletes found that their participants have to negotiate dual identities: female and athlete. The research participants developed two separate but overlapping identities and were forced to redefine their own conceptualizations of femininity. For example, they considered their muscularity to be an obstacle to being perceived as heterosexually feminine (Krane et. al). The researchers concluded that the characteristics of athleticism are culturally coded as masculine and contradict hegemonic femininity. This study supports our understanding of gender as a dualistic and exclusionary construction that informs young women's gender performance.

There are several primary agents of socialization that communicate the hegemonic feminine ideal to girls and women, including media, mothers, and peers. On an institutional level, the mass media construct and widely disseminate the dominant hyper-thin, young femininity ideal. Media serves as our common culture (Kellner, 1995) and the context in which gender construction occurs (Massoni, 2004). In terms of media content, what is both included and excluded, sends overt messages to girls about how they should look, act and dress as well as additional, subtler messages about what they should and should not do, and should and should not think. Massoni's research investigates the gendered occupational landscape in *Seventeen* magazine as an example of the relationship between mass media and girl culture. Massoni posits that girls are on a process of self-discovery and magazines such as *Seventeen* are femininity how-to manuals from a patriarchal point of production, and that these "femininity guides" center almost exclusively on "white women pursuing beauty and heterosexual relationships" (Massoni, p. 51). The main themes in these magazines are youth, beauty, heterosexual relationships, and the role of consumption in attaining the first three themes.

Milkie (2002) conducted interviews with 10 editors at two national girls' magazine organizations regarding the cultural/institutional gate-keeping practices that prevent (or greatly limit) the depiction of real girls in magazines (in favor of the hyper-thin, white ideal). This study contributes to our understanding of femininity, positing that media texts are important "because they enter the discourse and practices of women and men in the everyday negotiation of femininity and masculinity" (Milkie, p. 840). Currie's (1997) interviews with 48 girls explores how they read depictions of femininity in magazine ads. Currie's research found that girls have stereotypical conceptions of adult femininity. Moreover, through their reading of the ads, the research participants legitimize a patriarchal conception of femininity and normalize its association to commodities through which dominant femininity is expressed.

Girls and young women are socialized into the dominant media ideal via their own media consumption as well as reinforcements (and/or counter-messages) from primary groups. When considering the roles of family and peers it is necessary to bear in mind that these people are also socialized within the context of the same media messages and institutional pressures. It is also worth noting that although space does not permit us to discuss this issue in greater detail, fathers (and others) also have a role in the complex process of body image and gender development.

Girls often learn to do gender from their mothers, who, typically unconsciously, socialize their daughters with respect to gender and body image development (Clarke & Griffin, 2007). Mothers serve as representatives of traditional femininity (Thomas, 2008). Clarke and Griffin examined how women use socially constructed ideals of femininity and beauty throughout their lives. She conducted 44 interviews with women ages 50-70 and found three major themes with respect to how women learn to do gender: (a) mother's criticisms and compliments, (b) mother's relationship to her own body, and (c) interviewees own choices about body work. It is important to remember that mothers are also socialized in the context of media images and social and economic rewards and consequences for normative gender performance. Peer groups are also important transmitters of the femininity ideal. Gerner and Wilson's (2005) research suggests that girls' friendships with males are closely related to their body image.

Our research fills a gap in existing scholarship regarding the relationship between the mind-body dichotomy, socio-cultural perspectives on femininity and masculinity, and college-age women's body image issues. We are contributing qualitative data to the body of knowledge on the mind-body dualism by conducting our study within a feminist theoretical framework. Moreover, we are extending research on the relationship between sociocultural factors and body image via our focus on social constructions of femininity and masculinity as guiding forces in the development and performance of gendered body images. We are also contributing to methodological literature on the use of multiple qualitative interview methods in the context of one study.

## **Research Methodology**

### **In-depth Interviews, Written Interviews, Participants, Procedures**

In this study we combine qualitative in-depth interviews (Berg, 2001; Weiss, 1994) and open-ended surveys from which we also elicited qualitative data (structured as

written interviews.) The second author conducted in-depth interviews with seven white female college students, who attend liberal arts colleges in the northeast, in order to learn about their body image as well as their ideas about femininity and masculinity. The second author conducted these interviews in order to share insider-status with the participants. Her status as a college student, coupled with shared age-gender-race traits, allowed her to quickly build rapport and use empathy during each of the interviews. The sampling method was that of convenience; we asked local students in their residence halls if they would be willing to be interviewed for a study about body image and gender. We did not ask any of the students if they had ever suffered from an eating disorder, nor did we provide any additional information other than explaining informed consent and confidentiality in a written letter to those who responded favorably to our initial query. Later references to participants with eating disorders is based on their use of the term, while references to participants with disordered eating is based on our interpretation of what they have told us. All of the interviewees signed informed consent forms, indicating that their participation was voluntary, confidential, to be used for scholarly purposes only, and could be stopped at any time. Identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts. Additionally, interviewees were asked if they felt comfortable having their interviews tape-recorded and were also reminded that they could have the tape turned off at any time. At the time of the interviews our institution did not have an Institutional Review Board established: However, we did provide the Office of Academic Development a copy of our informed consent form as well as a research purpose statement.

Prior to the in-depth interviews we constructed an interview guide with broad categories of inquiry (Weiss, 1994) to cover in each interview as well as specific open-ended questions listed under each category. See Appendix A for a copy of the interview guide we used. Weiss refers to "lines of inquiry" (pp. 46-47) as general lists of topics the researcher would like to learn about and pursue with the participant. The main categories were: family, peers, media, romantic relationships, gender, and body image/diet/exercise. The specific questions were only to be used when the interviewer needed additional support to probe participants. The intent was to make certain that all major categories within the interview guide were covered in any order that flowed in a particular interview. We wanted the interviewees to be able to take the conversation to different topics organically. In accord with general feminist principles, we wanted the interview experience to be empowering for our participants and wanted them to share authority over the interview process (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Borland, 2004; Naples, 2003).

Our unstructured organic approach to the interviews developed in accord with our feminist framework. Anderson and Jack (1991) explain that feminist interviewers must shed agendas in order to truly listen for meaning. This is because women often engage in a process of muting themselves (Anderson & Jack).

A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience. Where experience does not "fit" dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and

feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to listen in stereo receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them. (Anderson & Jack, p. 11)

Interviewing women regarding their body image therefore requires applying a particular set of listening techniques, which we felt could be best accomplished via unstructured qualitative interviews.

As women commonly blame themselves for any body image dissatisfaction they may experience, and may not recognize their internalization of media messages as well as family and peer attitudes, we felt it was important to design an interview strategy aimed at accessing women's muted channels. To accomplish our goals we employed several techniques suggested by Anderson and Jack (1991), all of which facilitate listening to narrators without imposing our concerns at the expense of their storytelling and listening to our own internal monitors as feminist interviewers. We incorporated three specific listening techniques. We selected these techniques, because, based on our literature review and prior research experience, we felt these were potentially data-rich areas. First, the interviewer immersed herself in the interviews to listen for meaning from the participants' perspectives. Second, we listened to the participants' moral language during both the interview and transcription and analysis process. This dimension of listening was particularly revealing during discussions of goodness and guilt with respect to food consumption and exercise.

Moral self-evaluative statements allow us to examine the relationship between self concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way. (Anderson & Jack, p. 20)

Finally, we listened to meta-statements.

These are places in the interview where people spontaneously stop, look back and comment about their own thoughts or something just said....Meta-statements alert us to the individual's awareness of a discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said. (Anderson & Jack, pp. 21-22)

Our participants frequently cycled back when they would realize they were aware of the dominant femininity script promulgated by the media, but still participated in it. By conducting the interviews, the interviewer was able to cover each category through general questions followed by probes and picking up on markers dropped by participants. Upon transcribing the in-depth interviews and discussing our initial impressions, we concurred that there was a clear but complex relationship between our participants' body image issues and their ideas about femininity. Although we discerned this significant pattern in the interview data, we did not feel we had enough data from which to properly

explore this topic. Moreover, due to our interview questions, we did not garner enough data directly on the topic of dominant femininity. We felt it was important to gather more data specifically addressing this theme. The inclusion of males allowed us to explore the extent to which our female participants' perceptions about what males find attractive was reflected in statements by male peers. In other words, do males and females have similar understandings of legitimate femininity? As a result, we decided to construct a two-page open-ended written interview sheet which we distributed to 32 college students, 12 male and 20 female. Again, convenience sampling was employed and the second author walked through dormitories soliciting participants. Our aim was to collect information from 30-35 students with a gender mix.

We wanted to learn several things from this additional qualitative data. First, do both college-age men and women have the same ideas about what it means to be feminine and masculine? Second, do men report similar body image issues as compared to the women? Lastly, are there patterns in the data indicating that women's body image issues are interwoven with their perceptions of femininity and/or their male peers' perception of femininity? Adding this stage to our research greatly enhanced our findings illustrating the importance of modifying research projects as new understandings dictate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, 2008; Leavy, 2009). Likewise, when more than one means of data collection are employed, such as our use of in-depth interviews and qualitative written interviews, the methods should be used in conversation with one another so that each phase of data collection informs the next (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The written interviews were wholly informed by our initial reading of the in-depth interview data. We developed the written interview questions in order to garner more robust data regarding perception of dominant femininity and the link to individual self-concept. The methods in this project speak to each other and speak to the research question. This experience illustrates the flexibility qualitative researchers may need to adopt in order to best service their research project (Hesse-Biber & Leavy). Furthermore, when additional means of data collection are added mid-project, it is vital to develop an integrated approach to the method selection and application. Our open-ended survey questions were constructed specifically to illuminate the in-depth interview data, and add dimensionality to that data.

### **Data Analysis**

After transcribing the in-depth interviews we coded the interview data. We coded the data by hand, conceptualizing the analysis and interpretation process as a craft (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), and we felt this was an appropriate way to intimately get to know the data. Interviews were read in their entirety by each author for emergent themes. The first two authors noted possible meta-themes (overarching themes). We then discussed the possible themes that would later be refined through focused coding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). For example, coding might start with an emerging theme such as "body behaviors" and the later coding phase would involve breaking this code down into its dimensions or focused codes such as "food behaviors and rituals" and "exercise." Next we conducted focused coding using a mix of inductive and deductive code categories. As we engaged in focused coding, we clarified our themes by examining all of the data covered and identifying the variation within and among the various themes. Focused coding involved looking for particular code categories derived from our initial reading,

previous experience in this area, and our literature review. Our code categories included: family, transitional times, body image, effect of sports, eating/exercise habits/food issues, dieting, what is feminine, what is masculine, media influence, effects of eating disorder, consequences of non-conformity, and interpersonal non-family relationships. We used these focused codes to sift through large amounts of data. This approach is less open-ended and more directed than line-by-line coding, and is more selective and conceptual (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004): However, we did not feel that line-by-line coding was necessary in this study given the broad gender-related themes that specifically interested us.

We then coded the written interviews. See Appendix B for a copy of the written interview questions. First we divided them into male and female responses. We tagged the responses that spoke to issues of femininity and/or the mind/body dichotomy. This included all of the responses to the questions: (a) What do you think is the number one thing that men are judged on in our society and (b) What do you think is the number one thing that women are judged on in our society?

Coded data from both the in-depth and written interviews were combined thematically, and it is those themes that are presented in our results section. Therefore, participant quotes in the results section come from data collected in both interview formats.

### **Trustworthiness**

As reviewed in the data analysis section, we engaged in a multi-tiered coding process reviewing interviews in their entirety, coding for developing themes, and finally a process of focused coding. This directed coding approach allowed us to make links between the data and our literature review (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). This procedure not only ensured rigor in our analysis procedure, but also allowed us to make a vital link between analysis and interpretation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

As this project is situated within an engaged feminist perspective and a corresponding literature review, it was important to employ a methodology that facilitated our commitment to feminist scholarship. Feminist researchers who wish to attend to the voices of their participants (as in this project), and also situate their participants' experiences within a larger framework (a goal of this study) can find the task of data interpretation very challenging (Borland, 2004; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Leavy, 2007). Specifically, the researcher may have to make connections between the micro and macro level of analysis based on the literature review (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). This, at times, requires placing participants' words into a framework or language system that may differ from their personal interpretation. Many qualitative researchers are confronted with the challenge of situating micro-level data within a macro context: However, feminist interviewers may be particularly reflexive about how power, voice, and authority shape the research collaboration (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007), which is why we listened for women's muted language. In this vein, during the coding process we added memo-notes to the transcripts indicating pauses, changes in inflection, and our impressions about each participant's narrative process to demonstrate openly the bridge between analysis and interpretation. Our methodology fostered attention to both our participants and the larger body of knowledge in which we placed

our work. Specifically, we combined an inductive approach to the interviews with a range of listening techniques aiming our attention to muted channels of communication. This methodology allowed us to combine our participants' words with our feminist interpretation, derived from the literature. Therefore, we present our analysis and discussion together, using literature and our data to illustrate, describe, and explain the major themes to emerge out of our research.

## **Results**

### **What It Means to be Feminine: Systems of Privileges and Punishments**

Femininity is culture-driven and can be understood as a set of characteristics and behaviors ascribed to women. Most of our participants expressed difficulty conceptualizing and articulating what it means to be feminine. Interestingly however, they all talked about similar issues. Our research questions guiding our interviews were: What does it mean to be feminine in our culture? How have young women internalized media concepts about femininity?

From our interviews we learned that femininity can be defined in many different ways that reveal the mind-body dichotomy is often guiding notions of femaleness. We also found that the women we interviewed are aware of the mind-body dichotomy that shapes gender identity, and are consciously able to recognize the unfair standards to which women are held. They can also conceptualize and explain the benefits of embodying the cultural script of femininity. We asked all of our participants: "What do you think it means to be feminine?" Though most at first had a tough time pin-pointing a definition their descriptions share commonalities. Many participants focused on the physicality of femininity. One participant noted,

Um, for me, like feminine can be anything. Feminine can be dressing up and wearing high heels, getting all dolled up and having make-up on, having your hair up, wearing earrings, and wearing a lot of jewelry, and that's feminine. You know, that can be like really feminine. You can go out and look really cute with a lot of makeup on. But at the same time another sort of femininity is when you can just wear sweat pants and you can be gross and sweaty, you know wearing ratty clothes but yet you're still feminine.

When asked to discuss femininity, this participant, like all of the women we spoke with and people we interviewed via questionnaire, immediately began discussing cultural norms regarding appearance. The same woman also noted how cultural standards can and do contradict one another: Women can be feminine by fitting different roles, but those roles have very specific guidelines. When these women think about femininity the conversation swiftly shifts to a focus on the physical body, flesh, and appearance. Two other participants noted the following.

Um like what has been instilled in me, what culturally is feminine, you know like makeup, very prissy, carries a purse, you cross your legs, you

smile, um you're very polite, you just kind of shrug things off if they annoy you, um you don't make a big scene, you are naïve, you're sweet, you're innocent, um you should wear high heels, you should wear tights, you need to wear a bra, wear skirts, wear low-cut tops, something sexy. You should wear like lace bras, and lingerie from Victoria's Secret. Those are all like the cultural things that have definitely been thrown at all of us as we've grown up.

Feminine, well you think of makeup, you think of dresses, you think of dressing up, doing your hair, products in your hair, like a lot of material things like that go into making somebody look good and I think that's very feminine.

These participants are making two important links. First, they assert that femininity is manifested through products, and thus consumerism. Second, they note that hegemonic femininity prescribes behaviors, grounded in a traditional stereotypical conception of femaleness. The word feminine is in essence a script for women to follow that defines for them very specific things that need to be done in order to be attractive and desired by heterosexual men, and also to become the envy of other women. This, however, does not mean women are not making logical decisions given the system in which they must operate. In fact, we found that women were acutely aware of what they needed to do in order to perform within this system. In this vein, one of our participants notes the relationship between femininity and masculinity, making a vital link to social power.

It's like a threat. I feel like it's a threat to masculinity and to like you know, the patriarchal society that we have. You know the women are coming up on the power so they're like, alright let's tell them they have to be physically smaller and less intimidating and less threatening to them in any way.

The script of femininity is in constant contradiction based on its reliance on dualistic categories. In order to succeed, women understand they need to be thin, but not too thin; athletic, but not masculine; assertive, but not pushy; outgoing, but not loud; polite, but not meek; sexual, but not promiscuous; independent, but not a so-called feminazi.

When asked what he wanted in a girl, one college-aged male wrote, "great body, a girl who works out, but not one of those eat-a-salad-all-the-time girls." The message is, eat like a man, but don't gain the weight. Dichotomous standards also add to the confusion, be cute and sexy; thin and voluptuous; dominant and submissive; innocent/virginal and experienced; the list goes on. Women are taught to use their bodies to get what they want, but are ridiculed for using them at the same time. When asked about femininity one of our participants said,

Um, I think the show that's on TV right now, *The Apprentice*, I'm such a dork (laughs). It's this show and it's a competition between the men and the women and they have to do all these different tasks, like business stuff,

like and so far to accomplish all the tasks so far women have like used to sex basically, and they've won. And it kind of sucks because it's like oh sex sells you know? Like use your brain and not just your curves and your body that you have to get the job done. And it's great that the women are winning, but I don't like the image that they're putting out there that it's like, oh sell sex, sell lemonade and you'll sell the most if you flirt and kiss the boys, and you know roll your skirts up. I don't like how it was portrayed.

The day after this episode aired, talk shows focused on the women's purported distasteful use of their bodies. The women were widely discredited. Dominant notions of female sexuality are legitimized by commercial culture because this version of sex sells. We suggest that the culture conceives of women in bodily terms and simultaneously uses this cultural attitude as a way of de-legitimizing women. One participant noted,

Women love compliments, especially about their bodies, and not like "you're so smart" they want to hear like, "wow you look really great in that dress," or something like that. I think it's made people more concerned about the way they look.

As described by our participants, the cultural construction of femininity covers a wide range of defining what is feminine and deciding how one should perform femininity. One participant notes,

What's feminine? Yeah see, I just think of all the things that I do that are not feminine (laughs). But I mean, like yeah, like not getting a steak at dinner like what I do, like you know, or getting a salad is feminine.

What are the consequences for these exiled women, those who don't conform to dominant conceptions of femininity? One participant answered,

I feel like a lot of people label them, um "oh those must be lesbians, oh she must be a dike, she never wants to get dressed up, she's always wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt or a hat." And I feel like, where did that come from, it probably started coming from a man's mouth. And men are more likely to say that about women than women.

To be identified as a lesbian in contemporary American society places one at risk for homophobia, sexual rejection, and other social penalties, and it is this fear that coerces many women into conforming to dominant femininity standards or suffer the consequences (which may result in low self-esteem, low confidence, and poor body image). Weighing these options, many women understand that they will be rewarded for conformity with social acceptance, job opportunities, and romantic opportunities. One problem is, as women conform, they accept this construction and live in fear of what might happen should they stray from the norm. The fear of consequence is what keeps

many women participating in this system even when they recognize the system has been socially constructed.

I mean I feel like we almost think of feminists as like the Ku Klux Klan type of thing like in the racial world, like you know, they think that the white race is the superior race and they're better than everyone else. I feel like people think that feminists think that women are the best things in the world, you know we don't even need men, we'll just have test-tube babies.

Another participant said,

For women I think they are judged on appearance, the media certainly portrays it that way. I mean I remember when um like Rosie O'Donnell when her show became popular or whatever, their sole focus was on Rosie as a large woman, not like she was a comedian and an actress or intelligent, those came second to the weight thing. And then when she came out as a lesbian, that was the biggest thing but that's like a whole other thing.

These women are articulating two significant points: (a) American culture places an emphasis on women's weight over their personal characteristics (such as talent and intelligence) and (b) autonomous women pay a high price for non-conformity (autonomy can be (mis)labeled as feminism or lesbianism within the society). Feminists and lesbians are targeted as scapegoats and our participants suggest that young women understand that patriarchal forces have appropriated the categories feminist and lesbian and systematically transformed them into negative labels. Women who reject the mind-body dichotomy understand they may have these labels placed on them. Our participants illustrate that they have internalized that there is a price for non-conformity set by the culture. Their choices are therefore, at least partly, based on their understanding of a cost-reward system.

### **What It Means to be Masculine**

Unlike femininity, masculinity seemed to be less challenging for young women to describe. Our participants were much more rapid and specific in their responses about masculinity, some of which were,

"Masculine I feel is just like, in my mind I guess it's knowing what you want to do with your life and having the resources to go out and do it whether the sources are financial, whether the sources are educational, even like social skills.

Um, I think for men like I think like the whole gay homosexual fear, the media focuses on the masculine man and like the more traditional like breadwinner, muscular, compared to the effeminate. Like no traditional guy wants to be perceived as that, I think like, like men that are like

heterosexual want to be perceived as the traditional muscular man, intellectual.

Muscles, athleticism, weightlifting, stuff like that I mean yeah like physical stuff, it's the same stuff too. Hmm, I never really thought about it. Suit and tie, I guess more like masculine traits are more like the whole burping is acceptable, chugging beers is "masculine."

"Like rugged, strong, you know, like powerful, those are all masculine things."

Strength, power, and intelligence were common traits our participants associated with masculinity, which we suggest reinforces the links between male and mind, and male and power. The dichotomy our participants reveal implies that a male's body is useful as a means through which to demonstrate power and authority (via muscle and strength), and a female's body is ideally small and delicate, which can be interpreted as weakness and a form of metaphorical invisibility. In fact, women experience negative consequences for trying to demonstrate power, while men are rewarded for displaying their power. Our data therefore complicates the mind-body dualism suggesting that masculinity is located in both the mind and body: However, physicality in masculinity is explicitly linked to social power. Thus, men's bodywork is used to signify men's overall prowess within the culture.

Our male participants were well aware of the differences in how men and women are judged. In the written interview, when asked: "What do you think is the number one thing men are judged on in our society" the males responded with an array of answers:

- 4 - money
- 3 - appearance
- 1 - personality
- 1 - strength/build
- 1 - sexuality
- 1 - sensitivity
- 1 - how they carry themselves

In response to the same question about women, 11 out of 12 male participants wrote looks/appearance/weight/figure (the 12th said "bitchiness").

Illustrating how college-age men and women are socialized in the same context resulting in a similar belief system, all of the female participants also responded that the number one thing women are judged on is appearance/weight/thinness. The women also had varied responses to what men are judged on including: personality, appearance, muscles/strength/build, status/power, and wealth/job.

The women we interviewed understand that in order to be classified as feminine and desirable, they cannot exhibit the qualities that are socially coded masculine. Our participants recognize that the cultural definition of masculinity is limited, and that it is skewed to maintain patriarchy. Illustrating the difficult situation women are therefore operating within, they also struggle with knowing about the social construction of what a

man should be and still use these ideals with respect to what they want a man to be, and what they consider masculine.

...well right off the bat I think of like tall, and manly men. Egos, and with like broad shoulders and confidence, same thing confidence, um, rough and tough I guess um, ah, I mean I think of like all, all of like sports figures are really masculine um, all the athletes, politicians, just like that. Stature, power, ew that's awful to say, I can't believe I said that, but I mean females too. Um, but I mean ideally, not ideally that's not the right word, but like right off the bat like my first instinct is to say all that.

This participant suggests that there is something unsettling about the cultural construction of gender, yet still cannot configure any other definition of masculinity.

### **A Network of Sources: Agents of Socialization**

The cultural construction of femininity is reinforced from all of the major agents of socialization creating a consistent version of femininity. In particular, family, peers, and the media instill constant reminders of the ways women should modify and present their bodies in order to be accepted as feminine (Hesse-Biber, 1996, 2006; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Leavy & Ross, 2006).

#### **The Family**

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler (1993) explains that even from the neo-natal stage, people are molded into very particular gendered roles that dictate how they act and react in the social world as masculine or feminine. When a baby girl is born, typically people don't say, "what a strong girl," they immediately place her worth on her appearance with statements such as, "what a pretty girl." From that time on, females' worth is disproportionately associated with their bodies.

Family members also transmit cultural notions of what it means to be feminine, even if they do so unintentionally. Family members can contribute heavily to a young woman's sense of self including her relationship with her body. When asked in a follow-up question how she is affected by her younger sister's negative comments about her body, one woman responded,

"Well, I try not to let myself take what she [sister] says seriously because she's a kid and what does she know? And a lot of the time, she says some pretty crappy things to me which are hurtful um, like when, like she's said before that I was fat and that um my shirt looks stupid and I look stupid and shouldn't wear my hair like that. And I'm like, whatever you're a kid what do you know, you don't know anything. But then also it's like kids are like the most honest people you'll ever meet, you know, so it's kind of

two-fold but I mean I definitely take it to heart and I'm like, wow cool, you know, that makes me feel great that my sisters thinks I'm fat.

Parents also influence how young women think about their appearance.

I remember something from freshman year I was wearing a shirt and I remember my mom saying to me, "Honey you got a little gut there, you got a belly." And I was just like, "Oh my god," and I remember being like, "What a bitch, like how could she say that? Like I'm your daughter." Especially since my mom is very petite, she's about 5'2" and weighs about a hundred pounds, very petite, and she has been that way like the majority of her life.

For our participants, interpersonal relationships play a significant role in how they think about themselves and their bodies. Moreover, an emphasis on the body, weight, and appearance teaches young women that femininity is directly connected to their bodies. Parents in particular influence girls' body image and their relationship with food from the time of infancy (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The preceding interview excerpt illustrates how mothers can transmit the socio-cultural pressure to be thin on their daughters. While in this instance the pressure is overt and experienced painfully by our participant, these cultural ideals may be transmitted in many subtle ways. As Thompson et al., write,

Wooley and Wooley (1985) have noted that mothers have experienced the same socio-cultural pressures as their daughters and that these mothers may simply serve as the interpreters of societal standards and expectations. Mothers may also model the solutions they used to cope with the thinness—and appearance—focused values of their culture. (p. 178)

When trying to make sense of the pressure that our participants experienced from their parents, it is important to understand that they too live in a cultural context that associates femininity with thinness. Parents may be preparing their daughters to succeed in a thinness-oriented culture, which mothers themselves understand from personal experience (Hesse-Biber, 2006). One participant noted,

I know she's [mother] always going to support me, so I think no matter what would happen to me she would always be by my side. Granted she does make side comments about my gaining weight or whatever but in my house it is like accepted because I mean all the while I was growing up my dad was brutal to my older sister because she's overweight and like awful, but she like just grew a thick skin from it.

Here we can see that potentially harmful parental comments regarding daughters' bodies are at times normative.

## Peers

“Get thin, get a boy” was a major goal of the women we interviewed. In addition to the family, peers have a significant impact on the way young women feel about themselves. A woman’s peer population is also influenced by the same socio-cultural factors such as the mass media and family, and so consistent messages are reiterated. Most of our participants believed that fat girls do not get guys, and their notion of fat was relative to the thin ideal they are accustomed to seeing in the media.

And um and then I think too when I did lose weight I did start, like all throughout high school I did have boyfriends and in like middle school no one looked at me you know what I mean, I was 14 and I had a boyfriend and that was the same time I started being thinner so I think probably in my mind I made that connection of get thin, get a boy. Like it’s so stupid but...

There is an underlying assumption that once a girl loses weight, she is automatically more desirable, and gets a boy. Even at a young age, heterosexual women begin to see losing weight results in the culturally constructed reward of a desirable boyfriend. One of our participants expressed her frustration about what it means to be thin, and the consequences of not being thin.

Yeah definitely, I mean it was ok I’m with this person who loves me so much and supposedly I mean everything, and he’s telling me that I need to like lose weight basically. And now [that we broke up] I have no one, and I mean I’ve lost some weight since then but I’m like, well clearly it was someone who loved me telling me that [I needed to lose weight], and I’m single now but not skinny by any means so, put two and two...

The equation women learn is that being thin and beautiful gets one a boyfriend, which is highly valued within the culture (with a heterosexual relationship as a marker of successful femininity).

Men, who also inhabit the same cultural space, take dominant ideas about femininity and filter them to the women in their lives. Due to the unattainable standards that many men hold women to, women are often left wondering, “what’s wrong with me?” The women we interviewed experienced pressure from their boyfriends to fit the cultural body ideal.

I stopped playing sports so I put on a little bit of weight and I had a boyfriend who thought I was incredibly hot apparently but at the same point we would always be like, “go to the gym, you could look so much better if you went to the gym.” Which I mean underneath, I mean I was like I appreciate you thinking that I’m hot, but what’s wrong with me right now? Why is now not good enough? So I think that’s probably why I’m so insecure right now...

Um, I'm definitely insecure and I hate it but I am and it's because of what he did and I don't think like anything's good enough, I don't like, you know I lost a few pounds but it's still not good enough and I have unrealistic goals because I feel like what he wanted was unrealistic, not unrealistic but just not necessary. It wasn't like I had to lose a few pounds, it was like 5 or 10 pounds that he was talking about and so now like I always have an extra 5 pounds that I want to lose no matter what.

Both of these women felt pressure from their boyfriends to try and change their bodies/weight in order to meet cultural expectations of female beauty. In attempting to modify their bodies, both women experienced negative self-image and feelings of insecurity. Not only are significant others transmitters of cultural messages, but they reinforce the consequences of non-conformity. In this context, it is not surprising that the women we interviewed have experienced self-doubt. And again, the more general message women receive is that their bodies are of central importance and intimately linked to their (self) worth.

### **The Media**

The commercial media is one of the strongest transmitters of cultural conceptions of femininity and female beauty. With the average American exposed to 3,000 advertisements every day (Kilbourne, 2004), the media is a consistent part of the cultural landscape. Popular culture is the vein through which the ideals of the larger culture flow. Through a system of propaganda, popular culture creates and projects an image of flawless beauty and delivers this message in a way that encourages insecurity-driven consumerism. One participant said,

Well I, because that's what's out there. I mean that's what, I mean, everyone, like all the actresses, everyone on TV all that stuff there all skinny and pretty and happy and that's what everyone wants... that ideal life.

The media is successful because no one believes they are personally affected by their messages.

Um, I buy um, I don't think the media really affects the way, like the shampoo I buy or something, and beauty products, I think my friends are more influential like what they say is good. I just try different things they say and if I like it, I will use that. Um, and maybe they have been influenced by the media so maybe I am indirectly affected by it.

Other participants echoed similar sentiments.

Well it's what you see, it's like in every movie the pretty girl, you know, even cartoons for kids are all like skinny. And all this stuff happens to you when you're the pretty girl and when you're little you're like, "aww if I

was like that, this would happen, and that would happen,” and I mean I wanted that, but. So I know I was definitely conscious of my body.

So, I guess like everything that I’ve had that what is right, what is wrong in terms of what is a decent weight, what is a decent, you know, hair color, that all comes from magazines, and books, and videos, and TV, and everything like that and that’s, all those things are produced by men. And so everything that men want women to be, those men who are powerful put that into print and put that into visuals and say ok, this is what we want you to look like and this is attractive.

Through the media young women come to connect success with thinness. One participant commented, “Media seems to give a positive look on skinny, tall, beautiful women and a negative look to not so thin women.”

Beyond equating thinness with social rewards, the media set up a consistent message system where there are consequences for not meeting the thin ideal. One participant noted, “Because everyone in media is thin, and if they aren’t and happen to get in the media, they are made fun of.”

While our participants indicate an understanding of how power has shaped mediated images of femininity, it nevertheless impacts them deeply, particularly their awareness of their bodies. When asked how the media impacts them, some participants noted the following, “It makes me feel slighted in regards to my appearance.” “They are all so perfect so in comparison I suck.” “It lowers my self-esteem, even though I know most of the models and body types are not the norm. Seeing all these things makes me think that those images are what society finds beautiful and that’s not me.”

As our participants explain, media images impact their body image and identity, while setting up a system in which women are judged in physical terms and are placed in competition with other women. For example, one participant expressed the following with regard to media. “It makes me want to improve myself because sometimes looking at stuff like that makes me question my own appearance.” When asked why she feels this way, the participant explained that she feels she is in “competition with prettier people.” Another woman noted, “Many people compare me and everyone to all the girls in the media, which is completely unfair.” When asked why she believes this she said, “Because beauty has been given a physical definition.”

### **Understanding the Relationship between Cultural Constructions of Femininity and Participants’ Body Image Issues**

Dominant images of female beauty center on hyper-thin bodies, which are reinforced as desirable through the major agents of socialization, and have impacted the women we interviewed in terms of their attitudes and behavior, including disordered eating and eating disorders. Women have been taught that there are social rewards for conformity to the cultural standard of femininity. Our interviewees all expressed serious concerns in this area. They were able to understand the system they are participating in, but unable to escape it for fear of rejection. In the next sections we look at what some of

the choices our participants are making by shifting to a discussion of body image, eating habits, and eating disorder struggles.

### **Body Image**

Earlier we noted how family members had, in many cases, commented on participants' bodies early on in their lives. Combined with other socio-cultural factors, it is not surprising that the women we interviewed were all aware of their body from a young age and associated their body with femininity. "I think I was conscious of my body since I was like six or something."

Beyond an awareness of their bodies, our participants learned a particular set of attitudes regarding women's bodies, and not one participant was currently satisfied with her body as it was. Moreover, our female participants all thought, to varying degrees, that a "better body" (one closer to the cultural standard) would make them happier and/or more successful. In our written interviews we asked all of the male and female participants the following question: "Honestly, if you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?" All of the female participants listed a body part, their weight, or their body image. In a follow-up question asking why, the following responses were given: envy other women, to gain confidence, to get boys, to get better clothes, due to self-consciousness, currently feels unattractive or otherwise dissatisfied with appearance, and as a result of cultural influence.

In the next follow-up question participants were asked for whom they most want to make these changes. Half of the women replied for their boyfriend, partner, or "guys." The other half responded "for myself," which each woman ironically explained was because "then I will be attractive to others."

The linkage created between a thin body and positive social/personal outcomes such as success and happiness is a primary reason that many women try to attain the ideal even though they do not completely accept the importance of it, and at times, are even critical of a culture in which women are judged based on physical characteristics. One participant remarked,

Plus I mean I want to feel good about myself and I don't feel that great now, and I'm not saying that having the perfect body is going to make me happy because I know it won't, but it's definitely going to help me a little bit at least have enough confidence to do the things I want to do.

Some of our interviewees felt very negatively about their bodies. These women thought a "good body" was important towards increasing their life chances and sought external affirmation about their appearance, particularly from men, who, as we saw, have internalized the same notions about femininity that women have learned.

Um, I don't like my body at all. And I would definitely like change a lot of it um, like I don't, I don't want to be stick thin, that's definitely not me and I wouldn't be able to do the things that I want to do and it's not reasonable. But I would like to be able to wear, like be comfortable in a bikini and not have to wear a tankini, and um, I mean I feel like I could

definitely do it, hopefully I will. Um, I mean it would be nice to be able to walk somewhere and have people be like, wow, that girl's hot, you know?

Despite desires for improvement, this woman knows that when working toward the feminine ideal there will always be more to perfect, and it is ultimately unachievable and potentially all-consuming.

But honestly like even if I got rid of like my love handles, even if I got a six pack, I mean there's no such thing as the perfect body so no one is happy with what they have, so I feel like you always want a little more, like oh I need a bigger butt, I need to have lip implants, I need to have my eyes opened more or shut or something and it's just like an addictive thing.

The preceding interview excerpts focus on the body image attitudes held by our participants, including a critical link between thinness and success. These attitudes also influenced their behaviors including their eating habits and overall relationship with food and nutrition.

### **Eating**

The women we interviewed all reported modifying their food intake and exercise rituals in order to try to meet the cultural dictate of femininity and thinness. In particular, these women experienced anxiety around eating, expressed feelings of guilt around eating, exercised excessively in direct relation to food intake, restricted food intake, weighed themselves ritualistically, and most reported that the relationship between eating and their body image was, at times, all-consuming. When speaking about eating in social environments one woman reported,

Or they think I'm fat, you start getting like crazy in your head, I started just like going insane basically. Like having all these thoughts in my head like "oh my god I'm fat, if I eat this in front of this person they're going to think that I'm this huge, disgusting person."

Other participants also experienced feelings of guilt when they ate and drank. In addition to obsessively weighing themselves, these women exercised excessively and restricted their eating in ritualistic ways in order to alleviate the negative feelings brought on by food consumption.

Like even like the other day, like last night when I got candy and then I felt so gross when I came back. And I think it was too that I didn't feel good that day either so I think that was like part of it but at the same time I went to the gym last night and ran 4 miles. And I probably didn't need to do that, but in my head it balances it out.

Like last week I drank a lot and I had a very unhealthy week and I had like gained like four pounds in a week and then I like lost six pounds this week so it probably wasn't that drastic because probably in a given week you fluctuate but like after that I was like driven like this weekend I like tried to be to healthy. Like on Sunday, because obviously we all drank Saturday night, so on a Sunday I won't eat anything until dinner and then I'll have cereal and that will be all I'll have all day. And that's like been every Sunday like all year.

Given the prominence that their body-work has in their lives, it is not surprising that food becomes a focal point. In fact, the women we interviewed reported being obsessed by thoughts of food, and more specifically, controlling their bodies by controlling their food intake. The following excerpt is an example of how all-consuming food and body management became for our participants.

It's especially hard now at school because everything's so limited, you don't really have a choice. I mean, whatever there's different meals going on but it's all like the same thing, it's not, like I would eat a sandwich here but it's not the bread that I want to eat and that sucks especially being on my diet I'm really aware and it kind of consumes my life, like I could be eating lunch and I'm like, okay what can I have for dinner now, if I eat this am I going to be hungry later, should I have something else. You know, I constantly think about food [*italics added*], it sucks.

This emphasis on the body takes a great deal of time and energy and became a preoccupation for the women in our study. Herein we see an acute connection between women's individual striving for thinness and the maintenance of a patriarchal social order, or in Bordo's (1993) terms, the politics of distraction. Some of our participants became so preoccupied with their bodies/appearance and fitting the cultural model of femininity that they developed eating disorders.

### **Effects of Eating Disorders**

While all of our female participants indicated disordered eating and/or a strong focus on their body, some also reported that they had suffered from bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa. Two women explained that they did not know why they developed an eating disorder, but felt that it gave them a sense of control. "And bingeing and puking made me happy because I was in control."

I knew it wasn't healthy what I was doing, but I still was like I don't have a problem, I could stop this anytime...and like I totally couldn't. And I, one time I went out to dinner and I just could not stop eating. And I went home and then threw it up and I had always thought that was disgusting my whole life, it's so gross, and I don't even remember like why I did it, I just automatically did it.

For these women, a focus on physical appearance resulted in highly dysfunctional eating regimes. What is perhaps most telling about the link between women's body image pursuits and patriarchal culture is that the women engaged in eating disordered behaviors were again distracted from other pursuits, including their education.

And I just was like, I was so skinny that like my hip bones stuck out, like my pants just completely hung off my body, like I just started looking disgusting and people were staring at me when I was walking to class. "She doesn't even look good anymore," I heard someone say. And it's like oh god...And so I couldn't even get out of bed and go to class, couldn't even do my homework, because all I could think about was when the next time I could binge was, and when I could throw it up without anyone realizing it.

It's in my mind constantly all day long, sometimes I find myself not paying attention in class because I'm thinking about what I ate, or what I am going to eat for the rest of the day. It's really sick and nobody knows because you don't want to talk about it.

Because these women are constantly focusing on their bodies and their eating and/or bingeing/purging, they are unable to focus on other aspects of their lives, such as their school work. In this way, disordered eating is the logical outcome of a social system in which femininity is associated with the body and masculinity is associated with power; eating disorders in effect maintain the mind-body dichotomy on which patriarchy rests. We posit that as women starve themselves they feed patriarchy.

### **Conclusion**

In this conclusion we briefly address the methodological and substantive contributions of our study. We also note the limitations of this research.

Working from a feminist perspective influenced this project in interrelated ways. For many qualitative feminist researchers it is vitally important to maintain a strong link between the epistemological and theoretical framework and the methods practices (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Leavy, 2007). Additionally, in accord with feminist literature in interviewing, we wanted our research participants to be co-collaborators in the knowledge-building process. To achieve this end although we constructed a topical interview guide, the seven in-depth interviews were open-ended, and participants were given the space for the conversation to flow naturally. Moreover, our hope was that the interview process, both in-depth and written, would provide an opportunity for self-reflection and consciousness-raising, which are necessary preconditions for feminist consciousness and self-empowerment. In this regard we were successful. The majority of our participants revealed in the interview or in a follow-up (initiated by the participant) that the process was eye-opening for them, promoted further reflection on their peer and media culture, and for some served as an impetus for a longer process of self-reflection. In future research, we recommend going back to the participants and inquiring about the research experience in a post-interview follow-up. This would provide an opportunity for

garnering systematic data that speaks to the effect of the research on the participants and would have been helpful in this study.

The feminist underpinning of the project also influenced the data analysis, interpretation and writing process. As feminist researchers we came into this study with a commitment to contributing to the larger project of feminist, feminism—which is a socio-political project aiming to unearth women’s subjugated knowledges, expose patriarchal forces, and improve women’s life chances. The commitment feminists maintain to this larger project can give rise to many challenges during the practice of research. In particular, qualitative feminists often seek to give voice to their research participants (a noted aspect of this project): However, feminists often also feel obliged to situate individual experiences in a macro context (or the context of patriarchy more specifically). In this vein, we situated our participants’ comments in a literature review connecting, illuminating, and juxtaposing our current body of scholarship with our participants’ interviews. In this way, although our sample size does not allow for generalizations, we were still able to suggest linkages between our participants’ experiences and institutional components of patriarchy.

With respect to methodology, our final comment pertains to our use of two forms of interviews. In our original research design we planned only for in-depth interviews: However, upon transcription we realized that we needed to expand our data pool particularly with respect to perspectives on femininity and masculinity. Moreover, we felt that it was important to add male perspectives as well in order to access a more complex picture of femininity and masculinity and the pressures on young women. Drawing on Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, 2008), we wanted our methods to inform each other. Accordingly, our written interview questions developed out of our in-depth interview data as well as our reflections on it.

In our post-study reflection we have thought about connections between two aspects of our methodology: (a) our feminist commitment to creating a tight fit between our theoretical underpinning and methods practices and (b) our use of methods that speak to each other. The combination of these two methods practices forms an integrated approach to research. Our multi-faceted attention to theoretical and methodological integration, we hope, will be of value to other qualitative researchers regardless of their epistemological and theoretical perspective. In this spirit, we presented our data from both interview phases in an integrated manner.

Our study also contributes both empirically and theoretically to interdisciplinary scholarship on body image, femininity, and the mind-body dichotomy. Our research supports studies in body image that propose socio-cultural and social psychological explanations for body image disturbance (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 1994; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004; Roberts & Gettman, 2004). From a young age girls learn from a host of institutions that femininity is linked with their physical bodies and exactly what that body should look like. Families, peers, and the media enforce the notion that femininity is connected to physical appearance, suggesting the historic mind-body dualism continues to shape women’s experiences with regards to femininity. As we saw from both the women and men in our study, femininity is most often linked to physical qualities, and a “good body” is feminine. The message received from these various sources is consistent and young women come to understand that in order to be perceived as feminine, they must try to

achieve the cultural standard. Furthermore, non-conformity has costs, while conformity is thought to bring rewards.

As a result of these pressures to conform to cultural notions of femininity, the college-age women we interviewed experienced a range of body image issues. Their coping mechanisms included disordered eating and eating disorders. The time these women spent thinking about their bodies, appearance, food, dieting, and exercise distracted them from other pursuits including focusing on their education and other activities that enrich mind qualities. In this way, the current standard of femininity serves to maintain the female aspect of the mind-body dichotomy and disproportionately associate women's worth with their bodies. Our research also extends and problematizes scholarship on the mind-body dichotomy with respect to masculinity. It is in this area that our study makes an important theoretical contribution. Despite the assumption within existing literature that masculinity is associated with the mind, our participants complicate this notion. According to both our female and male participants, masculinity is associated with a range of mind characteristics (encompassing personality), but is also deeply associated with a particular body type (a muscular body that takes up space and appears strong). Based on this data we suggest masculinity or "maleness" is linked to power-associated traits and pursuits. We hope this finding will be of value to other scholars who may explore this issue in more detail and with a larger pool of empirical data.

There are limitations in our study that should be considered when thinking about our conclusions. Specifically, we have a small homogenous convenience sample from which we gathered descriptive data. Our interviewees were all heterosexual. Alternative femininities may be more readily available to lesbians and thus the homogeneity of our participants limits our understanding of the complex relationship between femininity and body image for college-age women. In spite of these limitations, we hope that our study will assist other researchers designing projects in this area.

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## Appendix A

### In-depth Interview Guide: Broad Lines of Inquiry

1. Please tell me a little about your background such as how, where and with whom you grew up. Tell me about your relationships with your family members.
2. Can you tell me about your friends?
3. Can you tell me about a first crush or first dating experience? Have you recently been or are you currently in a relationship? When yes: please describe this relationship. Tell me about this person and your feelings about them.
4. What are you attracted to in others?
5. What do you think is most attractive about yourself? Why?
6. What do you like about your appearance? Why? How does this make you feel?
7. What, if anything, do you dislike about your appearance? Why? How does this make you feel? Do you try to change this, and if so, how?
8. Can you talk about your eating habits? What is your weekly routine?
9. Are you athletic or involved in dance? If yes, please describe these activities/
10. Do you exercise? If yes, please describe your typical exercise routines.
11. What media do you watch, listen to and/or read?
12. How would you describe femininity?
13. How would you describe masculinity?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or go back to?

## Appendix B

### Written Interview Sheet Questions

1. Are you Male or Female? Circle one.
2. What is your age?
3. Honestly, if you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?
4. Why do you feel you would change this about yourself?
5. Who is it that you feel is the most important person to think that you are attractive?
6. Why is it important to you that this person finds you attractive?
7. How do you feel that the media (magazines, movies, television, billboards, advertisements, etc.) has an effect on the way you feel about yourself?
8. Why do you feel this is so? Explain.
9. How do you feel the media affects the clothes and products you buy?
10. Why do you feel this is so? Explain.
11. What do you think is the number one thing men are judged on in our society?
12. What do you think is the number one thing women are judged on in our society?

This article does not include data from all of the code categories. Given space limitations, we have used the codes that most directly addressed our research question about the relationship between gender and body image and we may publish additional data in a different forum. As is often the case with qualitative research which yields an abundance of data, not all of the data can be properly addressed in one article. In the interest of disclosure we are upfront about this; however, we suggest it is a normative practice.

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