

**EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN A REFLECTIVE,
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SOCIAL SUPPORT WORKSHOP:
INFLUENCES ON SELF-ESTEEM AND BODY IMAGE**

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

March, 2004

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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Dedication

To the five women who participated in the Exercise Your Self Workshop. I am so fortunate you all came into my life. Your wisdom, experience and enthusiasm was truly inspirational. Thank you for giving your selves as you did and sharing your stories with me.

Acknowledgements

Mom and Dad, you have enabled me to pursue every opportunity I've ever imagined for myself. I am forever in gratitude for your constant support, encouragement and enthusiasm throughout this process. Thank you for your patience and for always listening.

Dr. Janice Butcher, thank you so much for taking a risk with me and for allowing me to pursue something that was truly my own. For your guidance, supportive criticism, patience and enthusiasm I am deeply grateful.

Dr. Joannie Halas, your guidance has enabled me to make huge intellectual leaps. You have challenged me in ways I will not forget. Thank you for having so much confidence in me and in the project.

Dr. Roewan Crowe, not only have I learned an enormous amount from you, with you I have had a most enjoyable, refreshing academic experience. Thank you for your support and for asking me the hard questions.

Dr. Cathy van Ingen, thank you for my first introduction into postmodern research. It was both terrifying and challenging in ways that have allowed me to grow both academically and personally.

Dr. Jennifer McTavish, you started the ball rolling. Thank you for telling me I could do this.

To my partner and friends, thank you for your constant support and for believing in me whenever I didn't.

Abstract

This study explores and describes the experiences of women participating in a reflective, physical activity and social support workshop designed to enhance self-esteem and body image. Women were selected to participate in the workshop and interviews were conducted both prior to and following the program. The interviews explored the participants' perceptions of physical activity, feelings of individual self-esteem and body image, and how the workshop informed each of these variables. In addition to the interviews, observations, journals, analysis of handouts and field notes were used to further the researcher's understanding of each participant's experience. The researcher used narrative analysis to interpret and represent each of the participant's experience within the workshop. The study's intervention draws on previous research into the relationship between physical activity, self-esteem and body image and provides implications for future designs of physical activity programs.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Research into women's experiences of self-esteem and body image is gaining much interest. Self-esteem has been described as the most indicative variable of life adjustment (Battle, 1993). Its relevance as a woman's issue, however, is unavoidable since the consequences of women experiencing low self-esteem are emotional, behavioral and political. As well, because society has refined its sense of beauty to often unrealistic standards and ideals, a woman's sense of her own physical attractiveness has become an important informer of her self-worth and self-concept (Monteath and McCabe, 1997). The investigation of women's experiences of self-esteem and body image is important because when compared to men, women have been shown to experience lower levels on both constructs. Men's self-esteem and security within their physical selves are often assumed, whereas, women who might exude a similar security within themselves is seen as arrogant or conceited (Sanford & Donovan, 1985).

Another interesting trend noted within much of the research is women's lack of participation in sport and physical activity when compared to men's participation. Participation in sport and physical activity seems to depend on an individual's level of perceived physical competence. Research indicates that boys tend to display much higher levels of perceived physical competence than females (Hayes, Crocker & Kowalski, 1999). As well, girls seem to experience less positive perceptions of strength, physical ability, sport skills, and physical self-worth than boys (Crocker, Eklund & Kowalski, 2000). Explanations have been offered as to why there is such a gender gap in sport participation and physical activity. Sport participation has traditionally been a venue in which strength, power, domination and performance have been heralded as

strictly masculine (Richman & Shaffer, 2000). Women's participation in such a venue has not traditionally been a gender-normative option. Thus, women's participation has been sparse.

It has been documented that participation in sport and physical activity has a positive impact on self-esteem and body image. Many physical educators have indicated that the physical activity curriculum in schools is essential for developing self-esteem in children (Fox, 1996). As well, self-esteem gains have been documented for adults who participate in physical activity programs (Palmer, 1995; Richman & Shaffer; 2000; Doganis, Theodorakis & Bagiatis, 1991). Furthermore, it has been suggested that individuals who participate in physical activity have more positive attitudes about their bodies than do individuals who do not participate in physical activity. Healthy perceptions of one's body are also thought in turn, to positively inform one's self-esteem.

Also worthy of discussion is the influence that social support has on the self-esteem of women. Social support seems to foster self-esteem in women through the sharing of common experiences, thereby removing a sense of isolation within each woman. As well, new relationships developed in a social support environment also seem to positively inform self-esteem in women (McManus, Redford and Hughes, 1997).

The preceding discussion suggests the need for further study about the influence that a reflective, physical activity and social support based workshop might have on the self-esteem and body image of a group of women. Investigation into the experiences of women in such a program is minimal. This research is important so that we can further explain the many barriers women face today in their attempts to be physically active. As well, the proposed research is necessary for potentially improving the self-esteem and well being of women.

Statement of Intent

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of a group of women participating in a reflective, physical activity and social support workshop designed to enhance self-esteem and body image. In order to accomplish this research endeavor, a qualitative methodology that employs narrative analysis will be used.

Rationale

Self-esteem and body image are very important health and well-being concerns. Moreover, the influence that self-esteem and body image have on women is of greater interest because the social and cultural expectations of women in North American society are enormous and often unrealistic. These societal expectations influence and often distort women's perceptions of themselves and their bodies. The rationale for this research follows the premise that physical activity may have an important influence on self-esteem and body image in women. As well, the proposed research will include an element of social support as a means by which self-esteem and healthy body perceptions may be facilitated. Some research has indicated that social support may have confounded investigations into the influence of physical activity on self-esteem. While this is seen as a weakness of previous research, the proposed study intends to use social support as a tool to enhance self-esteem and body perceptions in women. While physical activity may be a determinant of high self-esteem and positive body image, so may be social support. Women-centered groups provide social interaction, a shared-experience environment, and an outlet for individual expression. The Exercise Your *Self* Workshop (EYSW) is a reflection of these further considerations. The EYSW was developed by the researcher as a means through which physical activity, social support and consciousness raising could be facilitated and received by women in the hopes that self-esteem and body image could

be experienced more positively. The following sections will outline further the objectives and structure of the EYSW.

Objectives of the Exercise Your Self Workshop

The Exercise Your *Self* Workshop was a strategy to overcome many of the societal pressures that women face today. Through group physical activity and consciousness-raising, the workshop hoped to empower women through the use of their physical bodies and simultaneously, increase their awareness of self-esteem and body image and its relationship with the media, family, peers, and other variables that influence women's perceptions of themselves. The workshop also allowed a comfortable space for each woman to express and discuss their own personal experiences and struggles of low self-esteem and unhealthy body images.

The Exercise Your Self Workshop was based on the following two assumptions:

- 1) *Exercise can be used as a strategy to help resolve women's distorted perceptions of themselves, thus increasing self-esteem and promoting healthier body images.* By employing the physical body, one is made more aware of one's own physical strength, competence and potential. Targeting the physical body is a great source of empowerment that not only facilitates good physical health, but also influences healthy perceptions of one's self and body.
- 2) *Through social support and by raising awareness on the subjects of self-esteem and body image, the workshop will in turn, increase self-esteem and promote healthier body images in each woman.* The social support, interaction and consciousness-raising portion of the workshop provided a space where women felt comfortable learning about self-esteem and body image, and felt safe sharing their struggles and experiences with both. The workshop created the appropriate space and opportunity for

women to learn about self-esteem and body image and what variables influence each. Group discussion was facilitated to allow for personal reflection of individual experience; this exercise is designed to encourage personal growth and healthy perceptions of self and body.

Overview of the Study

The project involved administering a reflective, physical activity and social support workshop to a group of women. The intent of the project was to explore and describe each woman's experiences revolving around physical activity, self-esteem and body image. Each participant of the project was interviewed once prior to the workshop, and once following completion of the workshop. As well, observations, journals, field notes, and handouts were used to help thoroughly understand and represent each woman's experience. It was also the researcher's intent to observe whether the EYSW influenced self-esteem, body image and each woman's perceptions of physical activity.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been identified as most relevant to the research. Each term is briefly defined here, and more thoroughly outlined in the review of literature.

Self-Concept: encompasses the individual's experience and perceptions of the self; relates to the total description (characteristics and abilities) an individual provides for oneself.

Self-Esteem: the evaluative component of self-concept; the extent to which a person feels positive about oneself.

Body Image: the individual's perception of one's own body, along with the feelings, thoughts and judgments attached to this perception.

Physical Activity: any activity that increases one's energy expenditure (Bouchard, Shepard, Stephens, Sutton, McPherson, 1990).

Exercise: any activity done with the intention of increasing one's physical fitness (Bouchard et al., 1990).

Consciousness Raising: the ability to conceptualize and reconceptualize social reality: the ability to understand women's oppressed position in society while still operating with an evolved understanding (Cook & Fonow, 1990).

Rational(ities)

As you read the thesis, you will encounter my own personal reflections of experiences I have had throughout my undergraduate and graduate years at the University of Manitoba. These reflections are interspersed chronologically throughout the thesis; they are placed within the document as they occurred in my life. An important creative component of the thesis for me is to show how both my academic and personal experiences intertwined to make up my sense of self. How these experiences played out in my life and how they informed one another as well as myself will hopefully give the reader a greater sense of how I perceive the world around us. Many of these reflections illustrate my awareness of and experiences with self-esteem. These often "milestone" experiences not only influenced my decision to perform research on the construct of self-esteem, they also informed the research process in the same way the research process informed me. These reflections may provide the reader with an understanding of who I am as a researcher and as a person performing research; providing you with a small frame of who I am may help you understand how I came to pursue this project as well as how I approach and interpret the research.

While many of these reflections may seem “suspended” within the document and perhaps at times inconclusive, I feel their presence as well as the nature of their presence reflects how this academic inquiry made me evolve personally. I also feel that the nature of my considerations represent a suspicion that perhaps it can be better to ask questions rather than to answer questions. Nevertheless, this process gave forward a particular confidence in me that is, however, always changing and always curious.

Personal Reflection: Early Encounters

The transition from high school to university was a challenging one for me. Though I didn't see it as such at the time, I realize now that this was an experience that would shape who I am and the academic path I later chose.

I was accepted into the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreations Studies at the University of Manitoba. One of my best friends, Jeremy, was accepted as well. I remember that first week in class. It was a blur of hyperactivity all around me. I remember some older kids in the faculty coming in to our classes and trying to promote "Camp-getcha-going" and later, the "hen and stag" social. Then there was the big brother, big sister routine, where an older male student would "befriend" a first year female student, dress them up in ridiculous clothing and parade and degrade them all around campus. I was scared. Jeremy and I wanted nothing to do with any of this. We bolted. Far far away from Frank Kennedy. That day and every other day after class.

I felt a little isolated those first couple of years in Physical Education. I had made a couple of friends, but I was never one to hang out in the physical education lounge. That was absolutely forbidden space for me. I even hated walking past it. It just seemed like the high school I had never experienced in high school: a popularity contest. Who's the funniest, who's the most involved, who's the best athlete, who's the hottest and who can make the most noise? There seemed to be so much noise in that building. Everybody wanted to be heard. Except for me of course. I suppose I felt FK lacked introspection. Instead, it seemed to only include what many outsiders considered "jocks".

Jeremy and I escaped to St. John's College every day. I soon realized this was not a place I was going to flourish in either. I asked myself: was I hanging around with the wrong people or was I in the middle of some kind of self-esteem crisis?

I perceived that I did not 'fit in' anywhere. For the first time in my life I felt like I was compromising who I was. Perhaps I wasn't being fake, but I wasn't being true to myself. My social life shouldn't feel this uncomfortable, I thought. Trying to be somebody for a bunch of people who I wasn't even sure I liked.

I had lost touch with some of my closest friends. I later realized this may have contributed to my feelings of low self-esteem. Perhaps if I had maintained these friendships I wouldn't have lost such a sense of myself. These were people who really knew me, loved me and reinforced who I was.

A couple of things happened in that second year of university. In January I started working out pretty regularly. It was a slow process, but somehow building my physical strength transcended over into my mental strength. I started to feel mentally strong. I also developed a really good friendship with somebody who later became the strongest reinforcer of my self-esteem. We shared many common experiences and she loved me for who I was.

This experience was perhaps the first of which I felt my self-esteem was compromised and then somewhat rejuvenated. I was, however, extremely aware of the variables which were compromising my sense of self worth. These variables, along with my awareness of them, were very interesting to me. I imagine that this experience provoked in me a curiosity of self-esteem and its many influences.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following section will provide an overview of the major themes pertaining to this research project. Self-concept and self-esteem will first be introduced. A thorough description of the major historical contributors of self-concept and self-esteem research will be provided. As well, a brief summary of each construct's development and characteristics will be given. The limitations of performing traditional research on self-concept and self-esteem will be outlined and an alternative, qualitative format will be defended as relevant to the research. Finally, I will offer some insight into how self-esteem is pertinent to the lives of women, and how physical activity may be influential for self-esteem. Body image will also be introduced and outlined as a relevant theme within this research project.

Self-Concept and Self-Esteem

Although there is much controversy concerning how to operationalize the constructs of self-concept and self-esteem, most researchers view these terms as interchangeable and highly related to one another. In order to gain a full understanding of self-esteem and the historical roots of the 'self', we must first introduce self-concept as an influential partner.

Self-Concept

Due to the large number of historical authors of self-esteem and self-concept, the following section will primarily cite recent reviews of these constructs (eg. Bracken, 1996, Sonstroem, 1997, Hattie, 1992, etc).

Historical Contributors

William James. One of the most influential contributors to the study of the self-

concept was William James. His work distinguished between two fundamental aspects of the self; 'I' and 'Me'. 'I' became the 'knower', while 'Me' became a collective of things known about the self (Bracken, 1996). James emphasized that the knowing-self, or the I-self, was fundamental in constructing the Me-self.

James identified four components of the self. The body was the first part, which he illustrated as being the "innermost part of the material self" (Hattie, 1992, p.15). The social self was the second aspect, which can be described as the appreciation or recognition one receives from their family and friends. James further asserts that it is this aspect of the self which accounts for our instinctual need to be recognized and honored for our individuality. James established the spiritual self as the third component of the self; this being the most intimate part of the self and the center for which all of our reflecting and thinking is done. Finally, the pure ego is recognized as the fourth aspect of the self which is described as abstract; that is, a "fainter psychological process...an obscurer feeling of something more" (Hattie, 1992, p.16).

Sigmund Freud. More recent contributions to the study of the self-concept include Freud (early 1900's) and his followers. Freud established such instrumental concepts as the id (the instinctual need to satisfy the self, receive pleasure and avoid pain), the superego (which seeks to satisfy an ideal of oneself), and the ego (the link between the id and superego which struggles to differentiate between the ongoings of the mind, and the concepts of reality) (Hattie, 1992).

Allport. Allport established a new concept called 'proprium' to illustrate his theory of the self. The proprium consists of seven aspects which the self would regard as personal and intimate to us. They are as follows:

- a) bodily sense - sensation
- b) self identity through time - continuous existence

- c) self enhancement - assertion and love of self
- d) self extension - identification with others and other things mine
- e) rationality - planning, coping
- f) self image
- g) propiate striving - motivated behavior to enhance the self image (Burns, 1979).

Cooley. In contrast to James, Cooley placed an emphasis on how social interaction with others shaped the self. Cooley established the now-famous 'looking-glass self' by which "significant others constituted a social mirror into which the individual would gaze to detect their opinions toward the self. These opinions, in turn, were incorporated into the sense of self" (Bracken, 1996, p.4) This hypothesis suggested that the essence of the self is created by what we imagine others to think of our appearance, motivations and character.

Self-Concept Defined

Though there is debate and controversy revolving around how to define self-referent terms, theorists seem to agree on two fundamental aspects of its makeup. The first is that self-concept is key in determining personality, behavior, and in the achievement of mental health. Second, self-concept has to do with the evaluative beliefs one holds about him or herself (self perception). The following will explore some of these theories and other ways that self-concept has been defined.

Lynch, Norem-Hebeisen & Gergen (1981) acknowledge that self-concept encompasses a variety of organized meanings and perceptions which lead to a person's experiential self. Self-concept, he suggests, can be defined as feelings of being loved, wanted, acceptable, able or autonomous.

Other factors to consider are the experiential and perceptual aspects of the self-concept. Fitts (1971) defends these characteristics and defines the self-concept as the "self as seen, perceived and experienced by one" (p.12), and that the self-concept

becomes a frame of reference through which one interacts with the world. Furthermore, he acknowledges that the self-concept is also a predictor of behavior, and a phenomenon which is learned through one's lifetime from experiences one has with the environment and other people.

Typically, self-concept involves one's overall perception of him or herself.

To further explore the facet of perception and its relationship to the self-concept, Lynch et al. (1981) have outlined several considerations of the perceptual organization. They explain that self-concept is a product and producer of perception, where perception has its own determinants. The way in which these determinants are organized in an individual has selective effects on further experiences, where the individual learns who one is through these experiences. They explain further that "perception is synonymous with personal meaning, and is one's experience of events including the self" (p.11). The physical organism, in which experiences occur, influences the way one perceives by the condition and function of the body. The physical and social environment in which a person is being influenced, developed in, and currently functioning in, influences perception, and in particular the opportunities these environments provide for the individual. Time is also influential of perception. Lynch et al. (1981) suggest that an increase in time brings further awareness and perception. Perception is also influenced by one's needs for fulfillment, personal needs, self-actualization, self-enhancement, and adequacy. Goals are also a determinant of perception, in that they become a consequence of experience, and serve as guidelines for further selection of goals.

Wankle (1994) reviewed the significant contributions Rosenberg has made to the study of self-concept. Rosenberg suggests that self-concept consists of three elements. The 'extant self' contains the parts and whole perceptions of the self, their

relationship to each other, and the boundaries of these perceptions. The 'desired self' represents the ideal image of oneself, and the 'presenting self' involves the self that is presented to others based on the extant and desired self.

Wankle (1994) cited Rosenberg's (1985) list of characteristics of positive self-concept as follows:

- High self esteem
- High feelings of mattering
- High stability
- Low vulnerability
- High feelings of personal control
- Low public anxiety
- Harmonious plane coordination (fantasy versus reality)

Bracken (1996) cited self-concept, as defined by Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton (1976), to be a "person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of his or her environment" (p.58). Bracken (1996) noted that Shavelson et al. (1976) elaborated their definition to include seven fundamental aspects which make up the self-concept. They are as follows:

- 1) The self-concept is structured in such a manner that people categorize information they have about themselves, and relate each of these categories to one another
- 2) The self-concept is multifaceted, and each facet "reflects a self-referent category system" (Bracken, 1996, p.58) which is used by an individual or group of individuals.
- 3) The self-concept is hierarchical, with self perceptions at the base of its structure. Broader social, physical and academic domains are found in the center of its structure, with global self-concept at its peak.
- 4) As one moves from the base of the hierarchical structure of self-concept, each domain becomes increasingly stable. Each level is transient and can be influenced by other levels.
- 5) The self-concept, with reference to developmental factors, becomes increasingly multifaceted as an individual moves from infancy to adulthood.

- 6) The self-concept has descriptive and evaluative aspects to it which allows people to describe themselves and evaluate their character.
- 7) The self-concept should be recognized as something that has several aspects which should be differentiated from each other. For example, “academic achievements should be more highly correlated with academic self-concept than with social or physical self-concept” (Bracken, 1996, p.59).

It should be noted that the Shavelson et al.'s (1976) structural definition of self-concept is only one theorized structure. However, this representation was influential in constructing the appropriate instruments for measuring and researching self-concept and should therefore, be given adequate recognition.

The Development of Self-Concept

There are many theories about the development of an individual's self-concept. Many take into account its complexity and ever-changing nature. I wish, however, to address two specific processes which are particularly relevant to this study: reflected appraisals and social comparisons.

Reflected Appraisals and Social Comparisons Sonstroem (1984) identifies reflected appraisals as a major contributor to the development of self-concept. He describes Cooley's idea of the 'looking glass self'; the response and appraisals of others directly influence self-concept. “That is, the reactions of others to oneself serve as a mirror to reflect an image of the self” (p.125). Social interaction provides one with reflective feedback which influences how an individual feels about oneself. The amount of influence others have on an individual's self-concept depends on several factors: 1) whether or not an individual is able to provide honest feedback to the referent person; 2) the importance or significance of the person being interacted with; and 3) the “active

distorting influence of the individual's self-concept causing selective attention to information that will not be damaging to the sense of self" (Wankle, 1994, p.56).

The other important determinant of self-concept development is social comparisons. Wankle (1994) interprets this determinant to mean "how individuals evaluate their characteristics and abilities by comparing them to others" (p.56). People learn about themselves by measuring their value against the similarities and differences they may have with individuals in their social environment.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a very important psychological construct. It is often referred to as the evaluative component of self-concept, that is, the perception an individual possesses of his or her own worth (Battle, 1993). As Coopersmith (1967) maintains in his book, the *Antecedents of Self-Esteem*, self-esteem

expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward him/herself. It is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior (p.5).

Self-esteem has been referred to as the most indicative variable of life adjustment. It affects almost every aspect of our existence; the way we think, our motivations, feelings, behaviors, our ability to love, and the choices we make are all affected by the way we evaluate and perceive ourselves (Battle, 1993, Sanford & Donovan, 1985). Battle (1990) cites Gurney's (1988) proposal that "self-esteem permeates the child's whole life and potentially influences every single learning situation and action which he or she undertakes" (p.10). Self-esteem has been associated with academic achievement, social skills, attainment of leadership status, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Having high self-esteem permits people to function better in society, giving them greater adaptability and a greater sense of control over societal roles (Sonstroem, 1984).

Conversely, low self-esteem has been associated with many consequential outcomes. Low self-esteem has been linked to psychopathology, delinquent behavior (Battle, 1990), depression and feelings of being at the mercy of societal and environmental influences (Sonstroem, 1984). It has also been associated with poor health-related behaviors such as smoking, poor nutrition, distorted eating patterns, body dissatisfaction, and more sedentary lifestyles (Wankle, 1994). The need for self-esteem, therefore, is strong.

The following section will first provide a brief traditional perspective on the construct of self-esteem. I will then introduce some of the more recent perceptions and considerations that contribute to the expanding research on self-esteem.

Theoretical Background

Though I have already provided a brief overview of some of the major contributors of self-theory, I would like to include Morris Rosenberg and Stanley Coopersmith in my discussion of self-esteem. Their early theories of self-esteem provide a good foundation for further inquiry.

Morris Rosenberg. Morris Rosenberg's contribution to the research of self-esteem was at its height in the mid 1960's. He approached the construct as a kind of evaluative attitude, asserting that people had attitudes towards all kinds of things, the self being just one. According to Rosenberg, all self-attitudes have an evaluative component, and that an object in question was always subject to evaluation by the self. In other words, the way an individual rates him/herself with regard to a particular characteristic is

partly determining of self-esteem. Total self-esteem would arise by a kind of summation of these specific weighted self-evaluations (Wells & Marwell, 1976).

Rosenberg viewed the development of self-esteem as a process which involved a person's perception of how well they matched up to a set of personal central self-values. "The smaller the gap between the so-called ideal self and the current, actual, or 'real' self, the higher the self-esteem. Conversely, the greater the gap, the lower the self-esteem, even if one is viewed by others in a positive way" (Mruk, 1999, p.123).

Rosenberg approaches self-esteem from a sociological perspective. He views the self as a socially constructed entity, and feels that self-evaluations and self-values associated with self-esteem arise from "an interplay of cultural, social, familial, and other interpersonal processes" (Mruk, 1999, p.123). Furthermore, Rosenberg maintained that self-esteem was a construct that had enhancing potential. If low self-esteem results from negative external social factors, then practitioners can work to remove such social obstacles and instead, create positive social influences.

Stanley Coopersmith. The work of Coopersmith is much like that of Rosenberg's. However, Coopersmith considers self-esteem to be a more complex construct involving attitudes, as well as self-evaluation, defensive reactions, and various manifestations of these processes. For Coopersmith, self-esteem is composed of two elements: subjective expression (the individual's self-perception and self-description) and behavioral expression (behavioral manifestations of the individual's self-esteem which can be apparent to an outside observer). Describing the individual's self-esteem involves describing these two components; a person's true self-esteem (people who genuinely feel worthy and accepted) and defensive self-esteem (people who do not feel worthy and accepted) (Wells & Marwell, 1976).

Coopersmith proposes four determinants of self-esteem; success, values, aspirations, and defenses. The extent to which an individual would possess self-esteem would:

reflect the extent to which his successes approached his aspirations in areas of performance that were personally valued, with his defenses acting to define and interpret what is 'truly' valued, the 'actual' level of aspiration, and what is regarded as 'successful'. To achieve a positive self-evaluation, he would have to reach a level of performance in valued areas that met or exceeded his aspirations, and he would have to be able to diminish and reject the derogatory implications of any differences and deficiencies (Coopersmith, 1967, p.242).

Characteristics of Self-Esteem

High Self-Esteem Coopersmith (1967) proposed the following to be characteristics of individuals who possess high self-esteem:

- 1) Individuals with high self-esteem tend to be more effective in meeting environmental demands than those with low self-esteem.
- 2) People with high self-esteem tend to adopt an active and assertive position in meeting environmental demands.
- 3) High self-esteem is associated with such terms as self-respect, superiority, pride, self-acceptance, and self-love.
- 4) People with high self-esteem tend to be more autonomous and generally manifest greater confidence that they will succeed than individuals who possess low self-esteem.
- 5) High self-esteem individuals tend to be popular with their peers.
- 6) An individual with high self-esteem is apt to attend to others only to the extent that he/she esteems them.
- 7) High self-esteem individuals tend to participate in more exploratory and independent activities than do individuals with low self-esteem.
- 8) High self-esteem individuals tend to defend themselves well against threats and demeaning attempts by others.
- 9) High self-esteem individuals tend to possess greater confidence in their ability to deal with events; anxiety is less likely to be aroused in

them; and they tend to have a greater ability to resist the negative implications of social judgments (Battle, 1990/1993).

The individual with high self-esteem perceives him/herself to be capable of dealing with the demands of the internal and external environments. The individual also perceives him/herself to be loved by others, particularly by his/her parents, and that he/she is deserving of this love. The individual with high self-esteem perceives him/herself to be intellectually capable and as smart as his/her peers at the same chronological age, and thus reports being satisfied with his efforts in school and/or work (Battle, 1993).

Low Self-Esteem Coopersmith also outlines some items which he considers to be characteristic of individuals with low self-esteem:

- 1) Individuals with low self-esteem tend to withdraw from others and experience consistent feelings of distress.
- 2) People with low self-esteem tend to be more introverted and passive in adapting to environmental demands and pressures than individuals who possess high self-esteem.
- 3) Low self-esteem tends to be equated with inferiority, timidity, self-hatred, lack of personal acceptance, and submissiveness.
- 4) People low in self-esteem tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and are more likely to exhibit more frequent psychosomatic symptoms and feelings of depression than individuals with high self-esteem.
- 5) People with low self-esteem tend to be isolates who seldom select one another. These individuals tend to feel that they have greater difficulties forming friendships than do others. There does not appear to be any relationship however, between self-esteem and group membership. Persons of all levels of confidence and assurance are equally likely to join social groups, but the roles they play are different.
- 6) Low self-esteem individuals tend not to resist social pressures.
- 7) Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to remain quiet if they feel dissent with evoke personal attack. They are often unwilling

to express controversial opinions, even when they know they are correct; and they tend to have strong defensive reactions to criticism.

- 8) Low self-esteem individuals tend to be 'invisible' members of a group; they rarely serve as leaders.
- 9) Low self-esteem individuals tend to lack confidence to respect the critical appraisal of others, and remain defeated and exposed in their real or imagined deficiencies.
- 10) Individuals with low self-esteem tend to be self-conscious of their inadequacies-whether real or imagined.
- 11) Low self-esteem individuals, when distracted by personal concerns, will likely turn inward and dwell upon themselves-unlike those with high self-esteem (Battle, 1990, 1993).

As Battle (1993) suggests, people with low self-esteem tend to be pessimistic in their nature, and regard their ability to influence their environment in pessimistic ways as well. The individual with low self-esteem tends to view him/herself as having less competence and intelligence than peers his/her own age, and generally lacks confidence in his/her ability to perform academic tasks successfully. Low self-esteem individuals often appear unhappy, and they typically feel that parents and other significant players in their life do not love and accept them as much as they should. Interpersonal interactions are often experienced as difficult for people with low self-esteem. As well, positions which require qualities of leadership are rarely volunteered (Battle, 1993).

Limitations of Traditional Research on Self-Esteem and Self-Concept

While these pioneers contribute to the understanding of self-concept and self-esteem, limitations exist in the way they attempt to operationalize both constructs. In her article *Is Self-Esteem Political?*, Ellis (1998) suggests that traditional scientific research on the construct of self-esteem has tended to "conceptualize and operationalize self-esteem in ways which...disempower [women]" (p.1). Psychological research assumes that self-esteem is a stable and global construct which can be reliably measured

across gender, culture, sexuality and class. Traditional research on self-esteem tends to conclude with findings that further marginalize minority groups. What this traditional research does not account for are multiple understandings of self-esteem that may exist within each individual. For example “in non-western settings, self-esteem is composed of and influenced by quite different components to those suggested by conventional western measures” (Ellis, 1998, p.1).

What traditional research also fails to consider is women’s own descriptions of their experiences and how they give meaning to these experiences. Quantitative research aims to categorize individuals using statistical methods which often leaves an entire psychological phenomenon to a single number. It is difficult to thoroughly understand self-esteem in women through these means since quantitative research studies such a phenomenon separate from individual experience, where individual experience can be very diverse. Also not considered within mainstream approaches to research on self-esteem is the larger social and cultural context within which women’s lives take place. Often, the patriarchal structures and practices in our society are completely neglected as a system which operates to undermine the women’s experiences and roles within our society.

With quantitative research, theory becomes the dictating course of action. “A drawback of all these explanations is that they reflect experts’ theories rather than being based in women’s experiences. In short, they draw on mainstream research approaches, while language and the social context of women’s lives are virtually ignored” (Stoppard, Scattolon & Gammell, 2000, p.89). Women’s experiences are largely influenced by many social pressures which make up the context of their everyday lives (Stoppard et al., 2000). As well, these social pressures often influence how they identify themselves and

give worth to their lives. Women's understandings of self-esteem and the multiple, diverse meanings they attach to such a construct, need to be accounted for through qualitative means by which representation for each individual experience can be validated. By offering such an alternative approach to studying self-esteem, women are not only validated in their experiences, they are also given an empowering opportunity to hold a position of research into their own lives. That is, qualitative research allows women to feel a sense of responsibility over their own health; they are considered possessors of knowledge into their own experience and hold the capacity to control the direction of their lives. This removes the role of researcher as dictator over their experiences and feelings, and instead, puts themselves in command of their own lives.

Self-Esteem and the Environment

Sonstroem (1997) indicates that self-esteem interacts with the environment via a two-way process. Successes and rewarding experiences tend to give us strengthened feelings of competence and high self-esteem. On the other hand, self-esteem is believed to influence our behavior in the environment. "We tend to act as our conception of ourselves indicates, thus reinforcing the image" (Sonstroem, 1997, p.129). The relationship between self-esteem and the environment can therefore, be summarized under a "bidirectional rubric"; experiences in the environment can influence self-esteem and self-esteem can, in turn, impact our experiences in the environment.

Women and Self-Esteem

The issue of gender and its influence on self-esteem is deserving of inquiry. Statham and Rhoades (2001) cite Rosenberg (1970) as indicating; "sex does not inform self-concept; being treated as...a man or a woman does" (p.256). In many cultures, men are seen as inherently superior to women. The characteristics associated with men

(assertiveness, independence, rationality) are valued most, whereas passivity, emotionality, and sensitivity, the traits more associated with women, are seen as weak, vulnerable and lesser. Given these context, it is easy to understand how many women in our society experience low self-esteem.

Much research indicates that decreases in self-esteem for females begin during adolescence. In their review on gender and self-esteem, Statham and Rhoades (2001) indicate that these decreases in the self-esteem of young girls stem from “being forced to play out a socially mandated ‘false self’ that directly contradicts the strengths they displayed earlier in their lives when they were living out their ‘true self’” (p.256). The tendency to be seen as a ‘sexual object’ seemed to loom in their descriptions of their experiences. Sanford and Donovan (1985) suggest, accordingly, that social forces are primarily responsible for women’s experiences of low self-esteem. Statham and Rhoades (2001) even argue that “women ought to have lower levels of self-esteem, given their disadvantaged access to valued societal resources such as income and the often more negative notion of ‘femininity’ compared to ‘masculinity’” (p.258).

As Mruk (1999) states, women seem to rely partly on the ‘worthiness’ component of self-esteem (being valued by others in terms of acceptance or rejection), and that much of women’s self-esteem is dependent on their relationships with others. Given that we live in a sexist society, which often discourages women from pursuing their own potentials, worthiness becomes an outlet by which women can gain self-esteem. However, this can risk making them more vulnerable to others and less confident in themselves (Mruk, 1999).

Other indicators of low self-esteem in girls and women revolve around their family and work roles. The role of woman as domestic wife and caregiver is under-

appreciated and not recognized as one of the most important roles a woman can play. In interviewing several women about their roles as housewives and caregivers, Sanford and Donovan (1985) reported that the majority of women would refer to themselves as “only a housewife” or “only a mother”. Women often experience decreases in self-esteem following the birth of their children. Once an active participant in society, women can experience much isolation as a result of their choice to stay at home and care for their children. Often the heavy demands of being a mother is not recognized by their partners, or valued to the extent that it should by society (Wolf, 2002).

Physical Activity and Self-Esteem

The research indicating that physical activity may positively influence self-esteem is strong and widespread. Surveys published in 1974 and 1987 (as cited by Fox, 1996) indicate that physical educators in Great Britain and Ireland considered the physical activity curriculum to be essential for developing self-esteem in children. Among these educators’ top physical education objectives were fostering self-realization, psychological benefits, acquisition of physical competence and poise, and the development of self-confidence through understanding their own and others’ physical capacities. In their research on the determinants of children’s self-esteem, Ebbeck and Weiss (1998) also assert that self-esteem gains can be found in children who participate in physical activity, and that these gains can be attributed to increases in the child’s perceived level of physical competence.

In his meta-analysis on physical activity and self-esteem development in children, Gruber (1985) concludes that participation in direct play and/or physical activity programs contribute to the development of self-esteem in elementary school-age children. In her analysis on the effects of a walking program on the self-esteem of women, Palmer

(1995) suggested that self-esteem increases were found because of the participants' gaining a sense of accomplishment, pleasure, pride and successful mastery of a skill. Other research exclusive to women includes Richman and Shaffer's (2000) sample of 220 college females. Their research found that greater precollege sport participation promoted higher self-esteem by fostering physical competence, favorable body images and gender flexibility.

Doganis et. al (1991) also studied the effects of a fitness program on an exclusively female population. However, their research extended to include locus of control. Locus of control refers to the way persons perceive reasons controlling their behavior. Locus of control is also related to self-esteem. Internal locus of control refers to persons holding the belief that they are in control of their behavior, and possess the skills and abilities to be able to control their experiences and behaviors. External locus of control refers to individuals who believe that experiences and events are influenced by forces outside of one's own personal control. Internal locus of control is associated with high self-esteem, whereas external locus of control is associated with low self-esteem. The findings of this study showed that women exercisers possessed primarily internal locus of control and that those with positive attitudes towards the self were those who believed that they were able to control their exercise outcomes.

Other extensive reviews on the influence physical activity may have on self-esteem include Sonstroem's (1984) article on exercise and self-esteem. His review of literature includes Jasnoski's (1981) research on a women's running group. Results revealed increases for the experimental group only on the dependent variables of self-perception of physical abilities. Other experimental studies reviewed by Sonstroem (1984) showed increases in self-esteem following fitness training programs. Sonstroem

concludes in his review that exercise programs are associated with significant increases in the self-esteem scores of participants.

Further support for the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem is important in order to increase participation in physical activity and promote active lifestyles and thus, potentially benefit participants' psychological well being.

Who Benefits Most? It has been suggested that sedentary individuals and individuals with initially low levels of self-esteem will benefit most from physical activity; that is, they will experience the most increases in self-esteem (Sonstroem, 1997). However, Sonstroem also notes that significant increases in self-esteem were obtained from a physically and mentally more representative sample of college students. Sonstroem (1997) concludes, therefore, that it is incorrect to assume that enhancement of self-esteem through exercise is limited to those who are sedentary or who experience low levels of self-esteem.

Physical Body/Physical Competence As Gruber (1985) explains, "the body is the instrument of action and communication for developing infants and children. Thus a basic body concept emerges. This gradually evolves over time into a more global self-concept and self-esteem" (p.30). Sonstroem (1984) also addresses the body as being an important informer of self-concept and self-esteem. He supports Wylie's view that attitudes towards the body carry over into attitudes about one's self. This notion is recognized by the creators of self-concept inventories. The Piers-Harris Children's Subscale, the Self-Concept Inventory and the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale all consist of subscales addressing the physical body, including its appearance, attributes and abilities.

Richman and Shaffer (2000) support the notion that the physical body and physical competence are important contributors to self-esteem, and also note that they

are important indicators of sport participation. In their review of literature, they found that in a study of female and male undergraduates, athletes showed greater confidence in the way their own bodies performed than did nonathletes. They also found that perceptions of ability in sport and physical activity are related to how much people will participate (Richman & Shaffer, 2000). These findings can lead us to conclude that physical competence, participation in physical activity and self-esteem are related. However, more research needs to be done in order to assert these claims definitively.

Gender Research indicates that there are many gender differences associated with levels of participation in physical activity. Participation in sport and physical activity tends to depend on one's level of perceived physical competence in relation to a given skill. It seems that much research indicates that female levels of perceived competence in the physical domain are much lower than that of males (Hayes et al. 1999). In a study on children's physical activity and physical self-perceptions, Crocker et al. (2000) found that boys were more physically active, and displayed more positive perceptions of strength, physical ability, sport skills, and physical self-worth than girls. These findings are consistent with previous research which indicates that boys are more active than girls. These researchers suggest that traditional boys' sports dominate school life, and that there is less opportunity for girls to participate in such games as football, soccer, hockey, skateboarding and basketball (Crocker et al., 2000). Lirgg (1991) found that females tend to display less confidence than males in general, whereas others assert that females display less confidence than males in all achievement situations. This would include the domain of physical activity.

Richman and Shaffer (2000) explore some of the reasons why females report less perceived physical competence and participate less in sport and physical activity. They

suggest that:

Historically, female athletes have been subject to scrutiny for crossing gender lines and entering the 'man's world' of sport...leaving one to wonder, is it worth it for females to participate? As a place where traditionally masculine ideologies such as competition, performance, strength, power, dominance, and winning are heralded, sport is not the 'automatic' option for girls and women that it is for boys and men in our culture. That is, the traditional, communally scripted female path does not include athleticism as one of the gender-normative options. Thus, female athleticism is sometimes seen as less socially desirable for women and is often stamped with a lesbian stigma (Richman & Shaffer, 2000, p.189-190).

Lirgg (1991) reviewed other explanations offered by Lenney (1977) that may explain when and why females show less confidence in achievement situations. These include a) situations when the task is male oriented, b) circumstances when the situation is competitive or comparative, and c) situations when feedback is ambiguous. Studies have neither confirmed nor negated this theory. However, sport participation seems to coincide with the first two assumptions of Lenney's claims, and could therefore, explain women's lesser involvement in physical activity.

Nevertheless, physical educators must continue to encourage the involvement of women in sport and physical activity. By challenging traditional gender stereotypes, implementing physical education programs in schools that fit the interests of girls, and making athletic, strong female athletes more visible to the female population, we can hope to remove this gender pattern in physical activity.

Physical Activity, Social Support and Self-Esteem I would like to address one particular concern many researchers confront when investigating the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem. Many researchers have expressed that social support and social interaction may contaminate the correlation of physical activity and self-esteem. In his research on physical activity and psychological well being, Leonard

(1996) suggests that the social interaction that took place during his intervention may have been the cause of increases found in well being. Sonstroem (1997) reviewed Jasnoski, Holmes, Solomon, & Aguiar's (1981) research which hypothesized that increases in fitness would raise participants' self-esteem scores. They instead concluded that "self-esteem change scores were associated with feelings of social support emanating from group participation" (p.129). Alfermann and Stoll (2000) also tested the effects of physical activity on self-concept and well being. Both experimental and control groups were exposed to a group dynamic which allowed for participants to interact with one another. The experimental group, only, received an activity intervention. They reported that the control groups improved as much as the experimental groups on the dependent variables of self-concept and well being, and that exercise is an effective but not superior way to improve self-esteem. Furthermore, they suggested that other interventions which include social support may be equally or more effective in raising self-concept, well being and self-esteem.

Leonard (1996) responds to these concerns: "As social beings, we do have needs for affiliation and what that entails and brings. This need can be met in many social situations, and certainly not just in sports/physical activities...social interaction in physical activity [is] an important combination, especially for females" (p.204). It seems that a concern is to improve the self-esteem of individuals, and if a particular exercise intervention succeeds in doing so, not just because of the exercise but because of the social support as well, why aren't we encouraging this dynamic in our exercise interventions? The proposed project has intentionally included a social support dynamic in hopes that along with physical activity, it too, will raise the self-esteem of participants.

Body Image

Body image, as first defined by Schilder (1950), is “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (p. 11). Since 1950, the ‘body image’ has evolved to mean many different things. For this project, I will adopt the following definition for body image:

a person’s perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body. Body image defined in this way includes the perception and evaluation of one’s own body attractiveness, body size distortion, and emotions associated with body shape and size (Grogan, 1999). This definition takes into account the multidimensionality of body image, and best suits the present-day social and cultural considerations revolving around body image.

Body Image as Culturally and Socially Constructed

The way that the female body has been idealized throughout centuries is a transient and evolving theme. Grogan (1999) illustrates that “it is possible to trace a cultural change in the ‘ideal body’ from the voluptuous figures favored from the Middle Ages...to the thin body types favored by the fashion magazines of today” (p.13). It is also possible to trace differences in female body ideals between cultures. In poorer countries, thinness is often seen as a sign of malnutrition, and plumpness an indication of wealth and higher, healthier standards of living. In the more advanced Western countries however, the association of thinness with the feminine ideal is an unspoken assumption. Extensive research suggests that the idealized female body in Western society is thin (Monteath & McCabe, 1997). Furthermore, it seems as though this ideal may be getting slimmer. In their review of an analysis of measurements, Unger and Crawford (1992) showed that the models of *Playboy* magazine and the contestants of the Miss America pageants became increasingly thinner after 1960.

Why has slenderness become the aesthetic ideal for women? In her book *Femininity*, Brownmiller (1984) suggests that “fleshiness [may be] problematic to the present-day feminine illusion, for while fat creates the celebrated dimorphic curves of womanhood, it is also the agent of massiveness and bulk, properties more readily associated with masculine solidity and power” (p.32). The idea that ‘thin is in’ is also created by other stereotypes that exist within Western culture. “In Western society, an extremely negative stereotype of overweight people exists” (Monteath & McCabe, 1997, p.711). While thinness is associated with beauty, success, glamour, happiness, self-worth and control, fatness is associated with being lazy and ugly.

Body Image as Learned

The stereotypes, like the ones previously addressed, are very influential and implicit on women’s social learning process. Little girls learn through Barbie about how imperative physical appearance is to their personal happiness (Urla & Swedlund, 1998). “Women quickly learn that their social opportunities are affected by their beauty, and consequently their sense of their own attractiveness may become an integral part of women’s self-concept” (Monteath & McCabe, 1997, p.711). Wankle (1994) identifies ‘social comparisons’ as a major process involved in the formation of one’s self-concept. Social comparisons involve individuals “evaluating their characteristics and abilities by comparing them to others” (p.57). In this process of comparing one’s body with a socially constructed, and often unrealistic ideal of beauty, women learn to perceive and evaluate their bodies in unhealthy ways.

Body Image and the Media

Clearly, the media’s presence largely creates the cultural criteria for attractiveness. “Movies, television, magazines, rock videos, and advertising all tout the

importance of physical attractiveness, glamorizing the popular role models that one should emulate” (Harter, 2000). It has been suggested that “the media can affect women’s self-esteem and body-esteem by becoming a reference point against which unfavorable comparisons are made” (Grogan et al., 1996, p.570). One could argue that the fashion, make-up and fitness industries thrive and solely depend on women feeling inadequate about their bodies and selves. How would the media survive if all women felt good enough just as they were? Women wouldn’t need to buy any products if their sense of self and bodies was secure. Yet the magazines and television ads tell us that we are inadequate. Further, they tell us that we have the ability to change what we look and feel like.

Body Image and Self-Esteem

Much of Susan Harter’s (2000, 1999) research investigates the relationship between perceived physical appearance and self-esteem. Harter has found that “there is a robust relationship between how one evaluates one’s physical appearance (how one judges his or her *outer* self) and one’s level of self-esteem (how one evaluates one’s *inner* self) (p.133). This pattern seems to be more apparent in females and appears to increase as girls mature into womanhood. Harter (2000) suggests this may be the case since female worthiness is largely dependent on physical attractiveness, whereas male worthiness is more weighted on features such as intelligence, wealth, athleticism, job success and status.

In one such study investigating the relationship between perceived physical attractiveness and self-esteem in adolescents, Harter (2000) tried to determine what came first: physical appearance or self-esteem? “That is, does perceived appearance *precede* one’s sense of worth or does it *determine* one’s self-esteem?” (Harter, 2000, p.136).

Discouragingly, Harter (2000) has consistently found that, particularly with girls, one's level of perceived physical attractiveness largely determines one's self-esteem. "Thus, basing one's sense of self-worth as a person on how one looks is a particularly pernicious orientation for girls" (2000, p.136). Helping women and girls to adopt more inner worth orientations should therefore be a research and intervention priority.

Women-Centered Groups

In the last few decades, women-centered groups have made an important mark on the psychological well being of women. "Women brought together can offer each other support, validation and strength, and a growing sense of personal awareness, in a way that is difficult to achieve otherwise" (Butler & Wintram, 1991, p.1). The emergence of such women's groups evolved from the apparent change of women's role in society. During the feminist revolution, women were beginning to recognize their devalued status, whereby the need for them to assert themselves was imminent. Women-centered groups provided a social support network for them which removed a sense of isolation, and furthermore, prepared them for social change (Enns, 1992).

Consciousness-raising groups were first developed by women in the late 1960's. While these groups were meant more to raise women's awareness of their subordinate social status, they seemed to strike something else equally as important. Self-awareness seemed to run parallel with self-esteem (Butler & Wintram, 1991, Field, 1997). The new relationships generated out of the groups also seemed to increase self-esteem in women. McManus et. al (1997) and Butler and Wintram (1991) suggest that women's self-esteem is formed through their relationships with others; social competence is gained by one's comparison with others. Surrey (1991) suggests that self-esteem is also related to the "degree of emotional sharing, openness, and shared sense of understanding and regard"

(p.57). The group experience allows women to share and learn about their common experiences. Each woman may also function as a kind of mirror through which one can experience a greater sense of authentic self, thus making women more aware of their strengths. Women-centered groups therefore, may serve an important function in the self-esteem of individual women.

Contrary to these benefits, it has been suggested that in mixed-gendered groups, women tend to play a role subservient to the male participants' needs. Furthermore, the presence of men within group settings may leave important things unsaid (Holmes, 2001). Because there are important issues which are exclusive to women, establishing a group and setting where women are encouraged to share their experiences can help relieve the alienation they may feel.

Personal Reflection: Evolving Values

My first physical education job following graduating from the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies was a personal training job at a fast-paced, successful, saturated gym called Shapes. I had completed the Canadian Physical Fitness and Lifestyle Appraisal (CPAFLA) training and was enthusiastic about “changing people’s behavior” and whipping their bodies into shape. Little did I know this job experience would change my entire perspective on the fitness industry and my personal attitudes towards the body, fat and health.

In reflecting on the CPAFLA and its health related approach, I have many criticisms of its application. Its interpretation of well-being is incomplete in that it does not take into consideration the context in which it is often used. To employ the CPAFLA on individuals who are overweight, sedentary and/or just trying to get into shape for the first time in their lives, this method can be emotionally detrimental. The fitness industry, which largely employs fit and healthy individuals who are often very comfortable in their own bodies, does not take into account how the procedures involved with the CPAFLA might deter one from being active.

Weighing in at all of 125 pounds standing 5 foot 8 inches tall, my first experience receiving a fitness appraisal ended with my fitness “counselor” suggesting to me that perhaps I cut back on my daily dose of M & M’s. Where did she find the assumption to suggest this to me? She proceeded to tell me that my iliac crest skinfold fell into the high/health related risk zone. In laymen terms this essentially meant that my waist was too fat. I thought to myself, “I’m a size six. How can I be overweight, or fall into a health risk zone?” My fitness counselor then asked me if I could think of any other behaviors or bad habits I might change in order to eliminate this “problem”. I remember

this well. I don't know why, because I wasn't able to critically assess what was going on in a way that might make me want to challenge what was happening. However, I knew something didn't feel right.

Years later when I learned how to perform all these (degrading) tests on people, I still didn't criticize what this appraisal might be teaching my clients. The CPAFLA involves administering a series of, what I feel, are very invasive tests, used to assess a person's fitness level and overall physical health. The first series of tests are simple: measure one's blood pressure, heart rate, height and weight, from which a Body Mass Index (BMI) can be calculated. We then move into the "skinfolds" portion of the appraisal. This involves locating specific areas on the body whereby a measure of skin or fat can be measured with a skinfold caliper. These five regions include the triceps (back of the arm), biceps (front of the arm), subscapular region (the area under ones shoulder blade where the skin runs diagonal from one's spine), iliac crest region (waist), and the medial calf region (inner calf). Each area is measured three times and an average of these become one's final score. In order to locate and measure these areas one must certainly remove one's shirt. My role as the appraiser is to simply ask if they are comfortable removing their shirt. I contemplate, "Gee, I just met this individual, I wonder if they're comfortable standing half naked, in their bra, in a cold room beside a relatively fit, healthy person who's about to poke and prod at their most vulnerable fat-concentrated areas." After a seemingly long five minutes of fat-grabbing, I calculate a "Sum of 5 Skinfolds" and "Sum of 2 Trunk Skinfolds" whereby through a point system I am able to determine a rating for my client which ranges in category titles from "excellent" to "needs improvement". My job is to interpret the clients' score and provide them with information about where they fare against what is "normal", "healthy" or "average".

This is a difficult task. How does one tell a person she or he is fatter than the average person?

Now, you may be thinking, “well, surely you are only informing the overweight person of the health risks related to being overweight”. Well, let’s refer back to my first experience with the fat calipers. I was far from fat or “overweight”. I simply had a high score within the health benefit zone of the waist skin caliper. Consider how relating this information to a barely post-pubescent girl might influence her interpretation of her own body. “You might want to consider cutting back on the daily dose of M & M’s...”. Thankfully, I didn’t take this suggestion too seriously. But unfortunately, I felt I had to give up on my daily dose of M & M’s...and so I did.

Performing these fitness appraisals on my clients was an extremely discouraging experience. Each shift I would see a new gym member walk through the doors of Shapes and immediately become intimidated and uncomfortable. The atmosphere of this facility and of many gyms in North America is enough to deter one from being physically active. The clientele at Shapes was mainly composed of “good looking”, buff, overconfident bodies (what we might sometimes refer to as “meat heads”) whose main purpose was to multiply on what massive muscle fibers they already had. The obese, “overweight”, or even average-bodied individuals walking into this type of facility immediately becomes isolated as just that: fat. To make matters worse, this individual as part of his or her assessment, has to isolate their fat even further with some man-made fat grabber.

Approaching the sedentary person who is ready to become active should be a far less humiliating experience. Fitness is not always about fat. For me, it often has little to do with how you look. It’s also about how you feel. The CPAFLA’s approach to fitness overlooks this variable. Its focus remains purely on the physical body and reflects

societies skewed sense of and standards of beauty. Their tests are meant to measure how far along one is on a chart that apparently represents Canadian body norms. Follow up assessments are meant to monitor whether or not an individual has progressed towards these averages. Nowhere are there questions which might qualify an individual's experiences of being physically active, nor are there opportunities to gain any type of insight into these perceptions and experiences.

I would challenge the fitness industry to develop a method of assessing an individual's health goals by way of experiential progress. How does physical activity operate in your day to day life? How does it influence your perceptions of self? How does being physically active influence your mental health? How does physical activity make you feel in general? I would suggest that asking these questions might evoke responses in the individual which warrant adherence to physical activity more so than the emphasis placed on "improvements" of the physical body. It is as though the fitness trainer and her instruments are forcing an unnecessary intervention on individual clients, when really, we need to start empowering individuals through the emphasis of physical activity as an experiential process. Until this kind of emphasis is more pronounced within the fitness industry, we will continue to marginalize sedentary groups of people and alienate them further from gym facilities like Shapes.

This early encounter with the fitness industry provoked a curiosity about individual's experiential process of health and fitness. I wanted to approach physical activity with a sensitivity that many professionals don't and aren't willing to relate to. The EYSW is an attempt at qualifying women's experiences of physical education, body image and self-esteem.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The following chapter will introduce the details of the Exercise Your Self Workshop, its participants as well as my approach to the project and my analysis of the data.

Recruitment of Participants

Purposeful sampling was used for this project. This involves selecting information-rich cases to study more in depth (Patton, 1990). "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (Patton, 1990, p.169).

Participants were selected via three sources: the Women's Health Clinic, "Klinik," and the Aboriginal Centre, all of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Interested participants responded to posters distributed throughout the facilities and/or information passed along from representatives of the organizations. Interested participants contacted me, at my home, whereby I offered further information regarding the Exercise Your Self Workshop (EYSW) as well as the research intentions of the project. These phone conversations acted as intake procedures to discuss with the participants whether or not the program was suitable for their needs, and also whether their participation was suitable and/or valuable to the research. I informed each individual of all the procedures of the workshop: interviews, research and their potential role in the study. Furthermore, I informed them that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that they could refuse to answer any interview questions that they did not feel comfortable with.

At some point towards the end of our conversation, I asked each individual if they might be interested in taking part in the EYSW. Some were hesitant because of other

prior commitments. At times it was difficult to tell exactly who would be participating. In the end, there were eight interested women who all seemed enthusiastic about their participation, and whom I felt were appropriate for the study and program. Participants were selected based on the degree of commitment I felt the individual was willing to put forth in the EYSW. Follow up phone conversations took place in order to ensure that selected participants were still interested in taking part in the workshop and study. I then set up individual times to meet with each participant to conduct the first interview, and to distribute the 'activity schedule' for the EYSW, notifying them of dates, times, locations and supplies. The 'Letter of Consent' was also distributed at this time; I requested its return upon our first EYSW session. Please refer to Appendix A to see the 'Letter of Consent'.

Of the eight participants, three responded to advertisements from the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg: Barbara, Jaylene and Maggie (note: throughout the thesis, pseudonyms will be used for each participant). Maggie referred her friend Cheryl, to me, who also ended up participating. Barbara was in her 30's and aboriginal. Jaylene was also aboriginal and 25 years old. Maggie had an Inuit background. She was 45 and a teacher. Cheryl was also around 45 and described herself as "being part aboriginal", but that her name was the only indication of this heritage. Cheryl was a nurse. Nancy, Anna and Dawn responded to my advertisements via the Women's Health Clinic and/or Klinik in Winnipeg. Nancy was Filipino, 25 and was a university student. Anna was also a student. She was second generation German and 28 years old. Dawn was Caucasian and also 25 years old. Jane was an acquaintance of mine, and participated in the EYSW after much encouragement. Jane was 42 and from Mexico. Of these eight participants, Jaylene, Barbara and Anna dropped out of the workshop.

Exclusion/Inclusion Criteria

There were some characteristics and/or exclusion/inclusion criteria that I wanted to establish regarding an individual's participation in the EYSW. First, the workshop was designed for the young adult woman to the middle-aged woman. The constructs of self-esteem and body image change with age; different issues arise with different ages. For example, issues of disordered eating are perhaps more likely to arise in teenage girls. This workshop was not designed for or capable of addressing this issue at length, and therefore I would refer a younger woman elsewhere.

I wanted to include women who have previously been involved in some physical activity, but who were presently sedentary and looking to get more involved in an active lifestyle. The workshop facilitated an eclectic mix of beginner exercises which accommodated the sedentary individual. I strived to include women of different backgrounds including race, class and sexuality.

Setting

The setting of the EYSW was in a variety of different spaces in the Frank Kennedy Centre at the University of Manitoba. Each activity session, except for the day we went walking in King's Park, took place in Room 203, the "Dance Studio" on the second floor of Frank Kennedy Centre. The dance studio provided us with a large enough space, equipped with mirrors, appropriate equipment for each activity, as well as a suitable sound system for activities which required music accompaniment. Each 'collective reflective' session took place in one of Rooms 117, 212, or 128 of Frank Kennedy Centre. Most of these sessions occurred in Room 117 which was most suitable and comfortable, including a carpeted floor, softer lighting and more privacy.

Description of the Exercise Your *Self* Workshop

The Exercise Your *Self* Workshop is a reflective, physical activity and social support program, running 10 sessions in length. Sessions were held once a week for 10 weeks, running two hours in duration. Each session was broken up into two sections. The first hour of each session was dedicated to some type of physical activity. The second hour of the workshop, named 'collective reflective', was time allotted for reflection and consciousness-raising about self-esteem, body image and experiences of each, revolving around physical activity. To see an outline of the EYSW, please refer to the Activity Schedule in Appendix B.

Qualitative Research Methods

The research project adopted a qualitative research approach to interpret the experiences of each woman who participated in the EYSW. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe qualitative research as a

situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible...qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.3).

In contrast to quantitative inquiry, qualitative research emphasizes the qualities of processes and meanings that are not experimentally measured in terms of quantity, amount, frequency or intensity. Qualitative inquiry seeks to show how realities are socially constructed and how these realities are created and given meaning. While the ultimate goal of quantitative research is to define and claim objective truth, qualitative studies seek to represent the individual's own account of subjective experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The researcher assumed the role of interpretive bricoleur. "The interpretive

bricoleur produces a bricolage, that is, a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.4). Using a bricolage method allows one to apply a number of different research strategies: from interviewing to observing, and from self-reflection to introspection. The bricolage method also allows for changes to occur as the research unfolds; the bricolage “changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods, and techniques of representation and interpretation are added to the puzzle” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.4). Since the nature of this research involved human lives and sensitive experiences, the researcher allowed for a flexible research structure.

I also used triangulation as a means of approaching and collecting data.

Triangulation allows the researcher to use multiple data sources as well as multiple theoretical perspectives in order to arrive at an interpretive stage of the research process (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.82). One can argue that the use of multiple methods allows for a richer understanding of a phenomenon when objective truth cannot be claimed. “The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity...and depth to any inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.5). Although I wanted to arrive at a point in my interpretations where I felt I had intimately represented the experiences of the EYSW participants, I have not however, claimed that my interpretations are secure, or not subject to other multiple understandings.

Through interviews, observation, journaling, field notes and analysis of handouts, I attempted to provide rich descriptions of each of the participant’s experiences with self-esteem and body image, as well as the participant’s experiences within the EYSW.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit stories and relevant information from the participants of the EYSW. Kvale (1996) describes the purpose of a qualitative interview as “obtaining qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning” (p.124). The semi-structured interview used in this research included questions relevant to the themes of self-esteem and body image, and the participants’ experiences of both within the EYSW. While my hope was to elicit responses to specific questions asked, there was an openness to change the sequence of the interview in order to follow up more thoroughly on the stories of each woman’s experiences (Kvale, 1996).

Each participant of the EYSW was interviewed twice, once prior to commencement of the EYSW, and once following completion of the EYSW. While the first interview mainly focused on the participants’ experiences of self-esteem and body image, the latter interview focused predominantly on the women’s experiences of self-esteem and body image within the EYSW. Each interview lasted about one hour in duration, depending on the nature of the interview and the participant’s willingness to respond. A tape recorder was used to record each interview. Transcriptions of each interview were made following completion of both pre and post-workshop interviews. Please refer to Appendix C for sample interview questions.

Observations

Observations provided me with another method of understanding further the experiences of each woman participating in the EYSW. Observing each participant within the group setting provided me with an opportunity to also interpret what was seen, rather than only heard within the interviews. Observations allowed me to enter more

closely the life world of the persons whose experiences were relevant to my research (van Manen, 1990). As Patton (1990) explains, through observation one can “come to understand program activities and impacts through detailed descriptive information about what has occurred in a program and how the people in the program have reacted to what has occurred” (p.203).

Observation also involves being aware of what does not happen (Patton, 1990). Observing behaviors that do not occur with particular individuals allowed me to interpret possible meanings that may be relevant for each participant. Furthermore, observing what did not occur within the EYSW allowed me to make appropriate revisions for workshops that I may conduct in the future, and speculate on implications for future research projects similar to my own.

Journaling

After each ‘collective reflective’ session I ‘assigned’ journal questions which were relevant and related to the discussion structured that particular day. Although not monitored on a weekly basis, I encouraged the participants of the EYSW to keep a journal throughout the duration of the workshop. As van Manen (1990) points out “keeping a regular diary may help a person to reflect on significant aspects of his or her past and present life...journal writing is used for the purpose of ‘self-discovery’ or for coming to terms with personal problems or issues in one’s private life” (p.73).

I encouraged each participant to reflect, within their journal, on their past and present experiences with self-esteem and body image. Furthermore, I encouraged them to document their experiences of both within the EYSW. Through journaling I hoped to keep the participants’ reflections of their experiences ‘fresh’ in their minds, so that they were able to verbalize and draw from them more readily during our discussions. Upon

completion of the EYSW I asked each participant to loan their journals to me so that once more, I could integrate their own voice more into my interpretations of their experiences. I hoped that by including their own words within my analysis and interpretations I would be able to capture their voice and experience more intimately.

Analysis of Handouts

A small number of handouts were distributed to the participants of the EYSW throughout its duration. These handouts/questionnaires were designed to inform me more about the women's experiences of self-esteem, body image and their relationship, if any, with the EYSW. Responses obtained from the handouts supported the information from the interviews, observations and journaling to gain further insight into the women's experiences. Please refer to Appendix D for a sample workshop session handout and to Appendix E to view the 'Activity Questionnaire'.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken following each session of the EYSW. As Crabtree and Miller (1999) explain "the habit of regularly recording experiences as soon as possible after they occur is essential...field notes represent an attempt to provide a literal account of what happened in the field setting-the social processes and their contexts" (p.59). Within these field notes I included relevant parts of discussions that took place within the 'collective reflective'. As well, I recorded particular behaviors and shared experiences of the participants. I also made note of significant circumstances which occurred in the activity portions of the workshop.

Feminist Research Methods

The project not only approached the research from a feminist framework, it also incorporated feminist research methods. Cook and Fonow (1990) assert that feminist

methodology is still in the process of “becoming” and has not yet fully articulated any specific methodological approaches. While traditional science may perceive this as a weakness, Cook and Fonow (1990) defend that imposing “premature closure on definitions of feminist methodology run the risk of limiting its possibilities by stipulating a ‘correct’ set of techniques without adequate opportunity to examine a wide variety of other approaches for their feminist relevance” (p.71). Feminist methodology offers an opportunity to critique the social sciences and to question and reflect on traditional sources and potentials of possible knowledge. Feminist methodology “reject[s] the conservatizing limitation of a phenomenon to the factual recording of what is, suppressing the likelihood that liberating alternatives will be discovered” (Cook & Fonow, 1990, p.71).

Acknowledging Influences of Gender

A central principle of feminist methodology is acknowledging the influence of gender in social life and research. The focus of inquiry rests on the assumption that men have held a central position in sociological analysis, and that this influences women’s experiences and perceptions of themselves and their world. “Descriptions and interpretations of women’s experience have often reflected faulty theories that men have created about the ‘nature’ of women. Distorted definitions resulted from men seeing women as something ‘other’ than themselves and drawing unjustified inferences from this perspective. What is clearly missing are women’s self-definitions” (Lavesque-Lopman, 1988, p.10). Thus, feminist research methods seek to describe the experiences of women via a ‘female prism’ which is the description, analysis, explanation and interpretation of the female world by women (Cook & Fonow, 1990). This process also encourages the researcher, in her analysis, to be reflective of herself as a gendered being

as well; to be aware that her interpretations of women's experiences are also shaped by gender asymmetry.

Consciousness Raising

Another central practice of feminist research methods is consciousness raising. As Stanley and Wise (1983) address in Cook and Fonow (1990), feminists work within a 'double vision of reality' which allows them to see the endless contradictions presented to us in life. Understanding these contradictions arise when we are able to recognize our oppressed position within the social world; "women's understanding of our lives are transformed so that we see, understand and feel them in a new and quite different way at the same time that we see them in the 'old way'" (Cook & Fonow, 1990, p.74). Thus, women are able to conceptualize and reconceptualize our social reality. Reaching this understanding allows us to escape categorizing feminine themes and ideals, and furthermore, enables us to redefine our own realities which better suit our experiences and desires.

Qualitative Methodology

The following section will outline the tradition of and approach to the analysis I have chosen to be most appropriate for the study.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative analysis is a qualitative research methodology which uses stories to describe human experiences and action (Oliver, 1998). Through narrative inquiry, the researcher seeks to create stories that locate and represent the way people create meaning from their experiences. "The narrative approach...is firmly grounded in qualitative traditions and stresses the 'lived experience' of individuals, the importance of multiple perspectives, the existence of context-bound, constructed social realities, and the impact

of the researcher on the research process” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.223). Drawing from multiple data sources (interviews, observation, field notes, journals, and analysis of handouts), I attempted to recount and interpret the subjective experiences of the participants of the EYSW. Since self-esteem and body image are not experienced the same way for every woman, I attempted to account for these differences and give voice to each woman’s subjective and meaningful experience. For example, two women of a different race or sexuality may experience self-esteem in entirely unique ways from one another. Narrative analysis was a strong medium through which I could fulfill these goals of representation. Oliver (1998) asserts that “narrative analysis is particularly powerful for understanding the fullness and uniqueness of human existence...stories show whose voices are heard, and whose voices are silenced; whose histories are valued, and whose are devalued” (p.245-247). Self-esteem and body image are feminist issues, where oppression exists to silence and devalue women’s personal strength and bodies. The hope for my research was to provide a space for each woman to tell her story of self-esteem and body image.

The configuration of a narrative should be treated much like any literary story. As Kvale (1996) and Oliver (1998) outline, each narrative has its setting, characters and plot which are interwoven to create meaning or explanations for certain events. The setting is where the story or action takes place, including the cultural context. The setting is comprised of three elements: the physical environment, sociocultural features, and temporal location. The physical environment would include such features as where certain activities take place (physical activity room, classroom) as well as the artifacts present and not present within this environment. Another feature essential to the physical environment is the relationship between researcher and participant. The sociocultural

elements of a narrative include the values, beliefs and social regulations of the participants and their environment, as well as the participants' race, class, ethnicity, gender and religion (Oliver, 1998). Finally the narrative needs to include the temporal location in its description. Temporal location is the "pattern of happenings" (Kvale, 1996) which exist as a position in history. These reflect the cultural norms that influence the unfolding of events. The temporal location helps to explain beliefs, traditions, perceptions and interpretation of experiences which are essential for drawing meaning from lives (Oliver, 1998).

The characters of a narrative represent the people who create the stories to be told. Oliver (1998) outlines two types of characters represented in narratives: main characters and supporting characters. Main characters are the primary focus for the researcher since they make up the stories to be told. It is the researcher's responsibility to describe the relationship between the main characters and their environment or setting. Supporting characters, in contrast, are not the main focus of the narrative. Their inclusion in the text is based on the extent of influence they have on the main characters. Supporting characters influence the thinking, feeling and actions of the main characters. "The degree of influence is directly related to the level at which the supporting characters are written into the narrative" (Oliver, 1998, p.253).

The plot of a narrative gives the story a point and a unity (Kvale, 1996). The plot "provides meaning to the narrative; it is the structure through which people understand and explain the relationship among the events and the choices of their lives" (Oliver, 1998, p.254). Through the integration of events and actions in the past, present and future, the researcher is able to derive meaning not otherwise seen in the data.

Data Analysis

Meaning Interpretation Meaning interpretation involves investigating data sources to derive meaning and/or perspectives from people's experiences. The researcher gains "a perspective on what is investigated and interprets the interviews from this perspective. The interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent in a text" (Kvale, 1996, p.201).

Although the goal of narrative inquiry is to derive meaning from people's experiences and stories, it is important to be aware of the plurality of interpretations and thus, provide alternative and multiple forms of representation. Many intellectuals have criticized the assumption that researchers hold the authority to tell other people's stories (hooks, 1991; Flax, 1992). Stories are interpretations of an individual's experience. These stories become interpreted again by the researcher where truth claims and representation may become 'foggy' and misunderstood. This concern has pushed researchers to become more self-reflective in their analysis of narratives. By providing multiple interpretations of narratives, we as researchers avoid claiming truth or objective meaning for people's experience.

Validity

With reference to the present study, validity refers to the "degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate" (Kvale, 1996, p.238). This research project intended to investigate and describe the experiences of self-esteem and body image from the standpoint of each woman participating in the EYSW. As well, the project intended to describe the experiences of self-esteem and body image experienced by each woman with reference to the EYSW. For example, the researcher intended to explore whether the program had any influence on the self-esteem and body image of the

participating women. The issue of validity arises when we address the question: how “true” is the researcher representing each woman’s experiences in her descriptions of them? Measures were taken to ensure that descriptions represented each woman’s experience as accurately as possible. First the researcher practiced self-reflexivity, where she continually reminded herself of her position as a human within the research, and how her interpretations of each experience were shaped by her own experience and identity. Finally, I included journal entries within the translations which provided further, a sense of intimacy and richness in each woman’s experience.

My Position as Researcher and Interpreter

Throughout this research process and integrated throughout this final document, I have included my own personal stories of experiences which not only shaped my sense of self-esteem and body image, but also influenced how I arrived at my own interpretations of the participants’ experiences. These stories often provide personal details of my own experiences but they are necessary to include so that you, the reader, can understand my position as researcher and interpreter of these five women’s lives.

This process of interpretation was sometimes difficult for me because often, I was extremely aware of how my own subjective experience influences my interpretation of others’ lives. Although I don’t claim absolute truth to the following stories, I believe the means by which I attempted to understand these women and their experiences were fair, thorough and intimate.

Personal Reflection: “Do the Thing You Think You Cannot Do”

In November of 1999, I returned home from an enlightening six-month journey through Europe with nothing to do. Everyday that I was away, whether I did nothing or everything, I felt as though I was giving myself an education. When I came home to live with my parents, I had no job, no direction and a slight regret of my previous accomplishments with the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies. I didn't want to be a fitness counselor or a personal trainer; I barely wanted anything to do with the industry. I felt it lacked an aspect of qualifying people's lives and experiences, which was something I felt I needed to pursue, and something I felt I was good at.

I was depressed. I went back to my old serving job at a café.

April 12, 2000

Everyday I feel less extraordinary, less exceptional. I can't remember the last time I felt enlightened. When I crawl into those moments, they are usually doubtful of my present existence. What am I doing, where am I living, where am I heading? I work 30 hours a week at a café that I love, love the people, love the laughs, but knowledge is so minimal and I feel that my mind has not been challenged in so long. But then I don't even know what I want to challenge it with.

There was something in the back of my mind. But it seemed highly unattainable. I believed in physical activity. I was interested in self-esteem. Mostly I was curious about how my own experiences of being active informed my self-esteem. There were other interests. I was currently involved in a workshop at the university called, “Explorations of the Self.” It involved a group of people getting together one afternoon a week to reflect on their experiences of self and how we might inform our sense of self positively. I strongly believed in this workshop and in “support” groups in general.

This thing in the back of my mind kept brewing. It became somewhat of a “dream.” I remember finally calling one of the advisors from the graduate studies

program in physical education and expressing an interest in pursuing a masters degree.

For some reason I began to cry to her on the phone. I think it was when she told me that it was actually a possibility that I could pursue my idea. One might think I would be happy about this possibility. And perhaps I was happy. But more so, I think it was her belief in my capabilities as an academic that provoked the tears. It had taken me a few months, I recall, to even make this kind of inquiry about pursuing a masters degree. Not because I didn't think my research idea was important, but because I didn't have the belief in myself that I could ever achieve this kind of academic caliber. There was a quote I stumbled upon shortly after this phone call: "Do the thing you think you cannot do." It was worth a try.

I was never much of a strong student. In elementary school I assumed such nick names as "Kim Simpleton," or they might refer to me as "Kim she's dim," or, "Kim's brain is like Teflon, nothing sticks". I've never been one to place blame for defeats in my life, but I'll certainly recall this as an experience that would later negatively inform my intellectual self-esteem. I never thought people referred to me as smart and so, I never referred to myself as someone who was academically gifted. I certainly had no place pursuing a masters degree. Even when things began to progress in my course work, I still didn't think I belonged in graduate studies. I told myself I was "just going through the motions," but that I'd never actually receive my degree. When people would ask what I was taking in school, it was fun for me to tell them I was "doing my masters," because for a few moments I knew they must be thinking I'm smart. I was fooling them all, I thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EXERCISE YOUR SELF WORKSHOP: A SUMMARY

Session 1: Orientation/Introduction

The first session of the Exercise Your Self Workshop (EYSW) was meant to be an introduction to the program. I wanted to clarify some of the vagueness that the participants might have been feeling about the content and intention of the workshop. As well, I felt it was very important to develop a positive rapport amongst the participants in this first session since we were going to be sharing a lot of personal things with each other. I allowed for two full hours of interaction this first night, leaving our first activity for the following week.

I had arranged for us to meet in room 117 of the Frank Kennedy Centre at the University of Manitoba. I liked this room because it was small, private, carpeted and had a softer feel than some of the other rooms I was offered. I arranged nine chairs in a circle in an attempt to create an informal feel amongst us. I felt as though a circle created a kind of equivalency amongst us. As well, I did not want to create a power difference between myself and the participants. I wanted to act as somewhat of a participant observer.

Everybody was on time, and upon their arrival I asked each woman to make themselves a nametag. I started by welcoming everybody to the EYSW and thanked them for their decision to participate. I explained what 'check-ins' were and how we would start each 'collective reflective' with them. For this first night however, I thought we would do an 'ice-breaking exercise' in order to get acquainted with each other. I asked each woman to break up into partners and discuss each other's lives for about five to 10 minutes. I then asked them to return to the circle and introduce their partners to the group. I asked them to share their partner's name, a little bit about who they are and to share

with the group something that their partner is proud of. This exercise was really successful in that each pair seemed to connect well. There was a lot of dialogue between each pair, so much so that I had to 'cut them off'. I noticed that many of the women felt proud of their children; another was also proud that she was going back to school.

I outlined the purpose of the workshop for the women and emphasized that the EYSW is not a weight loss program. I explained to them that it was my hope as a researcher and facilitator that by pairing physical activity with personal reflections of self-esteem and body image, the workshop may help enable the women to understand how physical activity is important for good self-esteem and healthy physical self-perceptions. I also emphasized my intentions within the group and explained that my role would not be that of 'teacher' but of facilitator. I suggested that I have as much to learn from them as we all have to learn from each other.

Together, we then established a list of group rules; things that were important for each woman to feel safe and comfortable sharing amongst themselves in the workshop. The list of the women's suggestions included: confidentiality, to have fun, to not judge others, to encourage each other, and to have respect for others. I was pleased with this list and suggested that we consider punctuality as an important item as well. We also established a list of group expectations. This was important for me to understand so that I could accommodate their wants and goals for the program. The groups expectations included the following: changing focus, learning about pilates, wanting to normalize your feelings, motivation to get going and adhere to physical activity, winding down, wanting to learn new ways of exercising without a focus on weight loss, discipline to journal, wanting a healthier lifestyle and healthier diet, tying in intellectual/emotional/mental

component of exercise, enhance self-esteem and body image, and knowing you're not alone.

I talked about journaling and explained that each week, I would outline a topic for the women to write about. I encouraged each woman to write as much as they could, but that I wouldn't be monitoring or 'marking' their progress. I had a positive response from the journaling; the women seemed excited and enthusiastic about the opportunity to write about personal reflections. I also noted that it was one of the women's personal goals to journal more.

We then did our 'check-outs' where I asked each woman to share a personal goal for the workshop. Dawn expressed wanting to improve her body image and Jane mentioned she wanted to gain confidence in speaking and to make friendship connections. Anna shared that she wanted to get into shape without going into what she called the "danger zone," which I understood as a place where she overexercises and becomes obsessed with exercising and dieting. I shared that my goal was to make the workshop fun for everyone so that the women want to adhere to the program.

Session 2

The scheduled activity for Session 2 was walking which turned out to be really positive. My intention was simply to start with an activity that was quite low impact. However, the walking helped establish good rapport amongst the group. It provided us with an opportunity to get to know each other while being active. Since there was six of us we seemed to pair off two by two where each pair got better acquainted. Yet at the same time, we all seemed to come together every once in a while and have a laugh or share something as a group. We walked for about 45 minutes in King's Park on a beautiful spring evening.

I reserved the second 'collective reflective' for 'probing'. I wanted to understand where the group was at as far as their physical activity habits, their personal barriers to being active as well as the messages they received as children and the messages we receive today about physical activity.

The group checked in. I asked them to share with the group their name, how they were feeling, and one positive thing that happened to them during the previous week. I opened the conversation by asking if anybody had any questions that were not addressed in the previous week or if anybody had any additional considerations for making the group more comfortable. There was no response to either from the group.

We started with a brainstorming exercise. I asked the group to talk about what kinds of messages we received as girls growing up about being involved in sport and physical activity. The following responses were shared by the group members:

- picking teams
- could/couldn't be as good as boys
- competitive environment
- not being included by boys
- being picked last
- felt not good enough
- "she hits like a girl"
- feeling competent
- increased participation
- sports are about winning or losing
- "participation" categories
- embarrassing moments.

As I returned to these responses I noted how these childhood reflections were mainly negative and assumed that such experiences would only discourage them from participating in their adult years. However, when I asked the group if these messages affected their participation today, the group's response was quite encouraging. Included in these responses were: no, I want to try things out, you gotta try, competition is less important than having fun. Several responses made reference to competition and their

aversion to it. Perhaps many of their childhood experiences revolved around competition instead of having fun and I wondered if this influenced their attitudes towards being active today.

I shifted the focus towards their present day activity behaviors and attitudes. I asked the group to brainstorm about how exercise makes them feel, both good and bad. The group offered the following remarks when I asked them to reflect on how activity makes them feel good: tired but energized, 'good' tired, rejuvenated, increased energy, sore (good sore), healthy, makes me eat better, extra effort into self and body. The following remarks were offered when I asked them to talk about how exercise makes them feel bad: guilty if you don't exercise, gym environment is not positive, makes you more weight conscious, taking exercise to extremes, can't do exercise if you're in a group.

I was also interested to know what prevents them from being active; that is, what were their personal barriers. Almost all of the women offered that time was a huge factor in their lack of participation. Others offered feelings of laziness. Another expressed not wanting to exercise alone. When I asked the group to reflect on how we can overcome these personal barriers, the following suggestions were offered: work with patterns, scheduling, baby steps so that it's not overwhelming, reasonable goals, don't expect to lose weight. I was intrigued by their awareness of ways to overcome their personal barriers and wondered still, why they weren't more active.

I wanted to talk about what encourages them to be active. I was both not surprised and discouraged by many of their responses. It appeared that much of their motivation to exercise was for appearance purposes. The groups responses included: beautiful bodies, Madonna, seeing family members, partners, positive influences and tight clothes.

I was also curious to understand how the group interpreted messages about exercise. I was initially surprised with their responses. I expected the group to be quite critical of the media's portrayal of exercise and bodies that exercise. Positive messages like "live healthy" and "participation" were amongst some of the group's initial responses. Somebody also offered that exercise has become "commercialized." However, one woman responded that the exercise industry helps us to understand that women have "problem areas" and what these problem areas are. It was as though she appreciated the media pointing these problem areas out to her so that she could work on them.

At this point I challenged the group to be critical of these messages we receive from the exercise industry. I asked them if they thought it was fair that the media inform women of their existing "problem areas." The responses I got after my own remarks were quite different than the initial contributions. One woman responded that the media "pick body parts of women and criticize it," another participant talked about Suzanne Somers and how exercise is all about "looking good." Other responses included "body beautiful," "body image, woman ideal." Other participants remarked how the media portrays women who are active as physically strong and that this was a desirable quality and a motivator for their participation.

Some of the women then also expressed their frustration over misinformation from the media and that one needs more instruction on how to be active properly rather than always being offered the "quick fixes" from the media.

This brainstorming activity was helpful for me to understand more about each participant's activity experiences. As well, I was happy for this first opportunity to challenge them about messages we, as women, receive about exercise and bodies from

the media. I was, however, disappointed with the time frame of the 'collective reflective.' I anticipated that this session would offer enough time to cover everything I had scheduled. We often appeared to be rushing through each question which didn't allow enough time to thoroughly reflect on each experience.

Following the brainstorm activity, I had the group fill out a "personal contract" that I had created which encouraged "self-care." After completing the contract, each woman read their statement aloud to the group.

After I gave the group their journal homework, we checked out. I asked each woman to address the following feelings in their check out: a) how did you feel about the activity?, b) how did it affect your self-esteem?, and c) how did you feel in your body? Some of the women remarked that the exercise made them "feel really good," "feel good in their body," "getting out there feels great" and that their "body feels rejuvenated." Others offered that "chatting with other group members" was positive. Another woman even suggested that the "talking/discussing was more beneficial than the exercise." The last woman to check out observed that the "group members were here for the same reasons but that we all come from different spaces" and that this would provide for a "supportive environment."

It appeared from this session that many of the women's main motivator for being active is to "look good." However, both Maggie and Cheryl alluded to different health related motivations for being active and expressed feelings of increased comfort in their bodies. Besides Jane, these two women were amongst the oldest in the group. They offered that age and experience contributes to these feelings of increased comfort and assurance in themselves and their bodies.

Session 3

Session 3 involved 'stretching for relaxation.' I wondered how the activity would be received by the group. Being a physical education graduate I had much knowledge about stretching. I wondered if it would be informative for them. As it turned out, the class was really positive. I had a good friend of mine, Sylvia, who is a physiotherapist come in and teach the group. She showed them several stretches involving all the major muscle groups, as well as other practical stretches for neck and back pain. It appeared that the class was very informative for the women. Some of the participants agreed they were happy to understand more about stretching and in particular, that the neck and back stretches would be "good to relieve headaches."

Session 3's 'collective reflective' involved talking about self-esteem. We checked in and I asked the group members to share their name and how they were feeling. The check-in lasted too long. Each woman took a long time to talk. I initially worried that this was a problem and wondered if I should remedy the time frame. However, I also felt that this length to check-in and to share was important to build rapport. As well, I took it as a good sign that everybody was feeling comfortable within the group enough to talk openly as they were.

In addition, I felt as though the content of their check-in was important for me understand further as well as to follow up on in the future. In the check-in many of the women expressed their anxiety of the upcoming summer and how much they disliked wearing summer clothes because they were revealing. I recall the women talking about how mini skirts had made a comeback in the fashion world. They expressed frustration that they were limited in what they could wear during the summer because of their "fat thighs" or "stretch marks." I took this as an opportunity to challenge them about how they

criticize their bodies. I said to the group, "somehow we've learned from the media, family, friends etc. to not like our bodies. Let's unlearn this."

Following the check in we talked about "What is Self-Esteem?" We brainstormed as a large group. I suggested that self-esteem meant how we value ourselves. As well, that it is made up of the thoughts and feelings one has about oneself. The group offered a number of suggestions which I recorded on our flipchart: acceptance of self, being comfortable with self, being proud of self and accomplishments, projecting an image of confidence, telling oneself that it is okay when you fail. As well, the group offered that self-esteem has to do with the way that you carry yourself as well as the way you project yourself. One woman suggested that self-esteem operates as a cycle; that if one projects low self-esteem, people will treat you as somebody with low self-esteem, and if one projects high self-esteem that people will treat you as an individual with high self-esteem. Another woman offered that low self-esteem involves believing negative things other people say about you.

After we felt we had a better understanding of what self-esteem was and what self-esteem meant to each participant, I talked about "Self-Esteem as Self-Image versus Ideal Self." I suggested that one way we define self-esteem is the difference between our self-image and our ideal self. I defined self-image as how we perceive ourselves; the picture we have of ourselves, or how we think and feel about ourselves. Conversely, I explained that our ideal self involves what we would like to be; the set of ideals about who we should be or should become as a person. I asked the group to journal about their own self-image and ideal selves.

Cheryl writes:

April 23/03

Self-Image I feel that I have come a long way. This year has been a year of healing and emerging as a more confident self-assured person. I still have my doubts about myself at times but experience and age have made me a more confident individual. I am finding more and more that I can say what I truly feel and in doing so become more of a truer me.

Ideal Self I think it would be nice to be at the point where the two meld. I know I am not there yet but I feel I am close to being there. My ideal self is being comfortable with myself and others around me.

Nancy writes:

<u>Self-Image</u>	<u>Ideal Image</u>
-feel OK	-self-assured
-look OK	- taken seriously
-nice	-confident
-sweet	
-helpful	

Maggie writes:

I see myself as a confident person, who is very secure with what I do. I am overweight for comfort, but still trying to accept that for now. I am comfortable with who I am and how I am perceived. Confident with self-insecure with body.

I would like to be more comfortable with my weight—however I need to drop some pounds to get to that place.

Dawn writes:

Self-Image:

I really piss myself off how I think @ times. It's up and down, good and bad and NEVER stable. Sometimes I feel like I'm "way too chubby to wear that!" Which is better than before-when I actually felt like the biggest cow around. And I how I've realized that I'm not even fat. I definitely don't like the way I look in certain things and when I go clothes shopping I get depressed. I also wish that my confidence was constant. Sometimes I can have such a great personality, and sometimes I'm a nervous wreck! What's up with that?

From Dawn's journal, it appeared that she didn't have time to write about her ideal self.

I brought the group back together to discuss how they found the exercise. I asked them what they discovered. One participant found that her ideal self had more confidence. Another woman expressed "wanting more guts," while others suggested that

by allowing oneself to say exactly what you feel is more true to yourself. Other suggestions offered that one's ideal self meant having consistency with one's confidence across many circumstances. As well, that one's ideal self was one that did not interpret messages about oneself so negatively.

I explained that the closer the distance between our self-image and our ideal self, the higher the self-esteem. I asked the group if in the exercise, they found these variables matched closely. There appeared to be a wide range of responses to this question. One woman said her ideal self and self-image were "totally opposite from each other," while others said theirs were "similar" and "getting there." Cheryl suggested that "age and experience brought mine closer together" while Jane offered that her self-image had "come a long way." Another woman mentioned that her self-image varies "depending on who she is with."

I then offered some suggestions as to how we may bring these two entities of self-image and ideal self closer together. Having realistic expectations for ourselves and understanding our potential as well as our limitations was important to achieve healthy self-esteem. As well, not measuring our value against others and not comparing ourselves to others is necessary for reaching our ideal selves. I suggested that "we are the authors of our own self-esteem" and that by defining our personal goals, values and objectives and by working towards them we can in turn, nourish our self-esteem. I asked the group to come up with some ideas of how we can "befriend" our ideal self; how can we come to love who we are? The group came up with the following list of suggestions:

- giving positive reinforcement to our self
- validating our feelings
- by joining women's groups similar to the EYSW
- experience and age brings us closer to our ideal self
- patience
- spontaneous self-care (taking care of your self)

An important dynamic took place in session three's 'collective reflective' discussion; a dynamic that I think reflects the importance of social support in women's group like the EYSW. I will share with you my own journal entry that I made immediately following session three's 'collective reflective.' The entry contains observations made within a particular discussion that took place that day. The focus of my observations were on the dynamic between Jane and Maggie. I first write about Jane.

Jane is very 'needy.' This group is probably very good for her especially the social support she receives from other women who offer her suggestions. Jane speaks often and often brings up her personal circumstances and her own insecurities. She said today, "Everywhere I go men find a way to treat me poorly." She appears very dependent on external sources of praise for her own self-esteem. She talked on Wednesday about how she can tell herself that she can do something or she is a good person, but then somebody will come along and tell her otherwise and she'll believe that. She often seeks 'answers' to her personal situation (what appears to be a mentally abusive and controlling husband as well as workplace abuse and insecurities) from the group. Maggie often responds to her assertively. Maggie said to Jane today, "You have to distance yourself from the people that don't make you feel good about yourself". Jane responded asking, "What if I don't have a choice but to be around these people?" Maggie was quick to react. "You always have a choice," she said. Jane did not respond but seemed to absorb Maggie's words somehow.

It was not clear how Jane interpreted Maggie's advice until a later time which I will address in Session 6.

I then gave the group their journal homework with the following questions to

address.

- 1) What are my personal goals in life? What do I want to achieve?
- 2) What do I need in order to achieve my personal goals?
- 3) What do I value?
- 4) What do I need in order to live in accordance with my values?

I mentioned that it was important to realize that self-esteem is always evolving and changing. As well, that it was optimistic to know that one can improve and enhance their self-esteem at any age.

Before we checked out we read together as a group, the "Declaration of Self-Esteem," each taking a turn with each paragraph. I also gave them a "Be good to yourself" handout, which offered many self-care suggestions. We finished by each checking out and addressed how we felt about the activity, how it affected our self-esteem, and how it made us feel in our bodies. One woman mentioned feeling better connected with herself, another said she felt more self-aware. Another offered that the stretching exercise was "relaxing and that it took her mind off life."

Session 4

The activity scheduled for Session 4 was low impact aerobics. I hired an acquaintance from my undergrad degree in physical education, whom I knew was an experienced aerobics instructor, to teach the class. We spoke a few times prior to the date of her class, whereby I indicated to her the level of fitness the group was at. I was clear that the class be low impact, and that many of the women in the group were sedentary.

Unfortunately, the "pitch control" on the stereo system was broken that day. This allows one to control the speed of the music in turn controlling the intensity of the workout. There wasn't much we could do to compensate. We went ahead with the class. As the class commenced, I began to realize the intensity of the workout was

cardiovascularly too challenging for most of the women. Although I felt I was in pretty good shape, the workout was certainly a challenge for me. As well, many of the women did not have much experience with standard aerobics moves like the “grapevine” etc. It was unfortunate because Maggie in particular appeared to be frustrated. Others were quite flushed and almost the entire group lacked the coordination necessary to have a good flow to the workout. These concerns were expressed to me after the workout. One woman wished that the instructor had reviewed basic moves like “grapevine,” and reminded me that not everyone was familiar with or had ever participated in an aerobics class. I took this into account. What perhaps failed most about this activity was the intensity level. It appeared, however, there was no way to avoid this since the pitch control was inoperable.

In ‘collective reflective’ we were to discuss “Women of Color and Culture.” The previous year I had volunteered as a volunteer speaker with the Women’s Health Clinic in Winnipeg. I made several connections with this experience. There I met Priah who was developing a talk specifically geared to women of color and culture, educating them to critique and challenge traditional white media stereotypes. I thought this talk would be informative to the participants since there were a wide variety of cultural backgrounds that made up our group. Priah introduced herself to the group and as an opening exercise had us stand in a line and identify ourselves with different cultural backgrounds. She would call out “Scottish”, “German”, “African”, “Aboriginal” and so forth. If we identified ourselves with any of the nationalities she called out, we would have to walk to the other side of the room and then back to the line. When we sat down, Priah asked if we were comfortable identifying ourselves with each culture or statement. The group agreed that they felt quite comfortable identifying with each statement because of the nature of

the group. They admitted however, that in another circumstance they wouldn't necessarily be as comfortable.

Priah shifted gears and talked about how beauty is different across cultures; for example, in North America a particular "ideal" feminine image of beauty may not transcend into a different culture. What we may consider beautiful here, in another country, beauty may be culturally defined quite differently. Priah asked the group who we thought an "ideal" woman of color was. One participant suggested that Oprah Winfrey was "ideal," whereas others offered that Halle Berry or Jennifer Lopez were more "ideal" women of color. Priah commented on the lack of women of color on the cover of magazines. She suggested that society sees women of color as "exotic" and that when we hear women referred to as exotic we often think of Asia or another distant country. This seemed to strike a cord with Nancy. "I don't like the word exotic," she said. "It's not a compliment because I just feel second string beautiful. Why can't you just say I'm beautiful?" She continued to talk about how it is idealized to be blonde and Caucasian, and wondered, "Am I just one of the token Asian girls getting into the [medicine] faculty?" The other women of the group didn't seem to relate to Nancy's experience. They suggested that "exotic" is only meant as a compliment of Nancy's unique beauty. Nancy also talked about her struggles within her own Filipino community. Her peers suggested that she had integrated herself too much into the white culture. Her friends referred to her as "Banana; yellow on the outside, white on the inside."

Cheryl encountered different cultural experiences. She describes herself as a bit "Heinz 57...My father's side is quite English...with Native quite far back. My mom's side...her father was Scottish and his father was Metis...My grandmother's side was Welsh and Spanish." Cheryl appeared white and explained that her [real] name was of

aboriginal descent and that her mother “changed the native way of writing [it] so that it didn’t look native.” She wondered if she had ever been discriminated against simply because of her name.

Maggie, whose appearance was also white, described her unique experience. Her background is Inuit and explained that she and her family were referred to as “raw meat eaters.” While her father “was told to hide the culture,” he appeared to pass on a sense of ethnic pride to his children. Maggie seemed to affiliate with his sense of pride and explained “I thought it was kind of cool because my dad was always around teaching about the culture.”

I felt the session was important for the group. However, I wasn’t sure if the subject matter resonated with many of the women. Since I had two aboriginal women that discontinued their participation, Nancy was the only woman who was not ‘white’. I wondered if it was difficult for the remaining four women to understand Nancy’s experience as a woman of color.

Session 5

Pilates was the scheduled activity for Session 5. It seemed many of the women were looking forward to learning about pilates as none of them had tried it before. I was also looking forward to the pilates since I was to teach it and it would be my first attempt at teaching such a class.

My concern after this first pilates session was that the activity may have appeared slow. Since pilates emphasizes five major principles in executing the exercises efficiently and correctly, I wanted to make sure that the participants have a good understanding of these principles before getting into more challenging exercises. The response from the class did not reflect my concern. The feedback I got from the group was positive; they

had enjoyed the activity. However, they did express frustration in their lack of body awareness and an inability to move their bodies in the way that the exercises required. I did offer to them that pilates was very “complicated” exercise, and that body awareness and strength comes with time and further understanding. I hoped that these variables would progress in the following pilates session next week.

During my volunteering with the Women’s Health Clinic I also made acquaintances with Angele. Angele was well versed on matters of dieting and weight preoccupation. I felt that body image and weight preoccupation were very closely linked and therefore, wanted to introduce weight preoccupation to the group. Angele had given many talks to young women around the city at various schools and I felt that her knowledge and experience would be of benefit to the group.

Angele introduced herself to the group and opened the discussion by asking them: “Where does body image come from?” A variety of responses were offered; parents, family, friends, society and media were some of the initial replies. As well, the women suggested that advertising, pictures, manikins, malls and magazines were also sources of body image. Jane suggested that “what men think” influences body image as well.

Angele followed this brainstorming exercise by handing out a “true or false” questionnaire regarding weight control myths and fallacies. The questionnaire addressed the following statements:

1. We can change our bodies to what we want them to be.
2. Diets give you energy.
3. Fat people do not try hard enough to lose weight.
4. Being fat is unhealthy.
5. Diets make you beautiful.
6. Women who become anorexic or bulimic are mentally ill.
7. Diets make you happier and healthier.
8. Being thin has always been considered beautiful.

The group responded to the questionnaire individually. Angele then reviewed each statement with the group whereby we had a brief discussion about each. All correct responses to the questionnaire were false. Angele felt this exercise was important to address some of the myths about diets and weight preoccupation. Since many of the women maintained some of these statements were true, I felt that the exercise was beneficial as well.

Angele proceeded to illustrate the “diet cycle” to the group. She outlined why dieting is potentially dangerous and emphasized a “diets don’t work” philosophy. I felt that this viewpoint also reflected the philosophy of the EYSW. The EYSW provides women with tools and ideas to help them accept and celebrate their bodies and themselves for who they are and what they look like. As well, the workshop discourages modifying or altering one’s physical or personal characteristics in order to fit society’s ideal of what women should be or what women should look like. In addition to supporting evidence that diets can be dangerous, I felt Angele’s talk was again, appropriate for the EYSW participants.

Following this discussion, Angele distributed a “Why do we need fat?” handout on which the following points were made:

- It provides the body with fatty acids which are needed to keep the body functioning.
- Every cell in the body requires fat to function normally.
- It insulates-maintains our normal body temperature.
- It cushions our bones and inner organs.
- It is involved in the production of bile-a digestive juice.
- It provides a necessary, compact store of energy.
- Without this store of energy, a woman will not menstruate normally.
- It aids in the production of the hormone estrogen which is needed to keep the bones strong and healthy (as well as to menstruate).

Angele reviewed the handout with the group. I also felt this was an encouraging contribution for the discussion of weight preoccupation. It seems that we have become a

fat fearing society, conditioned to avoid it at all costs. Women especially in their conquests to lose weight learn to avoid fat, when really we are often misunderstood about its vital role in our health.

Mid-way through the 'collective reflective', Angele prompted a discussion about weight preoccupation and dieting. Jane was an active contributor in the discussion giving me the impression that she had struggled a lot with dieting and weight preoccupation. The focus of the discussion seemed to revolve around Jane. Her first comment was very interesting to me. She said, "The only way I get compliments is if I look good." I felt as though this comment was very indicative of women's presence and role in society and represented the gap between women and men. Where men are reinforced for their professional accomplishments, physical strength and financial endeavors, women are often praised for their physical appearance. I felt her comment was very important.

Jane continued to speak of her experiences with dieting and her lack of enthusiasm for her physical appearance. She implied that in her struggle to reach her physical fitness and diet goals she adopted a "no pain, no gain" type of attitude. She found however, that it was a losing battle. "I tried to diet," she said, "but I ended up very miserable and depressed...I could feel myself going into a depression...and I feel guilty after binging." Jane also joked that she could "get bigger boobs so that I don't look so big...if I had bigger boobs, the focus would be more on that than my belly."

She continued to express a dissatisfaction with her physical appearance and referred to the low impact aerobics activity we did the previous week. "That's why I didn't like that exercise last week," she said, "because all I saw was me in the mirror and I thought, 'am I that big?'"

What was perhaps most distressing for me about Jane's experience was the question she addressed to the group regarding how to overcome her poor self image. She asked, "What if somebody has told you that you were the ugliest person alive?" It was hard to know how to react to this question; I was grateful that there were others to offer her words when sometimes I could not. It was as if Jane believed every negative thing that anybody had ever said about her. I reflected on my own experience and recognized that as a child, I had been given the tools and self-esteem to positively inform myself and to disregard such abusive and false remarks. I referred to Jane's interviews and all that I had learned about her and her childhood. I felt both compassion for her and frustration that she could not see past her abusers own insecurities. Cheryl attempted to offer words of support for Jane. She suggested to Jane that "you'll never satisfy everybody" and as women we must "be positive with ourselves and positive with other people [and] don't pick ourselves apart."

Session 6

Session 6's activity was also dedicated to pilates. I chose to set aside two sessions for pilates because of the level of difficulty of the activity. This decision was well received by the participants because it seemed that many of them were interested particularly in learning this task.

My pilates lesson plan consisted of going over the five basic principles as well as reviewing the exercises that we had done last week, and perhaps introduce one or two new exercises. The response I received from this class was positive and more encouraging than the previous pilates session. The women mentioned that they felt more competent performing the exercises because they had a better understanding of them. As well, it appeared that their body awareness had also improved. In our check-in's during

'collective reflective' both Cheryl and Nancy mentioned that they felt an increase in their self-esteem after the pilates activity because they "felt more competent this time around" performing the exercises. It appeared that this increase in feelings of physical competence was derived from a feeling that their "bodies could move in the ways that the exercises required."

There were other encouraging observations I made during check-in's in the 'collective reflective'. Cheryl mentioned that she felt quite tired prior to the activity class, but the "pilates rejuvenated me" she said. Maggie's contribution was also encouraging. After our discussion about weight preoccupation the previous week, Maggie mentioned talking to her daughter about dieting: "My daughter is on the 'Slim Fast' shakes. I said to her 'you're not going to make a habit out of this are you?'" It appeared that the previous week's discussion had impacted Maggie. Not only had it positively influenced her, Maggie was able to pass along this awareness to her daughter.

What really struck me as being important was what Jane mentioned in her check-in. She made reference to a dynamic I have previously outlined which occurred in Session 3. To refresh the readers memory the discussion began with Jane expressing that "everywhere I go men find a way of treating me poorly." She continued to speak of her life circumstance living with an emotionally abusive husband as well as other kinds of abuse and insecurities she experiences at her place of employment. Maggie suggested to Jane that she needed to "distance yourself from the people that don't make you feel good about yourself." When Jane asked, "What if I don't have a choice but to be around these people?", Maggie responded, "you always have a choice." Jane referred back to this discussion in her check in. She said "I was thinking about what the other group members had said about distancing yourself from the people that don't make me feel good about

myself.” It appeared that Jane had positively reflected on the support and suggestions that she received from Maggie that day. Jane would later recall, in our second interview, this experience as being important in positively informing her self-esteem. “That [discussion] made me feel better,” she recalled.

The scheduled discussion for Session 6’s ‘collective reflective’ was ‘What is Body Image?’ We opened up the floor by brainstorming as a group about what body image meant to us. The group offered a variety of responses which I recorded on the flipchart:

- the way we perceive our body
- the way others perceive your body
- the way we feel about other people’s bodies
- personal preferences of bodies
- basing opinions of people by how they look/dress
- dress to enhance body image

I elaborated on these definitions and suggested that body image was not necessarily the way we look, but the way we think we look compared to the way we think we *should* look. And that perhaps our goal might be to line up our feelings about our body with how we think we should look. I continued to suggest that one way we might do this is by accepting the way we look as we are. I then asked the group to think about where body image comes from. I recorded what the group said. We all agreed that body image comes mainly from our family, our peers, coworkers and especially the media. I wanted to elaborate on how the media influences our body image and suggested how it was important for us to understand how the media manipulates people, especially women, into believing that we do not look good enough the way we are. By understanding that this process is done very systematically by the media, it might help us to accept ourselves as we are.

I then did an exercise I learned from volunteering at the Women's Health Clinic. I drew what was meant to be a cover of a fashion magazine and had the group respond to questions I asked about the content of this particular cover. I asked for example, what does the model on the cover of the magazine look like and what is she wearing? I recorded their responses:

- perfect
- tanned
- glowing
- sheer top
- air brushing
- no zits

I then asked the group what kinds of articles are featured in the magazine?

- “how to get men”
- “how to please your man”
- “things to do in bed”
- “exercise tips”
- token recipe article
- “beauty tips”
- “diet tips”
- “fashion tips”

After we analyzed the fashion magazine, I asked the group what the assumptions of the magazine were; what are the things that are unsaid by the magazine, or the things that the magazine assumes about its consumer. I suggested that some things the magazine assumes is that we should pay a lot of attention to the way we look, that there is only one acceptable type of beauty, that if one does not look like the ‘ideal image’ that one does not have access to happiness or success, that if we do not fit the ‘ideal image’ we should try and change the way we look to fit the ideal and finally that if we try hard enough we can change the way we look to fit the ‘ideal image’. The group contributed the following as other assumptions the magazine holds:

- women all have low self-esteem
- that we're all fat

- if we're single we should find a man
- we should focus on looks, perfection and sex
- we should be depressed if we don't measure up to the ideal image

Dawn added something I thought was interesting and new. She noted that although the magazines emphasize dieting, fitness and beauty, other media venues as well as magazines always feature food in their advertising. There is "food on TV all the time" she said, and therefore "eating is always on the mind." Her point was that it seemed contradictory that there was "so much focus on food as well as dieting" in advertising. Another woman suggested that "as long as we fail, we'll keep buying." I took this opportunity to follow up on this important theme in the media. I suggested that the magazines tell us that the way we look is not good enough and that the media depends on women 'failing' to achieve the ideal body and beauty so that we keep buying their product in our quest to achieve the ideal. In a sense, I continued, the media depends on women to have low self-esteem and unhealthy body images so that their industry can keep profiting. "If we always felt good about our self-image, we wouldn't have any need to buy their products," I finished.

The discussion continued informally without any structure provided by me. I noticed that the group laughed together about this topic which I thought must be encouraging. I thought, "good to 'make light' about a sometimes very serious issue." I also sensed that the group needed to talk about these issues which affect them on a very regular basis. It was at these times during the workshop that I believed so much in the space that the EYSW was providing. It was offering an opportunity for women to come together and expel, laugh, get angry even, at the injustices of the media and other variables which strip women of their positive sense of self. Perhaps just as important, is

the opportunity for each woman to realize that in some way their experience is shared; they are not alone.

It was in this discussion that I again, observed something about Maggie and Cheryl. They seemed to stand out from the rest of the group. They were two of the three older women in the group; about 18 years Nancy and Dawn's senior who were both 25. They appeared to be quite confident and comfortable with themselves and tended to not focus on their body image as much as the others. Where Jane, Dawn and Nancy might complain about their body 'imperfections', Maggie and Cheryl often offered something like, "You'll get over it" or "in time you just learn to just accept your body." Cheryl often suggested that age and experience helped her become comfortable with her self-image. Maggie and Cheryl were also highly educated and were very established in their careers. I wondered if this emphasis on academic and professional successes provided them with a strong sense of self which focused less on their physical appearance.

I wrote the following in my own journal after Session 6.

Cheryl and Maggie stand out somehow in comparison to the rest of them. They just seem very comfortable and accepting of their bodies and selves, especially Cheryl in both body and self-image. More so Maggie in self-confidence than body image. They've come to accept themselves as is. Perhaps, it seems, they both place much importance on their jobs and the career skills and education obtained, that their body image isn't as important.

I facilitated a visualization for the group called "Imaginary Mind Mirror" from a book I found called "Transforming Body Image: Love the Body You Have." The visualization involved each woman imagining looking at their body's reflection in the mirror and reflecting to themselves about how they felt about certain aspects of their

body. I then had each woman fill out a worksheet handout which contained the following questions and responses from each participant.

1) What can you tell about this person from the way she holds herself?

Jane- Even though her body isn't perfect, she can be a lot of fun, she loves to laugh.

Cheryl- She feels good about herself. I have to remember to keep my shoulders back and down.

Dawn- Sometimes she is confident.

Nancy- She's confident and comfortable with herself.

Maggie- Confident, sure of self.

2) How does this person in the mirror appear to feel about herself and her body?

Jane- Not too bad.

Cheryl- She feels good about herself.

Dawn- Not great all the time, however, not bad all the time either.

Nancy- She feels great, no hang ups.

Maggie- Comfortable, okay with self, dresses for shape.

3) What feelings come up for you as you look at your body?

Jane- I wish I could stay slimmer.

Cheryl- At first I was shy to look at myself but then I thought I don't look too bad for an old chick.

Dawn- I wish I could love my body all the time.

Nancy- That I have problem areas ie. abdominal, inner thighs. Arms.

Maggie- It's okay, not perfect but okay.

4) What judgments do you form as you look at your body?

Jane- I don't know why I can't stay slim.

Cheryl- I am not judging as I work with old people and see many naked bodies of all shapes and sizes, scarred etc. so I feel comfortable about my body.

Dawn- How can I improve certain spots?

Nancy- I need to work on these areas.

Maggie- Just that maybe better posture would help with back pain, therefore I would stand tall.

5) What do you like about your body? What do you dislike?

Jane- My soft skin is very soft, I don't like my veins and stretch marks and scars.

Cheryl- I think the only thing I dislike is my stomach, but I have to come to accept that.

Dawn- I like my hair, face, lips, nose, eyes, the general shape of my body, and my calves. I dislike that I need to tone certain areas like my thighs, bum, hips, arms, stomach.

Nancy- I like my skin and eyes (face). I don't like my legs, abdomen and thighs.
 Maggie- I like my small bones and that I gain weight in proportion. I dislike my thighs.

6) What areas of your body do you focus on?

Jane- My face, my waist.

Cheryl- My stomach.

Dawn- My stomach, hips, thighs, and ass in certain things. I guess it really depends on what I'm wearing, sometimes I focus on my back fat or arms.

Nancy- Face.

Maggie- Stomach and butt. Preconditioned.

I then gave the group a "challenge for the week." I anticipated that this particular challenge might be near impossible but nevertheless, felt it was important to attempt. I had the group "imagine for one day, that nobody ever told you anything about your body; good or bad. Imagine that there was no family, no friends and especially no media to provide you with any information about your body." I asked the group to try the exercise and then journal about their experience with it.

Our check-out was very brief because of a lot of time dedicated to the session's scheduled activities.

Session 7

The group shared my excitement for Session 7. We were doing the first of two yoga classes. I hired an instructor whom I found through one of the yoga organizations in Winnipeg. Carla was just finishing her certification to teach, and was recommended to me by her teacher as one of her top students.

It was as though the yoga was most suited to the participants of the workshop. It was slow, relaxing and emphasized stretches which all the women really seemed to enjoy. All of us left the activity feeling very relaxed, yet rejuvenated. We talked about our favorite poses and how good they felt. When we checked in for 'collective reflective' Jane mentioned that she "felt great after yoga."

I wanted to talk about the 'Importance of high Self-Esteem and Healthy Body Images' in 'collective reflective' for Session 7. I felt that, as a group, we understood what both constructs meant at this point. However, I also felt that understanding how self-esteem and body image affect our lives was important. Perhaps a further understanding of how self-esteem and body image influences women's lives would motivate the participants to engage in behaviors and activities that would enable growth in these two health variables.

I thought it would be beneficial to have the group each fill out a handout of their individual responses to self-esteem and its role and influence in their lives. I've often wondered if people reflect on their periods of high and low self-esteem and if they are able to determine how and whether or not these fluctuations influence the way they behave and interact with their environment. I also wondered if this awareness motivates them to improve their sense of self worth. In my own experience, poor behavior and choices are often influenced by a lower sense of self worth. Perhaps drawing more awareness to these circumstances with the group members would enable them to enhance their self-esteem. The handout addressed the following questions which we discussed and recorded as a group after the women were given time to reflect on the questions individually.

Handout: The Importance of Self-Esteem and Healthy Body Images

1) Why does it matter if you have low or high self-esteem?/Why is self-esteem important to you?

- self-esteem allows you to accomplish tasks; basic and daily tasks.
- self-esteem is important because others see you as the way you portray yourself to others. ie. career.
- if one doesn't feel good about oneself, you may criticize others.
- if you're comfortable with who you are, then others can become comfortable with who they are.

- self-esteem is important because low self-esteem is painful.
- self-esteem is important because it allows you to be who you are and to be proud of who you are.

2) What does your low self-esteem look like?

-I'm constantly picking my flaws.

a) How does it affect the way you live in your body?

-I drag myself, I have no energy, no voice.

-you can't look in the mirror because you feel ugly.

-I walk slumped, I have no glow.

b) How does it affect your relationships with other people?

-you don't spend time with other people so you won't get hurt.

c) How does it affect the way you see yourself?

-I'm not happy with person I live with.

-makes you feel ashamed for not choosing what you think is right in your heart.

-I feel unimportant.

d) How does it affect your potential?

-you let other people rule you, take advantage of you, because you're not confident in own your choices so you let somebody else do it for you.

-I'm afraid to speak up for fear of looking stupid.

3) What does your high self-esteem look like?

-doing things you think you cannot do.

-forcing self to do the things you think you cannot do, so to realize that you can do it, which builds confidence.

I also provided some examples to these questions and elaborated more on why it might matter if we have high or low self-esteem. I suggested that low self-esteem involves holding on to negative thoughts or identifications of ourselves which prevent us from pursuing things that we might benefit or grow from. I found an exercise which addressed self-identifications in the book "Love the Body You Have." The exercise was called "cloaks of identity." It involved each participant naming their own negative self-identifications that may be destructive to their body and or their life. The negative self-identification may also be preventing them from pursuing something they may perceive as challenging. In this visualization, each participant was required to identify what role

these negative self-identifications were playing in their lives. How did it feel to be defined by this identification? What were the consequences and ramifications of being defined this way? How does the identification limit you? Once these questions were reflected upon, the visualization directed each participant to 'let go' of this identification as if one were 'taking off a cloak'.

When we were finished the visualization, I gave the group their journal homework which also reflected upon negative self-identifications. Again, we had a brief check-out due to time constraints.

Session 8

The women were again, excited about the yoga activity scheduled for Session 8. In our check-in for 'collective reflective,' many of us agreed that the yoga was very relaxing but rejuvenating at the same time. I thought the activity provoked the most positive response from the women.

I wanted to discuss the development of our self-esteem and body image in Session 8. I thought it was important to understand our childhood influences, how they might have been positive or negative, and how we might 'let go' of these negative influences in order to grow. I handed out a worksheet which required that the women reflect on their childhood influences. It contained the following questions:

Self-Esteem/Body Image Development

1. Who/What most influenced the development of your self-esteem/body image as a child?
2. Was this influence a positive or negative one?
3. What were the major message(s) you received from this influence?
4. Does this influence still affect your self-perceptions today? If so, how?

We addressed these questions as a group after they had individually answered the

worksheet. When I asked them to talk about what childhood messages they encountered growing up, a variety of responses were offered. Jane's messages appeared to be mostly negative. She said her mother called her "fat" and "used God to scare me." Maggie, standing at five feet two inches told us she was always referred to as "cute" because she was so tiny. Cheryl and Nancy's experience appeared to be very positive. Cheryl told the group of how her grandmother always enforced education and placed less emphasis on her physical features as being important. As well, Cheryl shared experiences of her mother with us. When she became a teenager she felt like a "satellite" because she had to "reevaluate things I learnt from my mother...so I went with what my peers said...they reaffirmed things for me." Nancy shared much of her childhood experiences with us as well. "I was the firstborn, which helped my self-esteem because my grandparents were very loving," she said. Her childhood "was very positive. My parents and grandparents spent a lot of time with me doing crafts, activities and stuff. I always felt, no matter what, I was loved, accepted and wanted."

I wanted to spend some time talking about what factors prevent us from letting go of some of the negative messages we may have received as a girl growing up. It appeared as though some of the participants, in particular Jane, had a hard time liberating herself from these negative, often abusive childhood messages. Nancy reiterated how her childhood was quite positive, but that she had a "hard time adjusting when she moved to Canada" from the Philippines at a young age. When we talked about barriers in letting go, many women agreed time was a factor. I thought about Jane and Maggie's shared experience of abusive partners. I wondered about how each woman dealt differently with their circumstance. Where Maggie appeared to be stronger because of her experience, Jane seemed to be withering away.

One of the women mentioned that it was “hard to let go of the patterns because they were comfortable.” Another participant offered that it was important to have an understanding and “realization of the pattern in order to change it.” Maggie also mentioned something that I felt was interesting. She spoke of being oppressed and coming to a realization and a “knowing when wrong had occurred.” Perhaps it is quite often that oppressed women are not even aware of the power dynamic between themselves and their oppressor. How does one remove oneself from this dynamic if one does not know that it is wrong? I wondered if this was the case with Jane.

We had a lengthy discussion about our childhood experiences and barriers in letting go. I had scheduled a visualization which related to the topic, but the group seemed so enthralled in conversation, I felt perhaps, it was more important to allow the discussion to continue. As well, there was not a lot of time left.

I gave the group journal homework which related to family and other influences growing up. When we checked out, there was a lot of positive response to the yoga session. One woman also referred to her absence from the workshop last week, saying, “When I didn’t come last week I felt like I didn’t do anything.” Another woman responded to this and said, “I didn’t want to come today, but I knew I’d feel better after I came, and I did.”

Session 9

I was curious and excited about Session 9. I knew at some point I had to introduce the group to some form of resistance training; I felt this aspect of physical activity was also important. I did not have access to weight machines, but noticed that the dance studio had several “big ball’s” hanging from the ceiling. As well, I knew they had a lot of flex bands which are great for strengthening exercises. I wasn’t well versed in either of

these mediums, but had another physiotherapist friend, Ian, who was. I asked the group several weeks ago how they would feel about a male coming into the EYSW environment. I didn't want them to be uncomfortable, and I didn't want it to change the positive dynamic of the group. It appeared they were not uncomfortable at all, but instead quite excited. They joked, asking, "Is he cute? Is he single?" Maggie even asked, after I told the group that Ian was also a paramedic, "Can he wear his uniform to class?"

The class's response to the activity was extremely positive. Ian introduced us to several exercises both with the flex bands as well as the "big balls." I was encouraged by the group's response and knew that these kinds of activities were highly accessible to them; they could acquire their own equipment and do it on their own at home. We had several laughs throughout the class, foremost because of our lack of strength to perform the exercises, having to contort our bodies in compromising positions. As well, these compromising body positions seemed to be compounded by the fact that there was a male in our presence supervising our performance. It was a little embarrassing for me, and Ian is a very good friend of mine.

I felt that we had spent a lot of time talking about self-esteem and body image; what they are, how they are developed, what influences both etc. What I felt was most important now, was how to combat low self-esteem and unhealthy body perceptions; how can we empower ourselves beyond the negative influences and negative self talk such that we can positively inform ourselves? My topic therefore, for Session 9 was "Creating Positive Visualizations/Self-Care."

I introduced the topic and suggested that creating positive visualizations was all about taking care of ourselves; we want to turn our negative perceptions of ourselves into positive perceptions. I reiterated that much of our self-image comes from how we talk to

ourselves. We can experience self-doubt and self-rejection by talking negatively to ourselves. I asked the group to brainstorm about what 'creating positive visualizations' might mean. The group came up with the following suggestions:

- positive music helps to bring yourself up. For example: "I will survive" (Bee Gee's)
- talking positive to self, telling yourself you deserve things, talking yourself 'up'
- having positive conversations with yourself
- surrounding yourself with positive people
- kicking yourself in the butt to motivate self
- bringing yourself closer to your ideal self
- wanting better/more for yourself

I wanted to provide the group with some sort of tool to change their negative self-talk into positive self-talk; something a little more concrete to help them work through their negative self-talk. I gave them an exercise to do individually, which outlined steps they might take to change their negative self-talk into positive self-talk.

I then introduced 'self-care' to the group. I suggested that self-care can influence the choices we make for ourselves. I discussed a theory which I had come up with on my own called the 'circle of self-esteem and self-care' which suggests that the more good we do for ourselves the better we feel about ourselves and in turn, the more good things we do for ourselves. I provided an opportunity for the group to come up with examples of self-care. I asked them, "What do you do to take care of yourselves?" The group came up with the following examples:

- pedicures, manicures, hygiene
- get a maid
- go for walks, runs
- spending money, buying outfits
- aromatherapy, candles
- talking to someone, counseling
- keep busy, plan ahead
- gardening
- bath
- make yourself pretty
- venting with friends

- animals make me feel better
- spending time with my daughter
- winding down with a glass of wine

I gave the group journal questions which again, related to what we had discussed that day: combating negative self-talk and self-care strategies. We checked out.

Session 10

I was both excited and a little sad about Session 10. It seemed as though the group had gotten very close over the last 10 weeks, and I knew this was probably going to be one of the last times we would all be together as a group. The last session also symbolized accomplishment for me. The workshop was something I had been scheming and planning for, for many years now. I had a sense of disbelief that one of my 'dreams' was coming to a close.

I wanted to do something fun and celebratory for the last session. I had asked the group several weeks ago how they might like participating in a hip hop dance activity for the last session. They were keen. A good friend of mine was quite experienced in teaching dance, and was currently taking hip hop dance classes at a local studio. She was quite responsive when I asked her to facilitate a class for the participants.

The hip hop was interesting. It reminded me of the aerobics session we did many weeks ago. Maggie, who appeared frustrated with her lack of coordination in the aerobics class, displayed similar emotions. Cheryl and Jane appeared awkward and out of their element, but still had smiles on their faces. The younger of the participants, Nancy and Dawn, appeared to be having a really good time, and probably benefited most from the activity.

The response I got from the hip hop dance was mixed. Since hip hop can be quite provocative at times, requiring quick, elusive and sometimes sexy body moves, some of

the women, namely Maggie, Cheryl and Jane felt a little uncomfortable. Perhaps however, because hip hop was more 'generation appropriate' for Nancy and Dawn, they responded with more enthusiasm.

As I mentioned previously, I wanted Session 10 to be somewhat celebratory. After we checked in, I initiated an exercise called 'Celebrating Selves' which posed the question "what if we had 'married' ourselves before we 'married' another?" In other words, what if we had committed and devoted ourselves to our self, before devoting our lives to a partner or other people. How might we be different? We brainstormed. The response I got, particularly from Maggie and Cheryl, was very interesting and I felt as though it was one of those important times that I learned from the women in the group. Some of the women responded that if they would have committed to themselves first, they would have avoided "unhealthy things" or they would have led a "richer life." It was however, what Maggie and Cheryl said, that struck me as very important. They agreed that, "In order to know 'good', one needs to experience the bad." Maggie elaborated: "The process of knowing yourself better involves making mistakes in order to know how to make good choices." I agreed, and thought, "Was this a bad exercise?"

I read to the group "Succulent Wild Woman: Dancing With Your Wonderful Self" which I obtained from a workshop I participated in at the Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre. "Succulent Wild Woman" is a short story which celebrates women alone, emphasizing, "We must become the women that we are first, before entering fully into a relationship." The story of one woman's experience alone unfolds until she decides to "marry herself." She writes, "It seemed time to be in union with myself, so I performed a metaphorical marriage, and promised to love and honor myself until the end." I thought it would be appropriate if each of us did this. It seemed appropriate to create a small

ceremony for ourselves, sending each other off with self-love and devotion. I asked the women to write vows to themselves, encouraging them to use traditional marriage language, "I promise to...etc." After the women were finished, I asked each to recite their vows aloud to the group. This exercise was really successful. Some of us even found ourselves a little emotional.

I wanted to give something back to the group. I gave each participant a 'celebrating women' card in which I tried to convey how important and special each of their contributions were to the group. I also gave each of them a rose. I took some more time to thank all of them for giving their time and souls to my project. It was hard for me to express just how grateful I was for their enthusiasm in their participation. Also, because we had gotten so close as a group, I felt that something very special had occurred in the EYSW. I thought, how fortunate I was to have had such a fabulous group!

Before we said goodbye, we made plans to get together the following week for dinner and drinks.

Personal Reflection: Personal Velocities

November 15, 2002

*When one can't inspire oneself, she turns to others for strength.
When one perceives that no other is there, she crumbles a bit.*

The end of the year 2002 was marked with loss. The new-year was marked with more. These losses and other challenging life circumstances forced me to appreciate and understand how important the presence of significant others are for my sense of self-esteem.

Things began with the break up of an intimate relationship. While irreconcilable lifestyle differences appeared to be the cause, one can't help but assume one's own faults were responsible for love lost.

January 6, 2003

Certainly fear arises when one confronts what may be personal flaws within one's self. Of course I knew I wasn't perfect, but at least I thought someone's love for me was enough, or at least impenetrable by my flaws. Turns out I was wrong.

First love. Held the belief that "love was enough." When there was no one else to back you up, that one person, your partner in life, would always come through for you. Tough lesson to learn. My Grandmother was simultaneously dying. And so, I suppose I especially needed the support of my partner at this time.

When my grandmother finally died in January, I didn't immediately realize the consequence this would have on my sense of self worth. I eventually began to imagine an illustration of somewhat of a pyramid of people in my life that inform me of my own "goodness." It seemed that some significant people were disappearing from my pyramid. I had less people around to "propel" my self-esteem. These people, in a sense, were my "personal velocities."

April 15, 2003

I feel less exceptional. I'm not that little girl being pumped full of love and vibrancy all the time anymore. I have to find my own way. Even mom and dad will leave me some day...I grew up believing that my world revolved around me. Everything was mine. Here is love and acceptance in this neatly packaged vile. And then you get older and circumstances jade you somehow.

I was having a hard time inspiring my own self-esteem. Academically, it was unfortunate timing since I was required to not only propose my research ideas to my faculty, but my workshop was also due to commence. There were times, I can recall, becoming so overwhelmed with the reality of these academic responsibilities that I would nearly make myself sick with dread. I was still struggling with an internal belief that I was incapable of achieving academic success. Presenting my ideas to a panel of academics would “blow my cover”; I would be revealing to them that I was stupid. Furthermore, I wondered what myself and my workshop could possibly offer to a group of women who appeared to be doing fine on their own.

There was no way out. I knew that. Somehow, I pulled it all off. Successfully.

April 24, 2003

“Everybody has their own personal velocity.” Perhaps I’ve finally encountered mine. The workshop is more than I could have imagined. Find strengths in myself that I thought I could never pull out of my ass, but when push has been coming to shove, somehow there it is. I am definitely interested in people’s personal “narratives.” How people “become” fascinates me.

I resolved to tell myself that academically, I deserved my successes. I was still bewildered as to how I managed to sound and appear somewhat smart, yet not actually possess intelligence. I wondered why it was so difficult to believe in myself. I required external reinforcement of which I felt was withering away.

May 4, 2003

Hard to find internal strength sometimes. Hard to see authentic me. Somehow, I often receive external reinforcement and wonder how I’ve fooled them. Other times I know it myself. When I’m ‘on’. I’d like to feel ‘on’ more often. Gran was so good at building me

up. She was such a good counselor and my biggest fan. I need more biggest fans. Why?

A few days after this entry, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. While this impacted me in many different ways, one interpretation seemed to compound on my already existing fear of loss. The threat of now losing my mother meant the loss of more “personal velocities,” or what I call in the following letter to a friend, “team players”: significant people in your life that inform you of your essential “goodness”.

May 10, 2003

Dear Karen,

All of my antisocialness coupled with mom's diagnosis, quadrupled with my own neurosis is making me a little out of my mind this Saturday afternoon...It was like overnight, things fell into perspective. It has to during adverse times. Especially the realization of your parents and your own mortality. How do people survive without their own personal 'team' or personal 'backup'? Allow me to illustrate: Gran's death made me realize the obvious - people don't last forever, even the ones closest to you. Therefore, your personal 'team' diminishes. Gran was an essential player on my personal team for many reasons. She loved me, built me up, didn't judge me, and supported me in almost everything I chose for myself. With the loss of the team player, your personhood, you fear, is diminished, when in reality it may not be at all. It may only be a temporary perception. With Gran gone, she is not physically here to make me more of who I am. Yet, without her physical presence now, I am able to draw from who she was as a person, and be better because of it. However, sometimes it is hard when I can't hear her anymore...With Gran's death emerged a strong fear: death of mom and dad, and death of major team players. Here arises the necessity for me to really confront this fear. Unfortunately this necessity was accompanied by a not-so-subtle reminder of the potential death of my mother.

While I supported my mother with optimism and encouragement, the time I spent away from her was quite opposite. I felt scared and alone. I reached out to my partner with whom I broke up with a few months prior. Although he initially was supportive, he became emotionally, very unavailable to me. He chose to withdraw his support. Perhaps as a consequence to this, I perceived other close friends to not be emotionally available to

me. Since I became a “burden” to my partner, my circumstance was also a burden to others. I felt alone and very insecure.

May 17, 2003

I have no one. I have myself. Who is not strong right now...I feel a sense of complete comfort and self-security nowhere. My insecurities take over my brain these days. Fear is a close friend. I dread the loss of the only people in my life that really back me up. My 'team players' are diminishing and are in jeopardy. Some of them I want to push away before I'm rejected. Surely I'll be rejected if my insecurities continue to thrive. I perceive that nobody really cares. Selfishness is such a strong motivator, and how does my pain benefit anybody? I perceive it only to be a burden to others. The one person I thought who would back me up (besides my family) decides to freeze up when push comes to shove. What does that do for my faith in love and companionship? I barely trust anyone.

June 7, 2003

I miss my grandmother. She would be so good for me now.

July 6, 2003

Her 'team players' threaten to trade, to die, leaving a reality of which she dreadfully fears...I am alone, so why can't I be alone?

I began to heal a little. I came to realize that ultimately, everybody is alone. I interpreted this realization rather optimistically, however. I anticipated a time when I would have the confidence to alone, handle whatever presented itself to me in life.

July 20, 2003

I look forward to a time when I am self-reliant again, confident about doing things alone and on my own terms. Look forward to finding things in myself that are unique and exceptional. I feel as though I am so dependent on external sources, mostly people, for my self-esteem. And I suppose people will always disappoint you.

I was running a lot in the spring. I began to receive praise for being in shape. I felt good. I felt good because I looked good. Perhaps this was part of the seed that planted my process of healing.

July 20, 2003

Suffering from the 'mind body problem' a bit now too. Seeking body praise for my self-esteem when I can't find any 'upstairs.'

Feel like a hypocrite with my research interests and all. I suppose I will try and get it anywhere I can now.

More time passed. My mother's cancer had subsided, my partner and I reconciled, I began to ask for a little help from my friends, and my grandmother's spirit began to inspire a certain independent strength within me. Although I realize my confidence depends so much on how others inform me, I came to understand how I must find ways to fulfill my own sense of self.

CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATING MAGGIE, JANE AND DAWN

The following chapter narrates the experiences of Maggie, Jane and Dawn. As the “narrative creator,” I have “molded the many different happenings into coherent stories” (Kvale, 1996, p.201). While the stories provide the reader with some background into these women’s lives and experiences, they also offer us a greater understanding of how, individually, they experienced the EYSW and what variables may have informed their sense of self.

I chose to write about Maggie, Jane and Dawn because I felt their self-perceptions, as well as the way they experienced the workshop, were unique and very different from one another. Their individual experiences were able to best illustrate the many dynamics that occurred within the workshop.

Maggie

My self-esteem is good. I don't have a problem with how I feel about myself. Because I'm at a totally different point in my life now, than where I was 15 years ago. And when I compare myself, and that's one of the things that [the workshop] had made me do, is to look back at the way I used to be and where I am now, and just to be able to see the differences...you don't realize when you're there how much strength you have to get you through things.

“Maggie Got the Brains”

The first time I saw Maggie she was wearing a purple jacket adorned with dogs and dog-sled patterns; themes from her Inuit background. She stood about 5 feet 2 inches tall, accompanied by a strong, sturdy build with a personality to match. I learned much about Maggie from this first meeting; mostly she appeared to be very sure of herself and

of every word that left her mouth. I also learned of her passion for her career, her love for her daughter and her desire to become more active.

Maggie responded to my advertisement at an aboriginal organization where she is an education coordinator. Her interest was provoked both by a desire to become more active and learn new ways of exercising, as well as by a curiosity for the other themes represented in the poster. When I further acquainted myself with Maggie I learned more about who she was and where she came from. Maggie grew up in a family of eight with two sisters and three brothers. Maggie shared much about how her sisters influenced a positive sense of self in her as a child. "I was very small and very agile," she explains.

My sister who was 15 years older than me used to take me out and get me to 'perform' for her friends. That was a big influence on the fact that my height never mattered. I got lots of praise and attention. I was cute and could entertain people with my antics. I could make them happy.

I would later find out about Maggie's sister's preoccupation with body image and wondered how Maggie seemingly avoided such struggles. She told me about a time when she was 17:

I remember we were camping and [her brother in law] was talking to one of his friends and said Maggie got the brains and [her sisters] got the looks. After that I tried to focus on looks for a while. This didn't last too long because it just wasn't me...others focused more on my intelligence than looks.

Maggie's Inuit heritage was strongly embraced by her father who ensured his children had a familiarity and appreciation of the culture. A desire to learn more about this culture as well as a curiosity for the unknown, provoked Maggie to move to

Churchill when she was just 18. One of the first people she met there and connected with became her husband and father of her only child.

I decided I wanted to go up to Churchill. And went to work up there. You know, experience the world kind of thing. Anyways, I met him. He was one of the first people I had met up there.

Comfortably and boldly, Maggie continued to share with me what was clearly a difficult time in her life.

So I had no family around, hadn't had any friends, and so, what I have found with men who are abusive, they know exactly how to work it...they know exactly what your weakness is. And they kind of build on that... You're being put down for everything you do. You know, so then your whole self-esteem goes. You know, I used to get dressed to go out, and he would say things like 'you can't go out like that. What do you think people are going to think of you if you wear things like that?'...Or you know, so if they see you one time and your thinking oh my gosh, I look a little fat. Then that's what they pick on. 'Wow, you're gaining weight, look at how heavy you are, that doesn't look right on you.' And they pick at things little by little.

I suspected this relationship had quite an impact on Maggie's self-esteem and feelings about her body. I wondered for how long somebody has to carry the influences of such negativity. And at what point does an abusive person's judgments leave you so that you can inform your own self more optimistically? When I listened more about how Maggie learns about herself, I began to understand the impact of such kinds of abuse. Though leaving her husband gave her a sense of personal strength, Maggie still seemed burdened with distorted perceptions of herself and mostly in the way she appeared.

When I started at the University of Manitoba...I went up to a 30 [inch waist]. And I remember thinking I was so fat. And uh, I started working out, and lost the weight. But I still wore the same [baggy] clothes. And didn't realize that I lost weight...And then something happened at school, a graduation or something, and I was wearing a dress, and one of my girlfriends said to me, 'Maggie, why don't you put a belt on the waist or something. It would look better.' And I said, 'I can't, look how fat I am.' And she put the belt on me, and she goes, 'Oh my god, there's no fat on you!' And I remember thinking I was so fat at the time, or that I was really overweight and out of shape and everything...that night I had like 20 people say to me, 'when did you lose all that weight?' And so here I was thinking, that I was so overweight, and feeling really bad about myself.

When I asked Maggie where she thought the misperception came from, she explained, "I think it was from, that was at the time too, when I was still just being away from her [daughter's] father. And I think a lot of it is still from that view, and that, you know, the way he would say things to me every time I dressed. I was still carrying that."

My first interview with Maggie along with her journal entries, allowed me to understand more about what informs her self-esteem and body image now. I found one such journal entry revealing this:

I see myself as a confident person, who is very secure with what I do. I am overweight for comfort, but still trying to accept that for now, I am comfortable with who I am and how I am perceived. Confident with self- insecure with body...I would like to be more comfortable with my weight- however I need to drop some pounds to get to that place.

During the time I spent with Maggie, her sense of self worth was rarely compromised. Mentally, she always seemed to know what her strengths were in all her many roles, though she admits that this strong sense of self is informed by how others perceive her. When asked to describe her own self-esteem Maggie says it “depends on what area. [laughs] Work related, I would say my self-esteem is quite high. Um, personally um, ahhh it’s quite flexible, it depends on how people react to me, like if somebody said something to me, then I can take that very personally.”

It was easy for me to see how much pride Maggie takes in her professional abilities and how much this contributes to her positive feelings about herself.

Um, in my job always, my self-esteem is pretty high. Because I’ve done a lot of things that have put me in a positive light...the comments from the community about the work I was doing was really positive. So you feel really good about what you’re doing. And students come to me all the time now, and they’ll say, ‘I can’t believe all the changes in my life, thank you’...those kind of things, they give you really positive self-esteem.

It was interesting for me to listen to Maggie’s perceptions of her body. If I were to compare her attitudes towards her body with the other group member’s feelings towards their bodies, I would interpret that Maggie’s perceptions were more healthy. By this, I mean that she was far less critical about her body than some of the other women were. This, Maggie offers, has a lot to do with age. “As I get older I tend to be more comfortable with my body,” she said in an interview. I sensed however, that Maggie’s perceptions of her body could still use some nurturing. Like many women, Maggie’s body image is informed by the media. In her first journal entry Maggie writes, “when reading magazines all you see is dozens of skinny models and tiny little clothes. Media

portrays body image with size and therefore we end up not feeling good about ourselves if our body doesn't fit the altered norm."

What perhaps seemed more informative of Maggie's body image was other people's perceptions of how she looked. Other people's comments to Maggie about her body seemed to influence both negative and positive body feelings. She shared an example of one such negative experience in her journal. When contemplating wearing a certain sweater to work which she thought may accentuate her chest too much, she describes, "I got to work and one of my coworkers looked at me, pointed to my chest and made a gesture of 'big'. I zipped up the sweater and left the office...I would like to...not worry about how others view my body."

In another circumstance involving a personal relationship she talks about how her partner made her feel good about how she looked.

He was very positive for me in that way. Whenever we would go shopping he was very very positive. Whenever I would try something on he was very positive, he was always, 'Oh that looks great on you. You should wear things this way, it makes you look good, I don't know why you like to wear things so baggy, because' you know things like that. So he was very positive on me.

When asked directly about where Maggie gets her information about her body she explains:

I guess it would be from things people say to me. You know, because I'll be thinking, 'God you know, look how fat I am right now'...but people say to me look how tiny you are. And I'll say well I'm not tiny I'm short. And they say no, no, look at you you're small too. And I'll think, I don't consider myself small. So I guess it would be the way other people perceive me?

In my first interview with Maggie, we talked about exercise and being physically active. Maggie recalled both positive and negative experiences of physical education as a child. Negative recollections involved activities that required coordination. This still influences her participation today. She refers to herself as:

Hav[ing] no coordination. So for me to go out and exercise in a group, I'm very self-conscious about that because I can't, you know, music doesn't mean a thing to me. [laughter] I'm moving my own way right? They say move left and I'm saying which way is left? I have no coordination, my movements don't look the same as anybody's. [laughter] So I find it very intimidating.

In her journal, Maggie recalls "hating physical education" and still as an adult doesn't like to participate in team sports where she "has no chance of winning". Her fear of looking like a "fool" seems to prevent her from participating in both coordination tasks as well as team sports.

Maggie's positive physical education experiences involved individual activities where she could pursue "personal bests". She recounts in an interview one such enjoyable experience of rock climbing. "You know, the feeling you get when you make it to the top. Even though you've got ropes and everything on you, you still get that whole feeling, you know, as you make it to the top, it's like I did it, I can't believe that I did it!"

I was therefore, intrigued by Maggie's enthusiasm to participate in the workshop. What was her motivation? It turned out Maggie shared many of the same feelings I have about being physically active. In her journal she shares: "Throughout my adult life I have gone back and forth between exercising and not. I always feel better about my body when I am exercising." As well, Maggie experiences enhanced self-esteem when she is exercising regularly. She recalls feelings of "walking taller...I guess it's probably

because your muscles are stronger, and then as your muscles strengthen you know, you feel better about the way that you walk. Your posture is better and it's just a better feeling." Maggie also illustrated an important way that exercise can enhance self-esteem. When asked to elaborate on why being active makes her feel better, Maggie responded with this:

I think it's just because you're doing something for yourself...my lifestyle is very busy, and a lot of the time I don't take time for myself...when I do exercise it's like taking time for yourself. And it's not something I tend to do a lot. And so I think it just makes me feel better.

Words of Reason: Maggie's Experience in the Workshop

I worried about Maggie the first few days leading up to the workshop. I didn't know her then as well as I know her now, and her presence slightly intimidated me. Because I was so freaked out about my own performance as a facilitator of this experimental workshop, I wondered how Maggie would perceive my capabilities and intelligence, or lack there of. I knew she was smart. Very smart. I also knew she was nearly 20 years my senior. I thought, what do I know that she doesn't already? What could I possibly show her? Because she seemed to exude such a 'cut and dry' attitude towards things, I also wondered how she would react to the mushy, 'feelings' aspect of the workshop? She appeared to be more interested in the activity part of it all. Would she connect with the themes? Or would it serve as a mild form of entertainment?

Maggie's presence in the Exercise Your Self Workshop was integral to the group. Maggie appeared confident, assertive, and very secure about her beliefs and all that she valued. She always seemed comfortable speaking up in the 'collective reflective' sessions

and often provided us with some comic relief. "Wanting to get into shape and feel more strong from exercising" seemed to be Maggie's main motivator for her participation.

Maggie and Cheryl, who were two of the older participants, seemed to stand out especially with regards to body image. When many members of the other group were dreading the approaching summer and the accompanying mini skirt trends of the season, Maggie and Cheryl seemed unphased by these concerns. It seemed clear that Maggie was more comfortable in her body. It was often that Maggie responded to the younger women's body image struggles with the same encouraging suggestions that I, as the facilitator, would not have been able to provide simply because of where I was in life. Maggie claimed that her level of comfort with her body was simply a matter of "age, experience and maturation". I also wondered if Maggie's body image was less of an informer of her self-esteem. I based this assumption on many of her interview responses which alluded to her intelligence and professional self as being a major contributor to her sense of self-worth. However, I did still suspect that Maggie may benefit or did benefit from our many body image discussions.

Maggie often initiated a kind of pendulum swing in the dynamic of many group discussions. I frequently allowed conversations to flow without a lot of structure. I did this first, because I was curious to see where the conversation would take us. But more so because there seemed to be a sense of urgency in each participant to talk about things like body image and self-esteem. It was as if this was one of the only venues in which to talk about something so important that influenced them on a day-to-day basis. What I observed in Maggie was interesting. While some of the members seemed to waver in their opinions and suggestions of things, Maggie seemed to serve as the 'word of reason' to us all. Perhaps because she appeared so convicted in what she offered us, perhaps it

was because her suggestions seemed so practical and logical, or perhaps because at some point during the workshop we began to know a little more about Maggie and everything she had pulled herself through.

Maggie's straightforward approach seemed to help Jane the most. Maggie would later share with me that she felt a kind of affinity for Jane because she felt Jane was going through an abusive circumstance similar to her own earlier in life. Jane seemed truly enlightened by some of the things Maggie offered her. One particular conversation involved Jane sharing feelings of being surrounded by many people who are mean to her and make her feel negative about herself. Many group members supported Jane in these personal injustices. They'd say, "Well that's not fair" or "he/she shouldn't do that" or "you should stand up for yourself". It was Maggie's words that seemed to 'hit home' the most for Jane. She simply stated, "you need to distance yourself from people that make you feel bad about yourself". When Jane asked, "what if you don't have a choice?" Maggie responded with, "you always have a choice." Jane would later recall what a positive impact this discussion had on her and recounted steps she had taken to distance herself from these negative influences.

Maggie's participation in the activity portions of the EYSW was also noteworthy. Maggie proved to be a very competent physical participant. She excelled in many of the activities that required flexibility; stretching, yoga and pilates. It was clear she felt quite comfortable and admitted feeling proud that she could perform some of the tasks that others could not because of their lack of flexibility. There were however, two specific activity sessions in which Maggie did not 'excel'. I remember these classes quite clearly, and I remember them particularly because of Maggie's response to them. The first of notice was the 'low impact' aerobics. At least it was intended to be low impact. However,

things ended up being a little too ‘cardiovascularly challenging’ for many of us. Not only that, but some of the women weren’t familiar with traditional aerobics moves, and therefore ended up being a step behind the entire class. Maggie had already indicated to me that she was not comfortable with tasks requiring a lot of coordination. And it became quite clear to me how uncomfortable she was performing the aerobics. I remember looking at her reflection in the mirror in the dance studio during our warm up and thinking she appeared quite angry and irritated. As the hour progressed my suspicions were somewhat confirmed, and I wondered if it was all she could do to remain participating in the class. All of us did, however, successfully finish the class. Our faces just ended up finishing a darker shade of red and our bodies an exhausted mass of flesh, barely able to conduct a productive upcoming ‘collective reflective.’ The other activity session which provoked a similar response from Maggie was the Hip Hop dance class in session 10; this was another task requiring coordination. I knew I had to inquire about these sessions with Maggie, perhaps more in depth during the second interview.

“It Was Something Maggie Said”

I received much praise from the women participants about the EYSW. But it was the encouragement I got from Maggie that may have meant the most to me. Perhaps it was because of my initial intimidation of her, but mainly because I just really respected her opinion. In our second interview together, Maggie and I talked about if and/or how the workshop had an impact on her.

Because of Maggie’s motivations to be a part of the workshop (to learn new ways of exercising, to become more active), I expected that if anything were going to influence her self-esteem or body image, it would have been the activity sessions. I was wrong.

When asked what she most enjoyed about her participation in the workshop, Maggie said

it was “the social interaction with everybody, because I think that we all connected, and...I think that there was some good learning going on, in both ways, for the ones of us that were older as well as those who were younger kind of building on experience. And...I think that there were some really beneficial things that happened.”

There were several ways that Maggie seemed to benefit from the social interaction of the group. Maggie shared common experiences with some of the group members. Although Maggie lived these experiences many years ago, hearing about what these other group members were going through now allowed Maggie to reflect in a positive way.

With Dawn as an example, learning from her again, just to see what it was I went through...bringing me back to that place where I could say, yeah, I know what it's like again...a lot of that came from Jane [too]. Because seeing what she's going through and listening to what she's talking about and it kind of brings me back to hey, wait a sec, I used to be there, I used to be just like that. You know so yeah, it made me reflect.

When asked to clarify what it was about these reflections that influenced her self-esteem Maggie offered this:

It makes you realize because you don't realize when you're there, how much strength you have to get through things...I'm at a different point in my life now, than where I was 15 years ago. And when I compare myself, and that's one of the things that this has made me do, is to look back at the way I used to be and where I am now, and just to be able to see the differences...this kind of gave me a chance to reflect on it, and say, you know what, I do see how strong I am now. And that strength was there before, but I didn't have the self-esteem to bring it

forward. Or I did have enough self-esteem to slowly work on it to bring it to the point I am now.

The sharing of common experiences also allowed Maggie to offer emotional support and encouragement for those who were struggling with similar circumstances that she had once prevailed through. Maggie elaborated on this dynamic.

With someone like Dawn, who's a young single mom, just starting out with university and, it's funny because I was able to say to her, you know what? I remember doing that. I was right there, where you were at exactly the age you're at. My daughter was younger, but I know exactly how she's feeling about it. And how you think you're never going to be anywhere but where you are right now. And so, I think in that way there was some positive comments that I could give to her about what she's going through. So those kinds of things I really enjoyed about it.

Both Maggie and the recipient seemed to benefit from this dynamic. Where, for example, Dawn and Jane were able to benefit from Maggie's advice and encouragement, Maggie was able to benefit from the responses that the support provoked in these recipients. To illustrate, I asked Maggie if she could recall a particular experience within the workshop that made her feel good about herself. Maggie responded with the following:

[pause] You know what it was, is when Jane referred, and she referred to it a few times, 'It was something Maggie said that made me think'. That made me feel good. Because it made me feel like, I've done something, or my experience has been able to help somebody. That would be it... Yeah, that's what it was. That's the one thing that I take, you know, made me really really feel good. Yep.

Maggie's physical competence also seemed to influence her self-esteem and feelings about her body. When I followed up with Maggie about her experiences in the activity portions of the workshop, she clarified a number of things for me. When I asked her to recall a particular experience within the workshop that made her feel positive about her body, the following conversation occurred.

Maggie: Well it certainly wasn't the hip hop. [laughter] Ummm, positive about my body-

Kim: I guess within the exercise portion, was there-

Maggie: Just the fact that my flexibility-you know, it's positive for me, because of the fact that I can still I mean...I can't go as far as I used to, but the fact that I can still stretch and still have really good flexibility is positive for me.

Kim: Anything about, addressing that same question. Anything else that made you feel positive about your body?

Maggie: Uh. [pause] No, I think that was about the only thing that made any kind of an impact. Well, although, I was surprised that I made it through the whole session of the aerobics. [pause] I didn't die. No heart attacks. [laughter] Yeah, so. Frustration because I'm going in the wrong direction.

This was something I really wanted to follow up on. Why did Maggie seem so irritated during the aerobics and hip hop dance classes? Her inability to perform the tasks requiring coordination really seemed to bother her in particular. All of us struggled with coordinating our bodies to a certain extent, so in no way did Maggie's performance alienate her from the group. As well, the group's rapport was extremely positive. I felt it was very conducive for creating an affirming physical environment in which we could all feel comfortable performing tasks at our individual levels. When I asked Maggie what

she least enjoyed about the workshop, with no hesitation Maggie said, “the aerobics”. She laughed and continued:

You see, I have no coordination. I am totally the most uncoordinated person. And it brings it all back, those feelings of being in a classroom and somebody going, ‘You’re moving the wrong way! You’re not going fast enough! You’re not doing that move right!’

Maggie described an experience much like this in which a particular fitness leader drew attention to her lack of coordination in the middle of a class. I understood this experience might have been slightly traumatizing for her. However, I sensed that her reaction to the class was more than just a reminder of previous negative experiences. Maggie elaborated: “I like to see myself in that position where I’m doing things the right way. You know, I like to do that...I was just thinking I look like an idiot.” When I asked if her physical competence had any sort of impact on her self-esteem, the following dialogue occurred:

Maggie: It was kind of a more, I don’t know if it was a self-esteem impact, but it was kind of on my whole self. Realizing that, it’s funny, you put yourself into a situation where you’re not comfortable or not feeling right, just the way it- reacted on myself. [pause] I guess it just made me think about the way I am sometimes about things... You know, being angry or whatever. That was just a stressful situation for me.

Kim: So what is it about like, the needing to do things right, or the not having the competence to do things right, that’s bothersome to you?

Maggie: Um, I think that probably is one of those things that’s leftover from being in the abusive situation. Because one of the things that used to happen regularly, I’d cook dinner and it’s never hot enough, “How come you can never

get the whole meal together at the same time, how come the potatoes are ready but the meats not, how can the salad"-you know? All of that kind of stuff. And I used to be such a perfectionist about everything. My house was, if it wasn't, like if you walked in 15 years ago, you walked into my house and it looked like this, I wouldn't let you in. [laughs] You know? And because it's just like things are perfect, or it just doesn't happen. And that's just a leftover from that I think. You know it's just one of those things that still lingers. And this just kind of gave me a chance to look at it and realize that hey, that's still there. It's something I still have to deal with. [laughs]

Maggie and I also talked about how the workshop influenced her body image. When I first met Maggie I sensed that she was fairly comfortable with her appearance. However, in reading her journals Maggie often expressed a desire to "drop some pounds" in order to be comfortable with her weight. As the facilitator of the workshop, I tried to convey that women can be 'overweight' and still be healthy. I wanted to challenge the participants to be happy with however they look instead of trying to modify their appearance in order to fit the 'female ideal'. I wondered if Maggie's body image was nurtured at all by the workshop. When I asked Maggie to generally describe her experience in the workshop, we had this discussion:

Maggie: I noticed like for myself, one of the things I noticed, as we were going through this, was that I tended to care less about how I was feeling, like um, about my body I guess. Like I would put on clothes in the morning and it wouldn't be oh geez you're getting too fat or da da da. It was um, more that I'm thinking up things and saying, time to go out and buy some new pants. So let's make sure-

Kim: Self-acceptance?

Maggie: Yeah, you know, that it's okay. I think that was another big thing for me.

This shift in how Maggie reflected on body image was also apparent in how she corresponded with her daughter. "One of the ways that [the workshop] impacted me, was to think about being more positive, um, with my daughter," she told me in our second interview. It seemed that the workshop may have helped Maggie nurture her daughter's own body image. Maggie told me about how she responded to her daughter after her daughter's efforts to become more health conscious.

So [the workshop] made me, when I would comment to [daughter's name], not saying, '[daughter's name] you know what? You're looking good because you're losing weight' I would say, 'look at the way you're carrying yourself now...it's just the way you're holding yourself. Look at how much better you look because you're holding yourself upright'. Rather than saying, 'Hey [daughter's name]', which I would have done before, 'you've lost some weight'. And I tried to make it more on the physical aspect rather than the weight she'd lost.

There seemed to be a couple of factors that informed Maggie's perceptions of her body. I often heard her refer to her age as a reference point for how she perceives her body. It seemed that Maggie's age provided her with a realistic way of interpreting her body. When I asked her to tell me how she felt about her body image after the workshop, Maggie replied, "Um, I feel okay about it. I mean you know, I'm not where I was when I was 20." When referring to a particular visualization exercise we did in 'collective reflective' Maggie illustrated, "And let's not just imagine- let's have a look at the body, and I'm going well, you know, you could, yeah sure you could lose some weight here, yeah you have issues about your thighs and your calves and stuff like that, but for your

age you're doing okay." I wondered if there was anything about the workshop that contributed to this body image attitude. The following dialogue occurred:

Kim: So what about the workshop said it was okay?

Maggie: Well, it was just the whole idea of how you had us look at things and look at the media, and how the media portrays people, and just giving us a chance to think about some of the things that are out there. And as I went out, and I would be aware more, of people who are shopping and I'd start to look at them, and I'd say you know, you know what that woman, she's about the same size as me, but she's also about the same age. Or just being able to put myself where I am in my life. And not always having to say well, geez you should look like Demi Moore because she's the same age as you. [laughs] You know, so yeah. Gave me a more realistic view.

I was sorry to finally say goodbye to Maggie. The relationship I had generated with her affirmed some of the reasons I chose to do this research. Not only had her individual experiences contributed to a greater understanding about self-esteem in women, her stories were personally inspiring. I felt I had learned a great deal from her.

Jane

Just talking and laughing. To me that was always uplifting...I didn't have to be afraid to say something, or that I would maybe say the wrong things, and I would be told to be quiet or to just give me the cold shoulder, I didn't feel it. And that was the best part. Like I could just go in there, just because as soon as everybody came in together, it was like, alright!

A Survivor

Jane and I were acquaintances before the workshop began. I approached her about participating in the workshop because I thought she might really benefit from the social interaction as well as the issues we were going to discuss in the 'collective reflective'. I knew just from talking with her in the past that she did not have many sources of emotional support. I also knew that she was struggling with a lot of things in her personal life.

Jane was born in Mexico 43 years ago. She spent most of her childhood and young adult life there. After being in Canada now for nearly 24 years, Jane speaks English well, but admits she's "not sure about some words- exactly what they mean, and I just kind of use my interpretation of it." She has three children, two girls who are grown, and one 12 year-old son, all from a previous marriage. She remarried five years ago, and is currently baking and cooking at a restaurant in Winnipeg.

Jane tells me she has "been through hell". In our first interview together, I learned the extent of Jane's personal struggles and all she has endured throughout her life. Jane has always appeared to be a bit unsure of herself, and I wondered where this uncertainty came from. I asked her to tell me about a time when she experienced low self-esteem.

“Sigh. Ever since I was a little girl. Basically,” she tells me. It immediately became apparent to me why Jane started off so poorly.

My upbringing was that um, kids should be seen not heard. Or you could never say anything, you could never express yourself, or talk about yourself...I do remember ever since I was very young I wanted to prove to my parents that I was not a bad person...I guess we were being hurt all the time. I remember my mom always calling me bad names. And so, all she'd say, 'You're such a pig' or 'you're such a whatever animal', and things and I always took that very personal I guess...or she would put me down, and I felt I guess there was nothing I could do to be [pause] good enough...she would always tell me you will never amount to anything. So, that's telling me right there that you're a loser. Good for nothing so to speak...you hear it enough times you actually believe it.

Jane also told me about having to endure years of sexual abuse beginning when she was only 13. It was difficult for Jane to talk about this experience. It was also difficult to listen to. It appeared that Jane didn't receive any emotional support during or following the abuse. What's worse, she was made to believe the assaults were her fault.

I finally went and told my mom, and the comfort I got from her was that 'Well that means you're a bad person, that's why it happened to you' and she blamed me for it. [pause] She said it was my fault...she made me go to [the abuser's] parents, to his dad, and apologize...she said I had obviously influenced it in some way.

I wondered how Jane coped through this trauma. “I just thought that that was um, what life was supposed to be like. I had to tell myself that's what life is supposed to be for a woman, or for girls,” she tells me. Jane also expressed feeling like she had no control

over this circumstance in her life; these feelings seemed to follow her into adulthood. “I still feel like I don’t have control over my life. Sometimes I feel like I do, and then I feel like I screw up and then down the drain goes my believing in myself.” I wondered if her childhood experiences were still plaguing her feelings of low self-worth. I hoped that she had positive influences and encouragement in her life now. When I read her first journal entry I suspected this wasn’t the case.

When I say something, I’m told that I shouldn’t say that, or why are you saying that, or, you have ‘no right’ to think that, or say something like that, and yet these are my feelings...I want to be loved unconditionally. Anybody can say ‘I love you’. But if the actions don’t match the words it means nothing to me.

It appeared to me that Jane longs to just ‘be herself’ and to be at a place where “I can be ME,” as she writes in her journal.

When I asked Jane to talk about her positive self-esteem she explains that “if things go well for me I feel, inside I feel good, and then I feel beautiful inside and I feel beautiful outside.” She specifically told me about an achievement which made her feel good about herself. “I got my certificate of food and handlers course [laughs]. I felt good about myself. Because I didn’t think I could do it, and I did.” Jane went on to explain strategies that she uses which allow her to achieve things and motivate her to do more.

I told myself I can do anything I put my mind to, that’s how I have always tried to think, and all my life because uh, I had to to survive I had to come up with a plan in my mind that I can do things. Even though you, seems most of the time it seems impossible. Impossible, and I tried to get past all that... when my marriage failed, uh, that was really really hard and yet after a few years I looked back and I told myself, I’m not a victim anymore, I’m a survivor.

Much of Jane's self-esteem seems to be related to her body image. When I asked her to describe her own self-esteem, Jane talked a lot about her physical appearance and how that influenced her feelings of negative self-worth.

My self-esteem has been so low that I just didn't, I mean I would look at my reflection in the mall and uh, I hated myself, I hated the way I looked. I figured I was the ugliest woman in the world...I don't like the way I look...I have my days. I have, just, when things go good for me then I feel good about myself. And I can, I even think 'you don't look too bad'...But when things go wrong I uh, (pause) I don't even like to look at myself. I do my makeup, I do whatever but um, to make myself look better but really how I feel inside is totally different so.

Like many women, Jane has learned to be critical of her body. When I asked her to describe her own body image, I was saddened by her response.

Um, when I was slimmer, I didn't like how small my chest was [laughs]. And now, I've gained weight but my chest is bigger, I like my chest but I don't like my body [laughs]. I feel overweight, I feel not attractive...my thighs and my stomach, and my hips [are overweight]...I have felt like I don't even want to get dressed in front of my husband, because I feel ugly, I mean I feel fat...I think that I'm really not attractive is most of the time, most of my life.

What was worrisome to me was how Jane appeared to be defensive of these physical self-perceptions. It seemed that Jane felt she needed to prove to other people that her (perceptions of her own) unattractiveness were not reflected in her personality. This was illustrated when I asked Jane if her body image affects how she interacts with people.

I usually try, to first okay, I have to let people know that the way I look is not necessarily the way I am inside. I know that's kind of a crazy thing to think about,

but um, I um, I tried to be myself, the way I feel like, the way, what is in here that likes to come out of me, and what I, and if I can do that and people respond to that in a good way then okay, then I think okay then I will be fine, and they will not judge me according to my body. They will judge me, they will think of me as the way I am or the way I act.

I wondered if many years of sexual abuse contributed to her negative feelings about her body.

Kim: Do you think that the abuse of your body as a child influences at all how you feel about your body, or how you treat your body?

Jane: [Sigh]. There is no doubt in my mind, that that has, that what happened to me as a child that that will always, that will be, that will affect me all my life.

Jane went on to tell me more about how she learned to dislike her body. "I do remember my, my ex husband he used to say, 'Oh, well you're sure getting fat, or things like that'. And uh, so then I just would change into my nightie in the bathroom so he wouldn't see me and I would put make-up on, and he would say, 'if you think that's going to make you look better, you're wrong'."

In Jane's journal she writes much about circumstances in her life where she's been informed negatively about her body. I reflect on this. I acknowledge just how much of our perceptions of ourselves come from what we are told by other people. I wonder how we can interrupt this learning process and filter out the negative in order to protect ourselves.

What is also noteworthy is how Jane has learned to judge her body by cultural standards. Jane appears to be pre-occupied with her weight and expresses a desire to be slimmer. She writes in her journal however, that "in Mexico, the way I look now with big

hips and thighs, the Mexicans consider that a perfect body, but not in Canada or the USA.” Jane’s reflection on this interests me. I imagine this must be a step in the right direction. She acknowledges the differences in these cultures and perhaps from this can note the weaknesses in our own and learn from them so that she may heal as an individual.

Baby Steps

Jane showed up a good 25 minutes early for our first Exercise Your Self Workshop. I was frantic at this stage of the game. I had worked with three years of anticipation and preparation for this day; finally my workshop ‘dream’ was a reality. In any case, I was a little nervous. I just wanted to allow myself enough time to set up the room for the group and go over my notes one last time before everybody arrived.

Jane needed to talk. She told me things at home weren’t going so well. Her husband didn’t really agree with her participation in the workshop. Jane told me he said, “If you want to feel better about yourself then you can read the bible.” According to Jane’s husband, they didn’t need any friends; he was all she needed in her life. I was glad Jane was there. It was clear to me however, that since our first interview together, Jane began to latch on to me. She really needed someone to talk to. I just wasn’t sure if I was the best candidate.

Jane appeared to be a little shy in the first session. She expressed feeling nervous about being a part of the group but admitted her motivations for her participation were to “gain confidence in speaking and to make friendship connections”. I got the impression that Jane’s participation in the workshop was a big deal for her. Not only was she disregarding her husband’s manipulative suggestions, she was also initiating something

in her life that may lead to further self-fulfillment. To me, this showed a certain amount of awareness and desire within Jane that could only be good.

Jane's presence in the workshop was very unique. I expected that because of her initial shyness and nervousness that she may end up being 'the quiet one' in the group. It soon became clear however, that Jane had a lot to say. It was as though the workshop space was the only opportunity she'd been given to speak freely, to be herself and to be curious. Jane took advantage of this space which I appreciated most of the time. It was often however, that the group's attention would shift to Jane's personal troubles in the 'collective reflective'. As the facilitator, it was hard for me to know how much of this shift was appropriate. I knew this dynamic was important for Jane. The social support she received from the other group members seemed valuable to Jane's well being. I wondered though, if this dynamic was taking away from the other women's opportunity to share, as well as other scheduled topics of discussion. Perhaps this was my weakness as a facilitator.

Jane's contribution to the 'collective reflective' sessions often involved feelings of helplessness. Her self-esteem seemed determined by external sources of praise and/or criticism. She expressed to the group in Session 3 that she can "tell myself that I can do something or that I am a good person, but then somebody will come along and tell me otherwise and I'll believe that." I wondered how apparent her insecurities were to the people around her. I wondered if her feelings of low self-esteem were compounded by other people's awareness of it and poor treatment towards her.

Jane also told the group that "everywhere I go, men find a way to treat me poorly." When we talked about body image and how to combat negative imagery and influences, Jane asked the group, "What if someone has told you you were the ugliest

person alive?” I thought Jane’s feelings of low self-esteem must enable this poor treatment of her. It was frustrating for me to witness Jane’s grief. I wondered if the other group members felt the same way. I thought, here is this beautiful, insightful, fun woman; why can’t she see these things in herself? Why doesn’t she fight for herself when other people are mean to her? And then I imagine what it must be like to come from where she comes from. My upbringing was positive such that I was always loved, praised and reinforced, and from this I learned I was a good person. I reflected on what Jane learned about herself growing up and wondered how one begins to inform themselves of one’s own goodness?

Jane’s feelings of low self-esteem were also reflected in how she referred to her body. We talked about weight preoccupation in Session 5’s ‘collective reflective’. Jane’s participation in this discussion was very enthusiastic. When I later referred to her corresponding journal entry, Jane expressed that she is “preoccupied with her weight and body image all the time...just one look in the mirror, and I’m hoping and praying that I will have the will power to eat very little all day.” This concerned me and I wondered why her weight was so important to her. When Jane told the group in the discussion that “the only way I get compliments is if I look good,” I was intrigued. Reinforcement must be extremely important to Jane, and since our society equates slimness with beauty, I wondered if Jane was striving to achieve this thinner ideal in order to be reinforced. Jane’s perception of herself was also illustrated when she expressed to the group her distaste for the mirror in the activity room. “I didn’t like that exercise last week because all I saw was me in the mirror and I thought, am I that big?”

I was encouraged however, by a particular visualization exercise I initiated in Session 6’s ‘collective reflective’. It was called ‘Imaginary Mind Mirror’ and involved

visualizing their bodies standing in front of a mirror and reflecting on how they feel about their bodies. When we discussed the exercise later as a group, Jane mentioned she pictured her body and self as “beautiful”. In a corresponding worksheet which also reflected on the visualization, Jane seemed to be adopting a more positive perception of herself. When asked, “How does this person in the mirror appear to feel about herself and her body?”, Jane’s response was, “not too bad...even though her body isn’t perfect, she can be a lot of fun, she loves to laugh...my skin is very soft.” I hoped that Jane could use this kind of exercise in the future so that she could develop these positive references even more.

Jane seemed to benefit from the social support she received from the group. What struck me as being the most important dynamic for Jane was the rapport she had with Maggie. All of the women offered support of some kind to Jane. Maggie however, really seemed to influence her. Perhaps it was Maggie’s straightforward, to-the-point way of presenting things that was so effective for Jane. In one particular discussion in Session 3, Jane was reiterating how she feels surrounded by people who are mean to her and make her feel negatively about her self. Maggie responded assertively to Jane’s concerns and said, “You need to distance yourself from people that make you feel bad about yourself.” When Jane then asked, “What if you don’t have a choice?”, Maggie simply stated, “you always have a choice.” Jane recalled this discussion three sessions later, saying that it “really made her think.”

“Unprogrammed”

For whatever reason I wasn’t totally excited about Jane’s post workshop interview. My expectations as a facilitator and a researcher were such that obviously I wanted the workshop to have a positive impact on my participants. I wasn’t sure that it

had had such an effect on Jane. I expected Jane's interview responses (regarding the workshop) would disappoint me.

Jane seemed to be in a really good mood the day we met to talk. Jane often appeared 'down' or distracted, but that day she seemed quite calm, cheery, focused and enthusiastic to talk. When I first asked Jane to tell me what she most enjoyed about the workshop, she laughed and exclaimed, "Dawn!" When she told me this, something in me shifted. Whatever disappointment I was expecting from this interview immediately dissolved. This response alone was somehow, some sort of success for Jane. I recalled how much Jane laughed with Dawn during the activities and 'collective reflective'. I wondered why I failed to observe this during the 10 weeks of the workshop. Knowing what little friendship connections Jane had in Winnipeg, this kind of emotional rapport between herself and other women could only be positive.

It appeared Jane's experience in the workshop was influential in many other ways. What was perhaps most notable for me was the impact the social support aspect of the workshop had on Jane. Jane illustrated this observation when I asked her to expand on other things she enjoyed about her participation.

Just talking and laughing. To me that was always uplifting...I didn't have to be afraid to say the wrong things, and I would be told to be quiet or to just give me the cold shoulder, I didn't feel it. And that was the best part. Like I could just go in there, just because as soon as everybody came in together, it was like, alright!...I felt I could be myself.

The social dynamic of the group seemed to remove a sense of isolation from Jane's own personal experiences. This aspect in particular, seemed to be most significant for Jane.

When I asked Jane what was most beneficial to her self-esteem and body image she responded with the following:

When we talked about, that you hear that everybody is kind of in the same boat. That made me feel good...Everybody, every time somebody was telling me something about themselves, it always made me feel wow, like, hey, I'm not alone in the world. Like I'm not the only person who struggles, or deals or thinks about things...I'm not the only one who feels like crap, and just wants to [pause] whatever, runaway and cry or, or tell somebody off, or whatever kind of feeling. I'm not the only one. And to just, that's okay, that kind of feeling. You just, you learn that, that's okay to feel that way.

Jane recalled a particular discussion in 'collective reflective' that seemed to remove a sense of isolation from her own experience as a child. In Session 8 we talked about how our own self-esteem and body image was developed.

[Maggie and Cheryl] talked about how they grew up...we talked about uh, upbringing...there was one thing that made me feel good, and that is, okay I'm not weird, I'm not stupid like I was made to believe when I was a kid, or I'm not like good-for-nothing, or nothing will ever become of me or whatever. Which wasn't all that I heard others say, but that they had been through, their upbringings were a little different, but then I kind of felt like, okay, it is not my fault. Or it's not me that has screwed up, or I was just a horrible person, or a horrible child.

Jane spoke more about how the social dynamic was supportive for her. It seemed as though our conversations in 'collective reflective' served Jane with guidance and advice which she could apply to her own life circumstances.

You hear about other people, like you get ideas, other people talk about things, uh, and you get ideas about what they are going through. And the way they see things. That was helpful for me...and the questions you had ready...like to me that was hey, yeah, this is something I need to talk about. This is something that I struggle with. This is something I want to hear the answer to, or that I want to hear what other people think...and everybody is a different person, everybody deals with things differently...and you hear something you need to hear and you lift up sort of.

A circumstance referred to earlier may more specifically illustrate the social support Jane received from the group. Jane recalled the discussion in which Maggie suggested distancing herself from negative people in her life and insinuated that Jane always has control over who she surrounds herself with. When I asked Jane if she felt the workshop informed her self-esteem in any way, Jane's responded with the following:

Like, that comment that I, I don't know what class it was, but somebody said, to separate yourself from the people who are negative, have a negative influence on you. That made me feel better. Like these are the things that I can quote now, which I never did before. Like now, like somebody gets to me, okay, then that's too bad. Like they have, do that on purpose-go away, like do something else. That was a very big thing. It made a big difference to me.

Jane and I got talking about exercise and more specifically the activity portions of the workshop. When I observed Jane in each session, she seemed to have a lot of fun whether she could perform the activity well or not. It was often Jane either had a big smile on her face or was distracted laughing at a joke one of the other women had just

made. Jane explained to me that overall, she enjoyed the exercise, but that specific aspects of the activities were not positive for her.

That time we went for that walk, I loved that...every time we did the exercise, there was, the exercise itself was great. I was terrible at keeping up, and I felt embarrassed so that was a negative. I felt bad about that.

Jane's physical competence seemed to influence how she felt about herself and her body. When I asked her if she could recall a particular experience in the workshop that made her feel good about her body, the following conversation took place.

Jane: Hmmmmmm. [pause] When we were doing something and I uh, I don't remember what the exercise was, there was, and this is nothing against you, but there was something you had a hard time doing and I was able to do it. [laughter]

Kim: Which was it?

Jane: I don't remember!

Kim: I can remember that actually.

Jane: And also the girl that did your thing - your friend, what's her name?

Kim: Sylvia?

Jane: Sylvia. She said she had a hard time doing something, and I thought, [whispers to self] okay, okay...so, I can't remember exactly what it was but, yeah. I remember thinking, alright! I shouldn't think that but I did.

Kim: No, but people have different capabilities. As far as their bodies go.

Jane: See and that's just it. When I couldn't do what some of the others do, like Maggie, forget it. Anyway, when I couldn't do some of those things I felt like, oh no, oh no, that's not good. And then when I was able to do it, it made me feel good.

Jane specifically recalled Yoga as being her favorite activity. Jane seemed to associate Yoga with relaxation instead of traditional exercise which typically makes her tired. The way Jane recalled the Yoga experience was curious to me. It seemed that this was an activity where Jane could just be herself. As well, it seemed as though the Yoga provided Jane with an opportunity to take time just for herself.

When we did the yoga. That was the best. Like that's, after that I felt the best, because...there was something that actually made me relax, not make me tired, or didn't make me ache...so that was my very favorite part about all the exercises...those were moments that were just my time. I don't have to worry about, what happened, like just be me, like this is my time. I would say, so the best part was the yoga. I felt really good about myself...it was just relaxing, I don't know if I can put it into words. [pause] It was just, it doesn't matter what I look like when I'm doing this. This is good, to just relax.

There appeared to be a number of factors from the workshop that influenced Jane's body image. What seemed to be most significant was the full length mirrors that covered a wall in the dance studio where the group performed each activity. Jane referred to this aspect of the workshop as being negative.

The only thing I found to be negative was when I saw myself in the mirror...seeing myself in the mirror, that was awkward. [laughs] That was just ahhhh! Every time, that, so that scared me, kind of, not scared me but kind of made me very self-conscious when I saw myself in the mirror. I am not totally happy with myself.

The mirrors seemed to remind Jane of her negative perceptions of her body. Jane seemed to struggle with trying to avoid her reflection.

Just when I saw my whole body...it was every time I saw myself, I would try to, that's why I just told myself okay, just focus on the person who is leading the group or whatever. Just don't look at yourself. Because I, just because I feel like in the last six years I've gained, uhhh at least 15 pounds, and it's like, it looks horrible on me. Every time I have to convince myself, okay, just don't look at yourself that way. Don't, and yet it was always every time I saw myself, every time.

Jane's reflection seemed to dishearten her participation and perhaps discourage her from being active in this kind of environment. She recalled asking herself, "Why do I do this, why did I do this?" I asked Jane to clarify.

That was the question that crossed my mind every time...why am I doing this, because I see myself. Like do this thing in the mirror. And I'm just, but I battle, I struggle with that every single time we did the exercise.

I wondered if there was anything about the workshop that helped Jane resolve her negative perceptions of her body. Jane recalled the structure of the workshop as being helpful in resolving some of her body image struggles. Where Jane seemed to feel defeated in the first half of each workshop session (the activity with mirrors), she recalled that reflecting on these feelings following the activities helped her overcome her negative perceptions of herself.

See that's what the good part about- we did the exercise first and then the talking later. [laughs] So it kind of like, okay, um like, I could kind of get past that...the talk after, we would talk about those things it would always help. When I would go home I felt great. By the time I would go home I felt good about myself.

It was important for me as a researcher and a facilitator to understand what specifically about our discussions and the workshop was helpful for Jane. I asked Jane how the workshop influenced her perceptions of her body. I was happy with how she responded. “Well, you just have to learn to accept yourself. That that was stressed so much was a great thing for me. Uh, I think, not listen to the media, not listen to other people.”

I wanted to get a better understanding of how Jane felt about her body now. Of course, I knew that the workshop didn't ‘revolutionize’ Jane's negative self-perceptions, but I wondered if there was any progress made since she became involved in the workshop. From how Jane responded to some of my questions regarding her feelings about her body, it seems Jane's self-perceptions may not have improved much. However, it seems as though Jane learned some principles that may, if practiced in the future, help her enhance her body image. I asked Jane how she felt about her body image.

[laughter] It needs improvement! Um, actually [pause] I try not to do something that I did very much before and that's compare myself...But am I happier with everything that way I look, I have to say no...I have come, I've learned to look at myself and don't just look at the negative parts. So I would say it's definitely, I feel yeah, I'm not so bad. I can say to myself, I can, my self-esteem is I guess, I've come that far that I feel right now, I can look at myself and say, hey you don't look too bad. But that's uh, not all the time...like you said, there is always the influence of other people, always the influence of it. And I'm just, okay, that's-I am me...so just be happy for who you are, or what you look like...So I guess my body image right now, I can say, I have learned to accept myself, but no I don't completely happy with how I look. And I think it has been so many years programmed into my brain, that it would take just a little bit at a time till it's

unprogrammed or whatever, so... Yeah, but the final, bottom line, so to speak, is that I have to want to change that in me. So, which I have learned to do.

Dawn

We all just like opened our hearts, pretty much right away and you know. It was just different...it's not like when you go into a room full of women. It's not like that. It's so different. We were all there for a different purpose. And just talking about anything and everything. Everything! [laughs] It was nice, you know? I think we all listened to each other and everybody would get feedback, whenever somebody had to say something, or somebody needed something, there was always feedback from at least someone. It just, it was really supportive.

“Heavy Stuff”

I remember waiting in a coffee shop to meet Dawn for the first time. On the phone the previous day, Dawn asked me if we were going to talk about “heavy stuff” because she was bringing her six year old daughter along and didn’t want to have her around for that conversation. Body image seemed to be a ‘sore spot’ for Dawn, and was one of her motivations for participating in the workshop.

Dawn appeared very friendly and high energy. She seemed a little quiet, but something told me Dawn had a lot to say. I learned a little about Dawn from our first encounter. She was born and raised in Winnipeg. She is 25 years old, single, and at the time we first met was about to encounter a fairly major life change. She was quitting her job and going to university for the first time. Dawn hadn’t been in school since high school, about 7 years earlier. I admired her ambitions and anticipated how difficult this adjustment might be for her. This first meeting was brief. Dawn answered all of my questions, and as far as I could tell she seemed like a good candidate for the workshop. Dawn and I met again for the first interview about a week later. I left her feeling a little discouraged for a couple of reasons. Only a few questions into the interview did the

batteries on my tape recorder run out. Therefore, we needed to cut things short, and try again another time. Also, Dawn's responses to the questions we did follow through with were very brief. She seemed hesitant to elaborate on her responses, giving me only a few word sentences without much clarification. Perhaps this was her 'style', I thought. Or maybe we just needed to build a stronger rapport before she felt comfortable sharing things with me. I assumed the latter and suspected again, that Dawn had a lot to say and had experienced much.

When we followed through with the first interview, I asked Dawn to describe her own self-esteem. She said, "It's hard because I have the advantage here...because we've already had how many classes?" Dawn's first interview didn't happen until we were many weeks into the workshop. I was anxious about this and wondered if it might create a problem for the research. On the other hand, the late interview may have been beneficial since Dawn and I had developed a really positive relationship. By her interview responses I could tell she felt really comfortable sharing herself with me. This first response made me think the workshop may have been good for her.

Dawn talked a lot about how her self-esteem was informed negatively in the past. It seemed as though a lot of how Dawn learned about herself was by what other people told her she was.

I guess when I was younger, I felt like, stupid and whatever because I was called all the names in the book by a couple of ex-boyfriends. The last one happened in February where someone's so mean like that...My other ex-boyfriend was mean like that. He would always call me fat and everything. And I believed him. I got the feeling that these experiences were things 'of the past' and didn't seem to influence Dawn much anymore. Dawn confirmed my suspicions. She told me, "Now if

somebody says stuff like that it's not [pause] it doesn't affect me the same, because I know that things aren't true. Like call me anything, I know it's not true."

I wanted to understand Dawn's feelings of low self-esteem better, because as she told me it's "still kind of getting better, but still needs some work sometimes." I wondered what kinds of things made her feel poorly about herself now. What I found was interesting. I find that for myself and other women my age with whom I am friends', we seem to focus our self-worth on physical appearance, academic and professional successes as well as our relationships with other people. While Dawn was also concerned with these variables, what's more was her concern for what kind of mother she was to her daughter. Negative perceptions of her abilities to be a good mother seemed to influence Dawn's self-esteem. When I asked her to tell me about a time when she experienced low self-esteem, the following conversation took place.

Dawn: I guess little things like, I don't deserve things. [pause] I'm going to cry...like yesterday, [my daughter said] 'oh mom, you're so nice, you're such a good mom' and I don't believe that sometimes. And then I feel like crap. The more she tells me I'm a good mom, the more I feel like crap.

Kim: Why?

Dawn: I guess because I don't feel like I do everything right...I want to do everything right, and I don't always. [tears]...maybe it comes back to media when you watch parents on TV who are absolutely perfect. And never get mad at their kids. Like I would probably compare myself to a mom on TV more than I would a model, and the way that I feel physically.

Dawn's low self-esteem also seemed to be associated with how much energy and time she had to give to her daughter.

Dawn: Sometimes I used up all my energy during the day and I came home and I was like, boring mom. And then that would frustrate me, because I'm like, I go to work and I'm like the happiest at work, why don't I be grumpy at work and save my happiness for home, you know? Because that's the people that you care most about.

Kim: So is that a feeling of guilt?

Dawn: Oh definitely, definitely.

Kim: Is that tied up in your low self-esteem?

Dawn: Yeah, oh bigtime. Probably lot's like I guess that's yeah, guilt, that would be right.

I was interested if being a single mother informed her self-esteem in any way.

Dawn explained to me that not being able to share responsibilities of parenting was challenging for her, and that taking time for herself often made her feel guilty.

Like if I was with someone, then I would just go out and do it. But it's definitely more difficult to find someone to watch her to do my own things, cause that's when the guilt comes back in. That's when I feel like I should be with her, and she's young, and she's only going to want to be with me for a couple more years. So when I do things like [the workshop] I feel guilty because I should be spending time with her.

What also struck me as relevant to Dawn's low self-esteem was in some circumstances, her lack of sense of worthiness, particularly when referring to her abilities as a mother.

Dawn: The more that she says I do [everything right], the more that I feel like I don't. I've never been able to take compliments good. I've been so working on it.

Like in the past year. But I've never been able to take compliments good, and it's hard when she says it because she's the most important thing to me.

Kim: Can you talk about that more? Why the more that she says it?-

Dawn: Ummmm, I guess because I don't take compliments well and-

Kim: Yes, but there's a difference between not being able to take a compliment and not believing that you're a good mom.

Dawn: [long pause] I guess because I don't believe that I am...I guess it's easier to focus on the negative things, than it is to focus on the positive. And I focus more on the negative.

I wanted to talk to Dawn about what influences her feelings of high self-esteem.

When I asked her to talk about it she explained to me, "I'm not always high self-esteem and I'm not always low self-esteem. I think I'm pretty neutral. Yeah, I have ups and downs, but most of the time I'm pretty neutral." She went on to tell me how for her, self-esteem is very transient and changes often even throughout any given day. "I guess I'm up and down all day long," she says. It seems that the change is dependent on her energy levels.

Where Dawn's low self-esteem is associated with a lack of energy, her high self-esteem seems to be associated with high energy levels. When I asked Dawn to tell me about a time when she experienced high self-esteem she explained, "I guess the job I did last I had high self-esteem. I just [pause] I had lots of energy." I wondered what other aspects of this job experience were positive for her.

Dawn: Days were stressful, but like, people weren't fake there, so if we had stressful days there we'd vent to each other, and realize that we didn't have to be perfect or be superstars at what we did. So it was real and genuine, that's what it

was, it was genuine. You could be so hyper or so low. It didn't matter, everybody was just awesome.

Kim: So was it the acceptance of the people there?

Dawn: Yeah. And the individuals that worked with us, because we worked with the developmentally challenged so. And they're like, so loving. You know?

Kim: And did you feel competent in the job?

Dawn: Oh, completely. Yep, oh totally.

Dawn continued to tell me how positive relationships and reinforcement from other people influence how she feels about herself.

Simple things like somebody calls and hasn't for a long time, or getting emails back, emailing people who knew that I hadn't had email for a long time and it's kind of like 'oh, there you are!' It's nice to hear from them and they hear from you. Um, tomorrow I'm getting together with a bunch of people I used to work with...years ago, and that will be nice. Cause they're awesome. Tomorrow will be up up up.

Dawn's sense of self-worth also seems to be associated with her physical appearance.

When I asked her to tell me what self-esteem meant to her, Dawn said, "Ummm, the way that you feel about yourself, the way you feel about your appearance, about your body." I asked Dawn to describe her own self-esteem to me. I found her responses seemed to revolve around her perceptions of her body. "I kind of obsessed with the way that my body looked," she explains. I wondered where this 'obsession' came from and wanted to inquire about what feelings were associated with Dawn's pre-occupation. I asked her to tell me about a time when she felt poorly about her body. "I was overweight when I was young, and being called that for so long, I would get, yeah I was, yeah I am!...I

remember always hating my size, totally hating my size and being very conscious of wearing shorts and stuff,” Dawn explains. Besides being told she was overweight, it seemed Dawn also learned to be critical of her body by comparing it to other bodies.

I just remember always comparing myself to other people, and their legs and their stomachs, and places where I was bigger. I always had like a ponch, so. I always loved flat bellies, and noticed them on other people and I was so self-conscious of mine. And same with my thighs and you know...I always felt like I was fat.

Dawn went on to explain how her negative perceptions of her body affected her lifestyle and relationships with other people. I found the following story illustrative of the major impact that body image pre-occupation can have on women’s lives.

When I was going out with the guy that I was just going out with, like his friends were so superficial, and into looks and hot chicks and everything. And I never really felt comfortable hanging out with them, cause I felt like, so horrible about myself. And their girlfriends were all thin, and pretty, well maybe not so much pretty, [laughs] but snobby, but um, yeah they were thin anyway, and I would never ever go out with them, cause I never wanted them to be like, “oh look at his girlfriend,” anything like that. Like I never went out with them, like rarely in the whole 2 years. Especially the ones that were more superficial. I wouldn’t go camping with them, or to the beach or anything, because I never liked the way that I looked in a bathing suit and I never felt comfortable camping cause I didn’t like to wear shorts, and I can’t wear dresses the whole time camping and that’s how I hid my thighs in the city. And if I wore dresses you couldn’t see my thighs and how they rub together... Yeah, so it did affect me. And I guess when my friends would go to the beach, I would never go. I don’t know. Just stuff like that.

More stuff where I couldn't hide my body I guess. [pause] But it did affect my relationships because I never made friends with his friends. [pause] To add to that one, I remember one time, I was feeling like crap and I went for a walk down Corydon, and we were going for gelati. And there's all these hot chicks, and it was super packed, you know how packed Corydon gets in the summer. All these hot chicks with short tops were walking by, and they had these thin bodies and they're beautiful, besides the fact that they had three pounds of make up on. And I was just like, the more they walked past us the more like shit I felt. And it was more and more and more. And I just, I ended up getting pissed off that night. He did nothing wrong. Just my insecurities. I remember that one because we ended up getting into a big fight. He was so pissed off that I felt so crappy about myself. I don't blame him because I would be so pissed off if somebody, especially somebody I was in a relationship with, like a good friend, I'd be so pissed off if they ever did that, like got so insecure that they made themselves sick. Like, I went to degrees like that where, we'd see certain people when we were out, I wasn't jealous and I never felt that he, not that he didn't look at them because he probably did, but they just looked so good, and I felt so crappy about myself. So. That happened a few times. But that one on Corydon was bad. It was so overwhelming because there were so many.

I got the feeling that Dawn's pre-occupations with her body had subsided. At this point in our interview, Dawn had made several references to her body that were positive. She spoke of a recent relationship that otherwise seemed "pretty abusive", but she explains, "he made me feel good about myself...physically he always reassured me, he never said that I was overweight, fat, anything." The influence of her partner's

reassurance seemed to survive the end of the relationship. "I like the shape of my body" she says, "I know it could be toned in certain areas, more toned, but not too toned. But yeah, the general shape of my body."

Without the influence of her boyfriend, I wondered what was sustaining this positive perception of her body. Dawn had a hard time articulating precisely what it was that changed her negative body perceptions.

You know what, I don't remember...I guess just things over the years are just changing, I don't know. Like little things, like I decided, that I liked my calves. I guess things just started changing. I don't know...it's harder to sit there and think about things I want to change about my body than what it used to be...because I don't think it's that bad. Not because of the fact that I can't because you can't. I can't ever get longer legs or longer torso...And um, no I just I don't know. It's just something that's different in my head. It's there, it's not something that I'm making myself believe, it's just something that one day I just didn't believe that I was this disgusting beast that I used to be. Like I really had a horrible self body image before. I used to think I was the fattest thing on the face of the earth. At this size. [pause]

Dawn seemed to analyze her perceptions of other people who are overweight in order to rationalize her own perceptions of herself.

And it's funny cause I look at people that are big, and I look at them and the things that they wear, and it's the confidence, like who cares how big you are? And I never look at people that are big and be like, oh my god, you know. It was me, I never cared about what they looked like. I mean sometimes I'll see somebody that's big and I'll be like, whoa. [pause] But, but no. I just, it just

happened. One day I was just fine with what I looked like.

Laughter is the Best Medicine: Dawn's Experience in the Workshop

Dawn served us with a very important presence in the workshop: humor. Maggie had it right when she said, "Dawn would just kill me because anything, she would just say it! [laughs] Anything she just says it!" It was perhaps Dawn's frankness and hilarity that put the rest of us at ease, often alleviating the seriousness of our discussions. What's more, I wondered if Dawn's blatant nature allowed the rest of us to feel comfortable being just as honest with ourselves and each other's feelings. Laughter, which Dawn often provoked, brought us together in a way that is hard for me to articulate. When we laughed it was as though we were sharing a secret or a joke that was gendered exclusive to women, particularly the six of us.

It took Dawn little time to get acquainted with each participant and comfortable in the workshop environment. Dawn spoke often in 'collective reflective', usually offering a funny remark about herself or about our conversations. It was also frequent that during the activity portion, Dawn would make light of her body and her 'inability' to perform a task. If Dawn found herself out of breath during a cardiovascular activity she would also be quick to exaggerate her breathlessness making others beside her laugh. It appeared that Dawn didn't take herself very seriously in some circumstances. At the same time, however, Dawn allowed herself to show the group her 'down side', sharing when she would be "PMSing" or be having a hard week. Dawn appeared very sure of herself and her words and struck me as someone who possessed a lot of confidence. It was perhaps her perceptions of her body that she took a little more to heart. Dawn shared her individual goals with the group in Session 1: to improve her body image.

In the first few sessions of the workshop, Dawn's contributions to our 'collective reflective' discussion would often involve references about her body. In one of the first 'check ins', Dawn told the group of her concerns with the approaching summer. She wasn't looking forward to it because of the accompanying fashions required. She went on to make subtle criticisms of her body. I thought about Dawn's interview and the story she told me about not allowing herself to camp and do other activities because of what she felt she had to wear. Dawn's journal writing really seemed to reflect her body pre-occupations. I asked the group to write whether they are ever pre-occupied with their weight and/or body image. Dawn writes:

Of course I am! When I look @ others-especially those girls in those belly shirts. I know that even if my body was as tight as can be-my stretch marks would never let me get away with wearing that. And it's not just those shirts-it's the things that smaller ppl can wear, that I would not look like that in. (I'm trying REALLY hard here not to say bad things about myself and use words like 'hideous'...)...It's been like my whole life...I've always (as long as I can remember) been called fat or chubby or anything in that context. So it's like-no matter how comfortable I may be w/ myself @ times, it always comes back to that.- I can remember in grade 8, not eating lunch-becoming a vegetarian-afraid to eat and eating little meals because of how fat I was...that went on for years-until I was pregnant...then a few years after she was born, went on weight watchers and lost 30 lbs in 3 mo.! I was happy! Then started slacking a little but not too much-but wasn't satisfied. I started working out like a motha fucka! Then came the effedrine hydroxycut and craziness in the head and extra pills to take just before I would work out. Right now as I write this I cry-I'm crying b/c all this time I spent worrying about

myself-and completely disregard [my daughter] and what she needed from me.

This is where I hold back from the negative self-talk and reflect on how to change this feeling of shit!

What was perhaps most apparent to me about Dawn throughout the workshop, was her transient demeanor which was reflected a little bit in her mood, but mostly in what she wrote. While Dawn was 'up' most days, every so often Dawn would come to session appearing 'down'. She was quite frank about these moods, and shared her feelings about them in her check ins. She would announce that she was "PMSing" or had had a hard week or day. These moods seemed important to me, and I wondered if they represented her feelings of self-esteem and body image, simply because her first interview portrayed this. When Dawn was "hyper" or "up" she felt good about herself. When she didn't have energy and felt down, this seemed to reflect lower self-esteem and negative perceptions of her body. Dawn writes in frustration about her ever-changing self-perceptions.

I really piss myself off how I think @ times. It's up and down, and bad and NEVER stable. Sometimes I feel like I'm 'way too chubby to wear that'...I also wish that my confidence was constant. Sometimes I can have such a great personality and sometimes I'm a nervous wreck! What's up w/ that?

The following is a portion of a handout I asked the women to fill out. It also seemed to reflect Dawn's changing self-perceptions. It also gave some insight into what influences Dawn's high and low self-perceptions.

4. How is your self-esteem? Discuss.

It depends on the day
It depends on who I'm surrounded by

5. How do you feel about your body? Good? Bad? Neutral? Discuss.

Same as above...I can't really say because it changes All the time!

6. How do you feel in your body? Good? Bad? Neutral? Discuss.

Depends on my mood-depends on my PMS, depends on who I'm with;
what I'm wearing

"A Whole Different Way of Thinking"

I was curious to interview Dawn a second time. While she was always very open during 'collective reflective', and often appeared to be having a lot of fun, I was never sure what kept Dawn coming back to each session. I wondered if the program had any influence on her. I anticipated that some time together would enlighten me. Dawn seemed to open up when it was just the two of us.

Several things were interesting about my conversation with Dawn after the workshop. It appeared that the presence of this workshop in Dawn's life was timely in that her life had and was shifting both personally and professionally. Just prior to the commencement of the workshop Dawn had ended her relationship with her partner of two and a half years. While she says they "had some good times", it was also abusive and adds she was becoming "physically exhausted from fighting." The decision to separate appeared to be positive for Dawn's well being. In addition to this change, Dawn was about to quit her job and go back to school for the first time in many years. She started her first university classes a few weeks into the workshop. In our second interview Dawn remarks that her self-esteem "in the last few months [is] definitely better." Again I wondered if the workshop had any influence on Dawn's self-perceptions.

Dawn's responses to my interview questions and questionnaire seemed to indicate that the workshop was significant in enhancing her self-esteem and body image. A theme

that was apparent throughout our conversation was that of self-acceptance. I asked her how she felt about her body.

[It has been] better in the last little while. I realize this one exercise that you did... You asked what would you change about your body?... I remember thinking after and I'm like, I wouldn't change anything about my body, like the way it is, the way it's structured. It would be nice to lose some of the chunks, but it's really not that bad. And I realize that. But I realized that in this class... the way that it's shaped and the way that it is, I can deal with... I remember that one exercise, and it was harder to do to sit there and think about things I want to change about my body than what it used to be... I realized that I couldn't say as many bad things as I could have in the past... I don't care as much if my stomach sticks out a little bit.

When I asked her to talk about her self-esteem Dawn's response seemed to touch upon her physical self-perceptions. She remarked that it was "better. I don't care so much to change myself, or buy that shirt cause it's the only one left in the small, and I like it, but I'm gonna lose weight and fit into it later. It's just a whole different way of thinking now." Later however, Dawn added that "I just have, like I'm just more confident now after this. Like not more confident, but I have a better body image of myself after this workshop." I wasn't sure how to interpret Dawn's responses. It seemed apparent that the workshop had informed her body image in a positive way. And I wondered how much of this enhancement had to do with her self-esteem. Dawn's positive physical self-perceptions appeared to make her feel good about herself. However, I wondered if a positive body image had anything to do with how she interpreted her level of confidence. Were self-esteem and confidence two different concepts to her? In any case, Dawn recalled "feel[ing] more comfortable with [her]self and the way that [she] look[s]."

It appeared that the social support and social interaction aspects of the workshop were especially important to her. "It made me think lots-out loud and hear other's opinions and stories," she writes. Dawn had a hard time articulating this experience for me in our interview. I asked her to recall how the workshop had positively informed her self-esteem.

Dawn: I don't know. I really don't know. I think it was uh, [pause] listening to everybody else talk. Especially Maggie and Cheryl.

Kim: What about what they said?

Dawn: I guess cause they're older and they've realized a lot of the stuff that I haven't yet.

I wanted to follow up on this more with Dawn.

Kim: Can you talk about the interaction between you and the other women and what that was like for you?

Dawn: I think it was just, like we all just like opened our hearts, pretty much right away and you know. It was just different...it's not like when you go into a room full of women. It's not like that. It's so different. We were all there for a different purpose. And just talking about anything and everything. Everything! [laughs] It was nice, you know? I think we all listened to each other and everybody would get feedback, whenever somebody had to say something, or somebody needed something, there was always feedback from at least someone. It just, it was really supportive...Realizing that [pause] like in the talks we must have um, the social part of it like, just realizing that I'm not as bad as I thought...I've definitely changed for the better.

The social interaction and support of the group seemed to interact with her life circumstances intimately. Dawn remarked that the workshop may have provided her with some support that she needed following the break up of her and her partner. "I think it was perfect...where I was going through a break up of like two and a half years and had this, and everybody was so supportive, and maybe if I wasn't so comfortable with myself, like if I wasn't going through this workshop at that time, maybe it wouldn't have been so easy to break up with him...I was more concentrating on me and what I needed," she says.

What was perhaps most telling about Dawn's experience in the workshop was her response to a question I had the group reflect on in their journal. This particular entry seemed to illustrate how important the social dynamic of the group was for Dawn. When I asked the group to write about one experience or even in their life that caused them to feel good about themselves, Dawn wrote:

I can't think-nothing comes to mind-maybe when I finally broke up w/ [my boyfriend]-or maybe once I started the EYSWorkshop-talking w/ everyone and discussing personal things. There was absolutely no judging and everyone could sense that. I think all of us ladies got something positive out of this. It was nice to have such different ppl-or should I say ppl from all different things/experiences that are connected in some way-we all learnt from each other and realized how 'the same' we were.

The dynamic of the group seemed to provide a space for Dawn that was comfortable to be active in as well.

I think we just had a really supportive group and that was what it was. You know, sometimes when I've gone to the gym and you feel kind of dumb doing aerobics and you kind of screw up or whatever. But it wasn't like that, like I didn't care. I

mean I felt kind of dumb when I couldn't do things but it wasn't like embarrassing. Cause nobody cares...and who cares if they really see you slip up because they'll just laugh at you. [laughs] And that's fine. [laughs]...when we were exercising we were always joking around and stuff and we'd look at each other and we'd screw up and just laugh.

Dawn's light references to the activities were interesting to me. It seemed that for Dawn the social dynamic of the activities was positive, whereas otherwise for her activity seemed like 'work'. When I asked her to talk about a learning experience that was derived from the workshop Dawn remarked, "I guess not to take things too seriously like exercising, whereas before I'd concentrate so hard and you know, didn't want to screw up and whatever...I guess the whole comfort level of just the whole thing, was a learning experience."

What was perhaps most surprising about Dawn's experiences in the group was her change in attitude towards exercising following completion of the workshop. When we talked about Dawn's exercise habits before the workshop began I learned that physical activity seemed to be a source of stress and guilt for her at times. When she did exercise Dawn admits that "I feel a whole lot better, like if I do go for a walk. It makes me feel a whole lot better." It seems however, that when she doesn't exercise, the inactivity becomes a source of low self-esteem. "When I stay home and do nothing I don't feel good about myself...when I would exercise and if I didn't I felt like sooo crappy when I didn't. [pause] But I hate that crappy feeling," she says. I share these same feelings of guilt when I'm not active, and I wondered how this could be resolved. Somehow the workshop seemed to remedy Dawn's feelings of guilt. When I asked her if she felt any

differently about being active following the workshop the following correspondence occurred.

Dawn: Yeah, yeah. Before it was always like kind of thing like, okay I've got to exercise, I've got to do something, oh look at this, I have to do this. But now, no I don't care. I could go the rest of my life and never exercise again and be okay with that.

Kim: Why?

Dawn: I guess I just realize that I am the way I am. You know, who cares?

I followed up on this theme later in the interview.

Kim: So did [the workshop] discourage you to exercise?

Dawn: I guess so.

Kim: Because of the lack of emphasis on-

Dawn: How good I have to look.

Kim: Right. So was exercise for you then, a way to look good?

Dawn: Yeah. Back in the day, yeah.

I realized the balancing act I would have to play if I were ever to facilitate another workshop like this in the future. I reflected on what kind of messages I was presenting in the workshop and thought perhaps I needed to make some modifications. Though I was promoting active living, I wondered if some individuals perceive activity only as a means to achieve the 'ideal' body. Dawn's experience certainly revealed something for me to consider in the future.

Personal Reflection: Growing Pains

The circumstances that marked my life during the winter and spring of 2003 provoked other issues of insecurity within me. It was as though the changes and uncertainty which were occurring all around me aroused an uncertainty within myself and of myself. My values, beliefs and interpretations of myself and my environment became vague and under suspicion. It was as though everything I had learned up until this time was up for examination all over again.

January 6, 2003

Odd to not know what is right when everything sits right before you. Also odd to recognize that one's feelings are not 'objective', and completely, vulnerably suspended for scrutiny by others and oneself. It's enough to drive me mad at times.

It was not only difficult for me to make ordinary decisions on a day to day basis, I rarely trusted my interpretations or perceptions of things to be "accurate" or appropriate. As a consequence of this experience, I did not feel as though I possessed a set of values or morals for myself and therefore, low self-esteem seemed to emerge. I began to rely heavily on other people's influences and opinions to make decisions for me. I was also however, very much aware of how diverse people's interpretations and perceptions of things were, and therefore, became suspicious of other people's truth claims. As a result, I found it very hard to operate socially and emotionally.

January 12, 2003

Perception is dangerous. Nobody can figure out fact from fallacy on their own. Everybody needs to analyze and assess first on their own and then ask the opinion of everyone else around them, and then think things over all over again before they can make any sort of decision about anything. You can barely argue that right and wrong exist. And how is any vulnerable person supposed to function in society with all these things jumping out at you in their own favor. "Well, you could go this way, or you could go that way, or you could go any number of ways". This is why childhood is absolutely productive. You get things done when people are telling

you definitively what is right and what to do and how to do it the right way. There is undisputedly right and wrong, truth and false.

April 24, 2003

Figuring out who I am is lost. Do I have to relearn myself? How does one know what is right when one barely believes in truth? Are there right choices or just choices with different consequences?

There were times when somehow, my understanding of and attitude towards my experience would change. It was as though I could sometimes flourish during adverse times. My confusion would turn into an appreciation for all the difference life had to offer.

May 8, 2003

I almost 'enjoy' adversity for the learning and growing that takes place within me during it all. Life is so amazing the way it works sometimes. It's so amazing. I don't mean good amazing. I mean profound in an ugly, great, disturbing, disgusting, fantastic way. It's a kaleidoscope of meanings, interpretations, experiences, love and loss.

Still however, I would struggle with the responsibility of creating a life of appropriate meanings; a way to live that was right for me.

May 10, 2003

It's kind of upsetting to think that we create our own meanings and values for everything. And perhaps there is, in the end, absolutely no right and wrong, it's just what you make of it. Isn't that what opinions are for?

My confusion seemed to manifest itself throughout my behavior; I would constantly reflect on the appropriateness of my thoughts and actions. Am I behaving appropriately? Are my actions and feelings appropriate for this circumstance? In particular, I struggled to balance with both providing support for my mother throughout her cancer procedures, as well as my reactions to them and my own need for emotional support. Somehow, in a way that is difficult to articulate, I did not think that I deserved support. I did not think my circumstance was worthy of asking for support. Because

although I recognized the circumstances of the last few months were challenging, I also knew I was an extremely fortunate person. This internal conflict created a kind of paranoia within me.

May 17, 2003

Barely coping with the circumstances in my life which seems to be compounded by my own feelings of neurosis, combined with "don't feel sorry for yourself," combined with "you have to be strong for your mother," combined with I'm not feeling much support for myself right now. I dislike myself today, these days. Internalizing much, paranoid of what I contemplate to be true...I can't cope with change. I don't understand it and don't want it to happen. I want security and knowing.

I longed for stability; a sense of ordinary, regularity. Because as things became vulnerable in my life, I also became vulnerable. I became hyperaware of how I appeared to others. It was as though my weaknesses were on display for others to alienate and to judge. My self-esteem was therefore in jeopardy.

June 7, 2003

All of a sudden things got so complicated. Why am I constantly consumed with how others see me? Constantly consumed with how I appear. Have I offended anyone? Was that funny? Was that smart? That was so stupid. My breasts are so fat and lazy. Is it just this year? This year of fear, uncertainty, change, loss. I suppose I would like to sort all of this out. I want to stop thinking about myself. The way I am. I miss my grandmother. She would be so good for me now.

When I reflect on this experience, I wonder why I felt such a sense of urgency to collaborate my logic of right and wrong; to create a sense of order and truth in my life. But as it had such an impact on my self-esteem-the way I operated in the world, the way I internalized so much - I understand now, the necessity for some kind of resolution.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS

Exercise Your Self Workshop: Informers of Self-Esteem and Body Image

There were several aspects of the Exercise Your Self Workshop that informed the self-esteem and body image of the five participants. Of these influences, the following section will address social support dynamics and activity informants of self-esteem and body image. As well, I will outline how consciousness raising and reflection aspects of the workshop informed the participants' sense of self and body.

Social Support

Of the many aspects of the Exercise Your Self Workshop (EYSW), the social support dynamic appeared to be the most informative and influential on the self-esteem and body perceptions of the participants of the program. Social support has been shown to foster self-esteem in women and has important implications for physical activity interventions (McManus et. al, 1997). It is important however, to illustrate how this dynamic occurs. When I asked Maggie what she most enjoyed about her participation in the workshop, her response appeared to represent many of the other women's feelings: "For me the most enjoyable part was the social interaction with everybody, because I think that we all connected and I think that there was some good learning going on...I think that there were some really beneficial things that happened." There appeared to be several factors that contributed to the social support benefits received by the participants. These aspects included the particular group rapport/group dynamic that occurred within the workshop, social interactions and specific relationships that developed between group members which in turn facilitated many shared experiences. The following section will outline such observations.

Group Rapport/Group Dynamic

An aspect of 'support groups', which facilitators often hope for, is a positive rapport among its participants. Although I tried to anticipate such rapport would occur by planning, for example, 'ice breaking' activities in the first couple of sessions, I could not have planned for or foreseen how quickly this positive rapport occurred. Jane put it well when she said, "as soon as everybody came in together, it was like, 'alright!'"

Perhaps what allowed for this dynamic to occur was the willingness of each participant to share themselves emotionally without casting judgment on others who were willing to share their own experiences. This atmosphere seemed to be appropriate for facilitating positive self-esteem in the participants. When I asked Nancy if there were aspects of the workshop that informed her self-esteem, she told me, "it was the social interaction" that was supportive for her. She elaborated: "We had a very good group, we had good people in the group who were nonjudgmental, and they were open and honest and willing to share their experiences. So it's nice when you say something that's not taken apart or put down or - it's accepted." Jane's experience was similar to Nancy's. When I asked her what she enjoyed most about the workshop, she explained, "I didn't have to be afraid to say something, or that I would maybe say the wrong things, and I would be told to be quiet or to just give me the cold shoulder, I didn't feel it. And that was the best part."

This atmosphere of emotional openness appeared to facilitate similar reactions in the other women participating in the workshop. The non-judgmental group rapport seemed to reflect Surrey's (1991) suggestion that self-esteem might be related to the "degree of emotional sharing, openness, and shared sense of understanding and regard" (p.57). While it may be difficult to replicate the ease with which the group bonded, it may

be noteworthy to observe more, the relationship between positive group rapport and self-esteem in women.

The Facilitator-Participant Relationship Resonating with culturally relevant physical education is the relationship between teacher and student, or in this case, the facilitator-participant relationship (van Ingen & Halas, 2003). While I recognized myself as responsible for generating successful relationships between myself and each of the participants, I also saw this necessary for creating a positive rapport within the group; the atmosphere generated amongst the participants would largely depend on how I interacted with each woman individually and as a group.

Prior to the commencement of the workshop, I saw my first couple of meetings with each woman as an opportunity to create a positive rapport between us. It was important for me to facilitate this so that each participant would feel comfortable sharing their lives and stories with me. As well, I hoped these feelings of comfort and respect would filter into the workshop creating an atmosphere conducive for sharing.

While I saw my role of facilitator as key in determining the success of the intervention, I felt that the way in which I carried out this role was important for the rapport amongst us. I wanted to abandon the traditional role of teacher and instead emphasize my presence as facilitator and/or participant observer. Gloria Ladson-Billing's (1994) interpretation of culturally relevant teacher practices demonstrates how disrupting this hierarchical tradition of power can profoundly influence an individual's learning process. I approached this research with feminist assertions: understanding women's experiences involve facilitating women's own descriptions, analysis, explanations and interpretations of these experiences (Cook & Fonow, 1990). I therefore emphasized my role, in the first EYSW, as that of facilitator and not teacher. Furthermore, I suggested

that I had as much to learn from them as they did from me, and more so, as all of us did from each other. This dynamic was observed by Maggie who appeared to appreciate this approach.

You participate- the fact that you participated with us, and you didn't do anything to make it like, 'oh well, I'm better than you guys, I can do this, I have the stamina to do this, I've been working out the whole time.' And that was good, because it made you part of the group the whole time...and that was nice, and that was a good thing. Because it made the whole thing into what it should be which was a group of peers working together.

The relationship between teachers (facilitators) and students (participants) should be considered when performing physical activity interventions in the future. Creating positive relationships between oneself and one's participants not only enhances the rapport amongst the group, but it also enhances the learning environment.

Social Interaction

When I asked each woman what they most enjoyed about their experience in the EYSW, all five participants responded that the social interaction aspect of the workshop was most enjoyable. This aspect also appeared to be extremely rewarding for the women.

The social interaction aspect of the workshop provided the participants with its most obvious feature; a social environment. Many of the women credited the social environment as providing a fun, high energy space that made exercising more fun. "Even when we were exercising we were always joking around and stuff and we'd look at each other and we'd screw up and just laugh. You know it was just really fun. Like the whole thing was fun," Darlene said. While this fun atmosphere appeared to provide us with nothing more than fun, when I reflected on this dynamic I wondered if it was more

significant than it initially seemed. As a group we reflected on many different serious issues that influence us as women: self-esteem, body image, exercise and health. I wondered if by making the atmosphere light and fun, these very serious issues became something that we could laugh about. I wondered if the atmosphere allowed for a more positive light to be cast on these troublesome concerns. For example, when I thought about Dawn's experience with exercise, I knew that she had struggled to try and maintain a potentially unrealistic body image by means of a lot of exercising that she had found very frustrating. After the workshop was finished I asked her how the 'fun' aspect of the social interaction was a learning experience for her. "I guess not to take things too seriously like exercising, whereas before I'd concentrate so hard and you know, didn't want to screw up and whatever," she explained.

Several other important dynamics occurred because of the social interaction that took place in the EYSW. The discussions that took place in the 'collective reflective' seemed to provide a support for the women. It appeared that the interaction amongst the women in the 'collective reflective' offered a kind of emotional 'feedback' to any one of the given participants. Many women described feeling a sense of affirmation from the other women after explaining or reflecting on a particular personal experience. When I asked Jane to describe an experience in the workshop that made her feel good about herself, she responded, "you hear something you need to hear and you lift up sort of." Appraisals from others appeared to be most important and influential for Jane's self-esteem. In a particular 'collective reflective' session we talked about our childhood and what our upbringing was like. When Jane shared her experience, the feedback she received from the rest of the group seemed to provide her with a sense of assurance.

We talked about upbringing...so there was one thing that made me feel good, and that is, okay I'm not just, I'm not weird, I'm not stupid like I was made to believe when I was a kid, or I'm not like good-for-nothing, or nothing will ever become of me or whatever. Which wasn't all that I heard others say, but that they had been through, their upbringings were different. But then I kind of felt like, okay, it is not my fault. Or it's not me that has screwed up, or I was just a horrible person, or a horrible child.

Dawn related to this experience commenting that, "the whole comfort level of just the whole thing, was a learning experience. Realizing that...like in the talks we must have um, the social part of it like, just realizing that I'm not as bad as I thought."

What appeared to be even more important for the participants was their exposure to other women's stories and experiences. For Nancy, listening to other women's stories served as a kind of positive reference point for where she was in her own life. I asked her what aspect of the social interaction was positive for her. "I think mostly sharing their experiences that everyone's had. It was kind of nice to look back, not look back but just to see oh, we kind of learnt from other people's experiences and how they dealt with certain situations and how they were doing at that point. So it was like, okay, I'm not, I'm on the right track type of thing," she explained. Nancy continued to illustrate how listening to other people's experiences was important to her: "For me, I felt like a sponge. Like I just learned through other people's experience. It was kind of just added on to more from my own experiences. So, I felt like a sponge." Dawn and Cheryl shared similar experiences commenting that "listening to everybody else talk" and "hearing the point of view of others in the workshop" was important.

As an observer, what stood out for me most as an important indicator of social interaction on self-esteem was particular friendships and connections made within the group, specifically the friendship generated between Jane and Maggie. After sharing Jane's experiences of receiving negative affirmations from significant others, the feedback she received from Maggie seemed to positively inform her self-esteem. For example, in response to my question about the workshop and whether she felt it informed her self-esteem in any way, Jane said,

Yeah. Yeah. That comment...I don't know what class it was, but somebody said, to separate yourself from the people who are negative, have a negative influence on you. That made me feel better. Like these are the things that I can quote a lot now, which I never did before. Like now, like somebody gets to me, okay, then that's too bad...That was a very big thing. It made a big difference to me.

Jane seemed to illustrate how this social interaction dynamic was important. She suggested, "You hear about other people, like you get ideas, other people talk about things, and you get ideas about what they are going through. And the way they see things, uh, that was helpful for me."

The social interaction dynamic of the workshop seemed to influence many of the participants' sense of self and how they operate in their own lives. These observations appear to support Cooley's (Bracken, 1996) suggestion that social interaction with others can shape the self by providing one with reflexive feedback which can influence how one feels about oneself as well as their position in society.

This concept of 'reflexivity' and social interaction was also explored by Barbara Myerhoff. In the book *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Riv-Ellen Prell (1989) outlines Myerhoff's notion of reflexivity; "the

capacity to arouse consciousness of ourselves as we see the actions of ourselves and others” (p.251). Social interaction, she explains, is a fertile field for analyzing how people are active constructors of themselves and their place in society.

Relationships With Others

Mruk (1999) suggests that women’s self-esteem is largely dependent on their relationship with others. New relationships generated from support groups and other types of group environments also seem to increase self-esteem in women (Butler & Wintram, 1991). While I never directly asked any of the participants if they felt the relationships they developed with the other women in the EYSW increased their self-esteem, it appeared that this dynamic was an important part of their experience in the group. The positive rapport, as well as the degree of emotional openness generated amongst the women, could not have existed if each participant did not feel a sense of closeness and comfort between each participant. Dawn outlined this atmosphere:

We all just opened our hearts, pretty much right away and you know. It was just different, it’s not like when you go into a room full of women. It’s not like that. It’s so different. We were all there for a different purpose. And just talking about anything and everything. Everything! [laughs] It was nice, you know? I think we all listened to each other talk and everybody would get feedback, whenever somebody had to say something, or somebody needed something, there was always feedback from at least someone. It just, it was really supportive.

It appeared this connection was felt by many, if not all of the participants. There were however, specific relationships generated between some of the women that appeared to inform a sense of self and/or sense of security. When I asked Nancy if there

was a particular experience or relationship within the workshop that was informative for her, she responded:

Um...Maggie, I feel like I have this connection with Maggie. I don't know, Maggie seems to be like, if I get older I want to be like her, like someone who's strong, is independent, can do whatever she wants to do. And the way she just talked and sometimes we'd have similarities. You know, with experiences or how you would deal with things. I'm like okay, I'm on the right track. But I think, emotionally and soulfully, I think it would be Cheryl. I think Cheryl brought in a humanness and soulfulness in the group. Yeah. It's true.

Jane also seemed to benefit from relationships generated within the group. When I asked her what she most enjoyed about the workshop, she exclaimed, "Dawn!" and laughed. Jane talked about her difficulty performing activities in front of the full-length mirrors in the dance studio. Seeing her body's reflection in the mirrors made her feel "awkward" and "very self-conscious" because "I'm not totally happy with myself." Dawn appeared to provide a distraction from Jane's self-consciousness; Jane would "listen to Dawn's comments...I couldn't hear anybody else except for the person next to me because of the echo in the gym. And so I just figured okay, I'll just listen to her and laugh, and maybe I'll get a good laugh out of it." While this relationship with Dawn appeared to be most significant, Jane also remembered feeling "welcome. I wanted that. So that was probably what made me feel the best all over, like that a lot of them made me feel good...that's when I felt the highest."

Shared Experience

Research indicates that social support can foster self-esteem in women through the sharing of common experiences (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Sharing

common experiences can remove a sense of isolation within each woman and her experience. This dynamic seemed to operate on many different levels within the EYSW, appearing with something as simple as sharing a bad day, or a bad mood. Cheryl explains:

For instance when we were having bad days, but other people have bad days too...when Darlene was having a bad day, it was like, well thank goodness she's having a bad day, cause I'm having a bad day too. You know? [laughs] You just feel better, if someone else is having a bad day. So it was supportive that way.

It was Jane however, who appeared to benefit most from the shared experience dynamic. It occurred to me that many of the participants of the EYSW had a good network of support people in their lives. I wondered though, if Jane had the same kind of support available to her. Jane's interaction with the other women in the workshop who listened and validated her experience, as well as shared some of her experiences, seemed to remove a sense of isolation from her life. When I asked Jane if she could recall anything that happened in the workshop that made her feel good about herself she said:

Every time somebody was telling something about themselves, it always made me feel wow, like hey, I'm not alone in the world. Like I'm not the only person who struggles, or deals or thinks about things...I'm not the only one who feels like crap, and just wants to [pause] whatever, runaway and cry or, or tell somebody off, or whatever kind of feeling. I'm not the only one. And to just, that's okay, that kind of feeling. You learn that, that's okay to feel that way...you hear that everybody is kind of in the same boat. That was, that made me feel good.

The shared experience dynamic seemed to operate in a different but beneficial way for Maggie as well. Maggie felt as though her stories and past experiences resonated

with both Jane and Dawn's experience. That Maggie was able to reflect on these experiences and offer words of advice to Jane and Dawn, was rewarding for her.

I think that there were some really beneficial things that happened. Especially with somebody like Dawn, who's a young single mom, just starting out with university and, it's funny because I was able to say to her, you know what? I remember doing that. I was right there, where you were at exactly the age you're at...I know exactly how she's feeling about it. And how you think you're never going to be anywhere but where you are right now. And so, I think in that way there was some positive comments that I could give to her about what she's going through. So those kinds of things I really enjoyed.

It appeared that Maggie's mentor-like role within the workshop was more than just enjoyable for her. The workshop offered her a space and opportunity in which she could help other people. This opportunity in turn, seemed to positively inform her own self-esteem. When I asked Maggie if she could recall a particular experience within the workshop that made her feel good about herself, she said:

[pause] You know what it was, is when Jane referred, and she referred to it a few times, 'it was something Maggie said that made me think.' That made me feel good. Because it made me feel like, I've done something, or my experience has been able to help somebody... Yeah, that's what it was. That's the one think that I take, you know, made me really really feel good.

The shared experience dynamic also seemed to influence the women's attitude toward and participation in the activity portion of the EYSW. Throughout the workshop I learned that many of the women's experiences with exercise had not been positive. Some of the women reported not feeling competent performing certain activities and that going

to the gym was an intimidating experience. While the workshop did not facilitate some of the participants' exercise capabilities, it appeared that the women were at similar activity levels. This provided a less competitive environment whereby the participants could simply enjoy the activity together whether they could perform things 'correctly' or not. It was as Jane said: "every body is kind of in the same boat," trying new things out together for the first time. Dawn said,

When I've gone to the gym and you feel kind of dumb doing aerobics and you kind of screw up or whatever. But [the workshop] wasn't like that, like I didn't care. I mean I felt kind of dumb when I couldn't do things, but it wasn't like embarrassing. Cause nobody cares, and they're concentrating on what they're doing anyways. And who cares if they really see you slip up because they'll just laugh at you. [laughs] And that's fine. [laughs]

The shared experience of the women performing the activities made the exercise enjoyable instead of competitive. This emphasis often appeared to remove a kind of 'performance anxiety' or 'lack of competence' feeling in the participants.

The Learning Climate These social support informants of self-esteem and body image were in part, supported by the way in which the atmosphere of the learning environment was created for each 'collective reflective' session. As van Ingen and Halas (2003) suggest, the design of the learning climate can influence how an individual learns. There were several dynamics which I initiated in order to facilitate a positive learning space for my participants. These dynamics included the setting for 'collective reflective', creating appropriate sharing climates and opportunities, and establishing rapport.

Although my options were limited, I felt I required a room with specific features. Room 117 in Frank Kennedy Center accommodated many of these features. This room

was private, carpeted, small and had a softer feel than some of the other rooms we occupied during our sessions. Its atmosphere allowed us to feel comfortable and more “at home” to discuss our experiences. Some of the other rooms, equipped with fluorescent lighting, tiled floors and altogether cold atmospheres were less conducive for creating comfortable and personal learning environments.

Creating appropriate sharing climates and opportunities was essential for making each participant feel comfortable and respected. It was also important for gathering information-rich data: creating comfortable sharing spaces encouraged sharing of meaningful and relevant experiences. There were some things I initiated so as to create this appropriate sharing space. First, I assembled the chairs in a circle. I felt this arrangement was important to establish a sense of equivalency and unity among us. This arrangement also demonstrated my role of participant observer rather than a figure of authority. My next initiative in creating an appropriate sharing space was to establish a list of group rules that would honor each individual participating including myself, as well as honor the journey of the EYSW. Each woman volunteered a number of items which established an understanding of respect and privacy between us.

Creating appropriate learning climates involves establishing a sense of inclusion within the environment (van Ingen & Halas, 2003). I therefore, felt it was necessary to provide sharing opportunities for each participant in each ‘collective reflective’. I hoped this might provide each woman with a sense of personal validation; if each woman was heard throughout each session, her own sense of self and authenticity would be expressed. This allowed for the group, as well as myself, to understand an individual’s position and perspective amongst us. As well, it would help me understand what each woman values, and perhaps how she defines her sense of self. Sharing opportunities were

provided with 'check ins' and 'check outs'. Check ins would occur at the beginning of each session where each woman would share, if they wished, a little bit about how they were feeling that particular week or day, and/or what was happening in their lives. Check outs would occur at the end of each session where each woman would reflect on how the 'collective reflective' impacted them. Check in and check outs provided even the quieter participants with opportunities to share.

Rapport was established quickly. The first session, absent of physical activity, allowed for us to get to know one another before embarking on more personal and meaningful curriculum. I scheduled two full hours for session one, and initiated an 'ice-breaking' exercise which also provided each woman an opportunity to validate her self and presence in the EYSW. In addition, I purposefully made walking the first activity in Session 2 so that we could casually talk and get to know one another.

Activity Informants of Self-Esteem and Body Image

Studies have shown that sport and physical activity may have a beneficial impact on the self-esteem of women (Fox, 1996; Ebbeck and Weiss, 1998). This research identified several variables that may have had an important influence on the self-esteem and body image of the women participating. It appeared that individual perceived physical competence was related to self-esteem. As well, the type of activity appeared to be informative of the participants' self-esteem and body image. In addition, factors specific to the environment of the activity space and 'time for self' seemed to influence self-esteem and body image. However, it appeared that the social interaction dynamic of the activity portion of the workshop was significantly more beneficial than any of these variables. The following section will discuss these observations.

Physical Competence

The participants' perceived physical competence and physical abilities appeared to directly influence many of the women's self-esteem relating to activity performance. Maggie and Jane seemed to experience this more so than the other participants. Maggie's 'inability' to perform activities 'correctly' or with a high level of performance was extremely uncomfortable and embarrassing for her. When I asked her what she least enjoyed about the workshop, Maggie said:

The aerobics. [laughs]... You see, I have no coordination. I am totally the most uncoordinated person. And it brings it all back, those feelings of being in a classroom and somebody going, 'you're moving the wrong way! You're not going fast enough! You're not doing that move right!'... I like to see myself in that position where I'm doing things the right way... I was just thinking I look like an idiot... it gave me a chance to reflect on, wow, you've really got yourself in a position where you just don't like the way you look. [laughter] You just don't want to look stupid in front of anybody!... That was stress. [laughter] It just kind of brings up the whole idea of being in a situation where you're not comfortable, and that was the feeling. You know, being angry or whatever. That was just a stressful situation for me.

Where Maggie's feelings of lack of competence for a given activity seemed to negatively inform her sense of self, her ability to perform certain skills well, correspondingly made her feel good about herself. Maggie had good flexibility, and was therefore able to perform such skills as stretching and Yoga with ease. When I asked her if she could recall a particular experience within the workshop that made her feel good about her body, Maggie said, "Just the fact that my flexibility - you know, it's positive

for me, because of the fact that I can still, I mean...I can't go as far as I used to, but the fact that I can still stretch and still have really good flexibility is positive for me."

Jane appeared to enjoy many of the exercise activities. "That time when we went for that walk, I loved that. Um, like I said, every time we did the exercise, there was, the exercise itself was great," she said. Like Maggie, Jane's perceived competence and abilities to perform the particular activities seemed to influence her perceptions of herself. When she referred to the coordination activities, aerobics and hip hop dance, Jane mentioned feeling embarrassed. "I was terrible at keeping up, and I felt embarrassed so that was a negative. I felt bad about that," she recalled. However, when Jane felt that she could perform certain activities well, it made her feel good about herself. Jane described her experience with the activities as follows:

There was something you had a hard time doing and I was able to do it.

[laughter]...Sylvia said she had a hard time doing something, and I thought, [whispers to self] okay, okay...I remember thinking alright!...When I couldn't do what some of the others do, like Maggie, forget it. Anyways, when I couldn't do some of those things I felt like, oh no, oh no, that's not good. And then when I was able to do, it made me feel good.

Although the women participating in the EYSW adhered to the program despite their lack of coordination skills in both the aerobics and hip hop activities, these individual experiences of competence may have important implications for further participation in physical activity. Research indicates that participation in physical activity seems to depend on an individual's level of perceived competence (Hayes et. al, 1999). Many of the women's future participation in physical activity seems to depend on the type of activity they participate in; one in which they both felt competent performing.

Type of Activity

The type of activity in the EYSW seemed to influence the participants' perceived level of competence as well as their motivation to adhere to the activity. As mentioned in the previous section, coordination activities were not popular among some of the participants of the workshop. Along with the coordination aspects of the aerobics and hip hop dance sessions, there was a cardiovascular element that the women did not seem to enjoy. Yoga and pilates were certainly the most popular of the activities facilitated in the workshop and became the activities that all of the participants wished to pursue further after completion of the workshop. As well, both Dawn and Cheryl showed enthusiasm for the 'ball' exercises. The "relaxation and rejuvenation" components of these activities seemed to be most appealing for the women. I asked Dawn to tell me what exercise she most enjoyed in the workshop:

I like the, was it resistance strengthening, on the ball...I liked that because it worked muscles that I don't normally work. And so that was easy and umm, not so much like cardio, well it wasn't cardio at all. And it's just, it makes you feel good without having to do lots of cardio.

Nancy appeared to benefit a lot from the physical portion of the EYSW. When I asked her if she could recall a particular experience that made her feel good about her body, she said, "The exercise I was, afterwards, like physically I think the exercise at the end I felt rejuvenating. Sometimes I felt a calming effect afterwards." For Nancy, the workshop introduced her to a variety of different, non-cardiovascular activities that still provided her with a feeling of having had a work out. She spoke about her experience of exercise in the past, and always having a feeling like she needed to go running in order to

become fit, or be doing enough for her physical self. This perception, it seemed had changed for her after participating in the workshop.

I think it was during the pilates and yoga. Because they were both a really good work out even though it wasn't as intense, it wasn't as like I would be running outside. There was a different feeling working out. So I think it's more like relaxing and concentrating with the yoga and pilates...it was just more calming, more meditating.

Jane also appeared to benefit from the non-cardiovascular activities. She told me about an experience in the workshop that made her feel good about her body.

Oh actually when we did the yoga. That was best. Like that's, after that I felt the best, because it made me realize, like that was, there was something that actually made me relax, not make me tired, or didn't make me ache. Like that aerobic thing. So that was my very favorite part about all the exercises we did...after that I felt good.

I felt as though observing these particular experiences were important as well as indicative of future directions health promoters should take. There appears to be an assumption with western society that in order to keep fit and maintain good health we must participate in challenging cardiovascular feats. In the EYSW, these cardiovascularly challenging activities discouraged adherence and participation. Instead, it was the activities that were enjoyable, relaxing, yet still somewhat physically challenging that motivated the participants to adhere.

Non-Competitive Activity Space: The Learning Climate

There were two factors specific to the activity environment that are worthy of mention. The first of these factors is the kind of psychological environment that was

created during the activity sessions. Culturally relevant physical education suggests that the learning climate is an important determinant for participation. "Teachers endeavor to promote a gym environment that is inclusive, non-sexist, non-threatening, where students feel safe to be themselves and participate without fear of ridicule, etc" (van Ingen & Halas, 2003). Although I could not have thoroughly understood each woman's level of activity competence, I attempted to select women whom I felt were relatively sedentary and had similar movement abilities. This, I anticipated, would remove a sense of competition among the participants. This inclusive atmosphere was also perhaps due to the positive rapport that existed among the participants. This positive rapport was conducive in creating a non-competitive space in which each woman did not feel overly challenged or incompetent in a way that would discourage her from participating. Although some of the activities may not have been enjoyed by some of the women, namely the coordination and cardiovascular activities, there seemed to be an underlying motivation to keep things light and enjoyable. I felt as though this kind of non-competitive environment was important in order to show the fun side of being active. Competition would only remind less competent participants of their lesser abilities therefore contributing to lower self-esteem relating to their physical selves. The non-competitive environment did not overly provoke comparisons of abilities between participants, which therefore limited negative self-perceptions.

This non-competitive dynamic that occurred in the EYSW is important for considering future activity programs for less active individuals, especially for women. It has been documented that compared to men, women's participation in sport and physical activity is significantly less. Although many women enjoy competition, some research suggests that women may tend to participate less because sport and physical activity

often features competition as well as other comparative elements (Lirgg, 1991). Perhaps removing these variables from some activity programs may encourage further involvement from those women who dislike competition.

What Didn't Work An intimidating aspect of the activity space, which significantly influenced at least one participant of the workshop, was the full length mirrors lining one large wall of the dance studio. It was apparent that Jane struggled with this feature of the activity space.

Seeing myself in the mirror, that was awkward. [laughs] That was just ahhh! Every time, that, so that scared me, kind of, not scared me but kind of made me very self-conscious when I saw myself in the mirror. I am not totally happy with myself...the only thing I found to be negative was when I saw myself in the mirror...just when I saw my whole body, I just would, believe me it was every time I saw myself, I would try to...just focus on the person who is leading the group or whatever. Just don't look at yourself. Because I just, because I feel like in the last six years I've gained, ughh at least 15 pounds, and it looks horrible on me. Every time I have to convince myself, okay, just don't look at yourself that way. Don't and yet it was always every time I saw myself, every time.

Hearing about Jane's discomfort with her reflection made me curious. I reflected on my own experience of performing physical activity in front of a mirror and realized that many, if not all gym facilities have this feature in their aerobics space. I admitted to myself that at times I had felt uncomfortable viewing my own body. I wondered how this issue could be remedied. Then I wondered if this issue should be remedied. If we were to remove the mirrors from the activity space, it still would not resolve issues of negative body perceptions. Not removing the mirrors from the activity space provides an

opportunity for self-criticism for the individual with negative body perceptions. While there appears to be no immediate solution to this issue, it calls for a reflection upon activity spaces and how they are structured, as well as further dialogue regarding body image and how, as health educators, we can enhance individual body perceptions.

Time For Self

The EYSW provided time for the participants to focus on themselves. Prioritizing time for oneself seems to infer a sense of self as being important which of course, has implications for self-esteem. Although many of the women did not speak about this variable, Jane suggested that the workshop, in particular the activity sessions devoted to yoga, allowed for her to focus on herself. She referred to the yoga as,

Moments that were just my time. I don't have to worry about what happened, like just be me, like this is my time. I would say, so the best part was the yoga. I felt really good about myself.

Social Interaction/Social Support Aspects of Physical Activity

It was interesting to observe how the participants responded to the EYSW. After I interviewed each woman for the second time, it was apparent that the social interaction and social support dynamic of the workshop was significant in enhancing each individual's feelings of self-esteem. In the interviews, when I addressed questions regarding the activities and whether they were informative for their self-esteem and body image, it appeared that the social interaction and social support variables of the activities were more important to the participants than the exercise itself. For example, when I asked Dawn if any of the activities influenced her feelings towards her body, she replied,

Not really. I think we just had a really supportive group and that was what it was.

You know, sometimes when I've gone to the gym and you feel kind of dumb

doing aerobics and you kind of screw up or whatever. But it wasn't like that, like I didn't care...it wasn't embarrassing. Cause nobody cares...and who cares if they really see you slip up because they'll just laugh at you. [laughs]...I really think it was the interaction with the other people. Even when we were exercising we were always joking around and stuff and we'd look at each other and we'd screw up and just laugh.

Dawn later admitted that the exercise may not have influenced her feelings of self-esteem or perceptions of her body. It appeared, rather, the social interactions of the activities, as well as the social support which emanated from the group was where her feelings of self-esteem were enhanced. She adds, "Maybe it wasn't even the exercise that helped. For me probably not...maybe it was the 'chit chatty'. But that's definitely what did it for me it wasn't the exercise."

Previous reports have discussed the importance of supportive and interactive physical activity and how these variables can end up confounding post-activity self-esteem scores. Leonard (1996) suggests that, "social interaction in physical activity [is] an important combination, especially for females" (p.204). The EYSW appears to support these suggestions and may warrant further initiative for exercise interventions that include such activity motivators.

Consciousness Raising

'Consciousness Raising' was the primary theme of each 'collective reflective' session. In essence, the aim was to raise the participants' awareness about their social reality while simultaneously reflecting on how this reality influences women's and their own lives. "The significance of these [consciousness raising] exchanges for women in clarifying social realities and challenging hegemonic oppression has often been

profound” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.261). Consciousness raising groups were first established by women in the 1960’s. The thought was that self-awareness was synonymous with self-esteem. The consciousness raising aspects of the EYSW appeared to initiate a similar kind of response in the participants.

Influences of Consciousness Raising on the Participants of the EYSW

As one participant described, the EYSW got her “thinking of things [she] hadn’t really thought of” before. Many of us seem to wander through life unphased by our social environment, accepting our often unjust and oppressive reality as it comes. What I wanted to address in the EYSW were such oppressive and unjust realities in women’s lives. I wanted for us, as a group, to look at our own social atmosphere and question why things are the way they are. For example, why, in magazines are women often, if not always, represented as white, heterosexual, glamorous and very thin? Many women accept that this is the image we must strive to achieve. Somehow, it seems, we are less of a woman if we don’t live up to all the roles and expectations society demands of us. I wanted the participants to ‘unlearn’ this and instead come up with alternate signifiers of femininity. Together, we might redefine beauty. This was one example of the consciousness raising that took place in the EYSW.

Jane struggled a lot with her perceptions of her body. In her first few journal entries, she often referred to herself, implying she was “fat” and “ugly”. The consciousness raising aspects of the workshop seemed to help her challenge these negative perceptions of herself. I asked her what it was like talking about the media and body image. She replied, “the [‘collective reflective’], we would talk about those things it would always help. When I would go home I felt great. By the time I would go home I

felt good about myself.” Later, when I asked her how her self-esteem was, she offered the following,

I have come, I’ve learned to look at myself and don’t just look at the negative parts. So I would say it’s definitely, I feel yeah, I’m not so bad. I can say that to myself, I can, my self-esteem is I guess, I’ve come that far that I feel right now...I can look at myself and say, hey, you don’t look too bad.

Dawn also struggled with negative perceptions of her body. There was however, an exercise in the EYSW where Dawn realized she “wouldn’t change anything about [her] body...it’s really not that bad.” It was hard for her to articulate how this shift in her perception of her body occurred. She did offer, however, that she “realized that in this class.”

Another concern I felt was important to raise awareness about was issues revolving around exercise and physical activity. From my own experience, it appears that some women’s motivation to be active is to achieve society’s body expectations of women. As well, it seems that in order to achieve this ideal, exercise often becomes the focal point in our lives. Some of the women in the workshop described feeling a kind of pressure to maintain unrealistic physical activity schedules. I wanted to disassociate exercise from beauty and instead emphasize the women’s activity accomplishments. After the workshop, Dawn and Nancy described similar experiences of a kind of shifting or changing in their awareness. Nancy had “come to the realization that okay, I’m pretty active, not as much as I was before and it’s kind of like, just to realize not to be hard on myself...and if I become less active then I’m okay with it. I don’t feel bad about it anymore.” Dawn’s exercise experiences were a source of guilt for her. If she missed a day of exercise, Dawn “felt sooo crappy.” Her participation in the workshop appeared to

alleviate her anxieties about her unrealistic exercise commitments and body expectations.

“Before [exercise] was always for looking good. And now it’s not so much for the looking good aspect...now it’s more for, it would be more for feeling good.”

“Passing It On”

The consciousness raising aspects of the EYSW seemed to bring forth an important awareness that many of the participants wanted to pass on to their children.

“The course brought out a lot,” Cheryl said, “I hadn’t thought about self-esteem in my kids. And the most important thing I guess is their self-esteem.”

The workshop’s “Media and Body Image” session resonated with Maggie, encouraging her to reflect on how she interacts with her teenage daughter.

I didn’t really realize how much or the amount of negative image that is out there about women, about women’s bodies. But I started to take notice to that, it was one of the things I did start to notice...And so one of the ways that that impacted on me, was to think about being more positive with my daughter and about the things that she’s doing...So it made me when I would comment to her, not saying, ‘[daughter’s name] you know what? You’re looking good because you’re losing weight.’ I would say, ‘look at the way you’re carrying yourself now.’...And I tried to make it more on the physical aspect rather than on the weight she’d lost.

I was pleased that the participants responded well to our many discussions in ‘collective reflective’ and it was this kind of feedback that reinforced my confidence in these consciousness raising aspects of the workshop.

“Reflection” Aspects of the EYSW: Influences on Participants

Another important aspect of the EYSW was the opportunities provided for each woman to reflect on individual personal experiences. This dynamic is often present in

women's consciousness raising groups, allowing "women to tell each other about their experiences, doubts, and anger - without fear of judgment or punishment" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.262). Although much has been recounted about how these groups are supportive for women, the EYSW appeared to shed new light onto specific dynamics of reflection that may influence self-esteem.

Personal Reflections

The social interaction dynamic of the EYSW prompted personal reflections of previous experiences in some of the participants. These reflections proved to be a positive experience for Maggie in particular. For Maggie, the opportunity to reflect on a difficult experience in her life allowed her to see the emotional progress she has made since. This appeared to be a source of self-esteem for her. When I asked Maggie how her self-esteem was after the workshop, she described the experience of reflecting.

My self-esteem is good. Because I'm at a different point in my life now, than where I was 15 years ago. And when I compare myself, and that's one of the things that [the workshop] has made me do, is to look back at the way I used to be and where I am now, and just to be able to see the differences...this has made me reflect on where I have been and how I was back then...it makes you realize because you don't realize when you're there, how much strength you have to get through things...this gave me a chance to reflect on it, and say, you know what, I do see how strong I am now. And that strength was there before, but I didn't have the self-esteem to bring it forward. Or I did have enough self-esteem to slowly work on it to bring it to the point that I am now.

Although the experience was a difficult one to reflect on, Maggie's ability to handle the circumstance psychologically, as well as reflect on the emotional growth that has taken

place since, appeared to inform her sense of self positively.

“Been There, Done That”

Another reflection dynamic, which operated a little differently than the one previously discussed, also played an important role in influencing the self-esteem of some of the older participants, namely Maggie and Cheryl. Often when Jane, Nancy or Dawn would reflect about a circumstance which they were currently experiencing, it would provoke Maggie and Cheryl to reflect on similar circumstances in their lives which may have taken place several years ago. While both women were always compassionate and immediate to offer their support and suggestions, Maggie and Cheryl also felt a sense of pride that they had endured similar circumstances in their lives and were able to pass on their wisdom to the subsequent generation. “With Dawn as an example” Maggie described, “learning from her again, just to see what it was I went through, just to see what I went through, bringing me back to that place where I could say, yeah, I know what it’s like.” When I asked Cheryl if she could recall a particular experience in the workshop that made her feel good about herself, she said,

I think the times that I felt good about myself, was when I would hear one of the younger girls would talk about something that I already knew. Just that I could tell them, well this is why you’re thinking this way. That idea. Because I felt like I’ve been there, done that, I know exactly how you feel. So those instances made me feel really good.

While these reflection dynamics are difficult to anticipate, I think they are also impossible to avoid when one is conscious about inviting a variety of different women with different experiences and backgrounds into a group setting. The experiences of this

particular group suggest the value of including women from different age groups. That is, age diversity appeared to be beneficial for some of the participants.

Meaningful and Relevant Curriculum: Culturally Relevant Physical Activity

Meaningful and relevant curriculum involves the teacher or facilitator recognizing and encouraging the multiple identities of students or participants that are consistent with their personal and social constructions of self (Ennis, 1999 & Halas, 2003). In many ways, the efforts of the EYSW accommodated this initiative of culturally relevant physical activity.

Providing access to meaningful and relevant activities and curriculum that resonate with the workshop participants was one endeavor of the EYSW. Much, if not all, of the curriculum addressed in the 'collective reflective' was relevant to each participant. As the facilitator, I initiated discussion significant to the social constructions of women and how these constructions endeavor to maintain women as victims of their environment.

While much of the curriculum was established prior to the commencement of the EYSW, I did offer a wide variety of physical activities throughout the workshop that I hoped would accommodate each participant. As well, during the first EYSW session, we brainstormed about what each participant's expectations were for the program. If necessary, this allowed me to accommodate their personal goals more.

Allowing for a flexible program is another initiative of culturally relevant physical education (Halas, 2003). While much of the curriculum for the 'collective reflective' was also planned prior to each session, I was willing to sacrifice certain activities for others that seemed more relevant to the group. I observed discussions

saturated with enthusiasm, anger and passion which I felt it were more important to explore than to interrupt for another, perhaps less relevant activity or discussion.

What Didn't Work

In an attempt to address a curriculum that resonated more with the participants racial and cultural identities, I invited Priah from the Women's Health Clinic of Winnipeg to guest speak about 'Women of Color and Culture'. Priah talked about white media stereotypes and provoked a lengthy discussion about the meaning of the word 'exotic'. She suggested that Westerners see women of color as 'exotic' implying that their beauty is secondary to the white woman's beauty. Nancy agreed with this perspective and said, "I don't like the word exotic...it's not a compliment because I just feel second string beautiful. Why can't you just say I'm beautiful?" Nancy was Filipino and was the only participant in the workshop whose appearance was not white. This may explain why the other participants did not relate to Nancy's experience and instead urged her to take these 'exotic' references as compliments. Nancy shared other experiences of racial alienation and while Maggie, Cheryl and Jane could, in a small way, relate to her experiences of discrimination, it was apparent that their white appearances had relieved them of much racially provoked suffering. This discussion seemed to create a 'friendly' division between the white appearing women and the non-white women (Priah was East Indian and Jamaican). Nancy and Priah were defending their experiences and feelings of being non-white women. Their experiences resonated with the discussion. The other women didn't appear to relate as much to the curriculum. I asked Nancy how she felt about this response from the group to this particular session.

Um, it was different coming from a different cultural background. Um...I just wish that they would understand where we were coming from. I think that people

just don't really relate that much to the topic, I mean I think they tried to relate, on some level, but I don't think they really like got the message of what the point of the talk was...I guess it's just something new for the people in the group...something they never thought of or something they can't relate to.

It was important that Nancy had the opportunity to express her identity as a Filipino woman just as it was important for some of the other women to express their cultural identities. What was perhaps equally as important to note, was both the division that took place in the group during the discussion, as well as the lack of empathy and honoring on the part of the 'white' women of Nancy's unique experience as a raced woman.

Other Informers of Self-Esteem and Body Image

While I observed throughout the duration of the EYSW how aspects of the intervention informed the participants' sense of self and body, I also became aware of other dynamics which influenced these constructs which had little or nothing to do with the program. Many of these variables resonate with previous research that addressed self-esteem and body image, namely reflected appraisals, social comparisons, looking glass self and how experiences in one's environment influence one's sense of self. In addition to these theories, I also observed the significance of age and experience in determining one's perceptions of self.

Reflected Appraisals, Social Comparisons and the Looking Glass Self

Many of the EYSW participants seemed to resonate with Cooley's (Sonstroem, 1984) idea of the 'looking glass self' or 'reflected appraisals' which suggest that the responses and appraisals of others directly influence one's perceptions of, and feelings towards the self. This theory was particularly apparent when some of the women recalled

previous abusive experiences or unhealthy relationships. These relationships were accompanied by feelings of low self-esteem because often, their partner's references about them were negative.

Social comparisons also seemed to influence the experiences of the participants. Social comparisons involve "how individuals evaluate their characteristics and abilities by comparing them to others" (Wankle, 1994, p.56). For example, Dawn's narrative recounted her experience of comparing her body to all the "beautiful, hot chicks" walking down Corydon. She recalls, "The more they walked past us the more like shit I felt."

Successful and Rewarding Experiences

Successes and rewarding experiences enhance our feelings of competence and self-esteem (Sonstroem, 1997). Some of the EYSW participants recalled particular successful and rewarding experiences in their lives which significantly informed their self-esteem. For example, Maggie, Dawn and Cheryl recalled successful work-related experiences which significantly influenced their enhanced feelings of self-esteem. Many of these job related experiences still seem to be significant in how these participants perceive their self worth.

Age and Experience

Another significant observation made, one which appears to be unexplored, is an individual's age and experience and its relationship with self-esteem and body image. This 'age and experience' dynamic was observed in both Maggie and Cheryl's contributions in the group, as well as from their reflections in each interview. Maggie, Cheryl and Jane were all around 42 to 45 years old; about 20 years my, Nancy and Dawn's senior. While Jane did not share the same strength, both Maggie and Cheryl reflected on how they felt their age and experience were important in positively

informing their sense of selves. When I asked Maggie what body image meant to her, she said, "I think it has a lot to do with the way you view your body. And what you feel about your body. Um, one thing I notice is that as I get older I tend to be more comfortable with my body and I think it's just an age thing." I asked her what it was about being older that made her sense of self stronger. Maggie suggested, "It's also probably with myself being more comfortable with who I am. I find that as I get older, I'm less self-conscious about things people say or things people do...now that I'm older, I find that oh, who cares?"

Cheryl's experience resonates with Maggie's and suggests that with age brings clarification of things that are important to the self as opposed to others. Cheryl says, "basically with age you get more sure of yourself and I think if you become more tolerant of people then you're also aware of which people you don't want to be around...your self-esteem develops from that too. You have your own sense of your own worth and what you're doing." I asked Cheryl what brought her to that understanding. She suggested, "I think having gone through a lot in my life probably...I think it really comes with age and dealing with a lot of different experiences." Cheryl also suggested that, as an individual ages, one's physical body becomes less of an informant of one's self esteem. Self-worth resides more in what one's mind has to offer. Cheryl suggests, "As you get older your body doesn't become as important to you because you're losing so much of your body anyways. When you think about somebody who's 90, they don't care. As you get older it's your personality that's so important I think."

Maggie and Cheryl's interpretations of their age and experience and how they are meaningful to their self-perceptions is both encouraging for the younger reader as well as exciting to anticipate the possibilities of knowledge that come with age and experience.

Things I Didn't Expect to Happen

While many of my outcome expectations were met and sometimes even surpassed, there were a few reactions from some participants that really surprised me.

“I'm Never Exercising Again”

As a health educator, my intentions for the EYSW were, of course, to promote active living. I am not, however, certain that my intentions were conveyed or expressed in a manner that resonated with all of my participants. There were certain motivations amongst my participants which seemed to characterize their participation in the EYSW. Although Dawn, Maggie, Cheryl, Jane and Nancy all expressed a motivation to participate for reasons of “getting in shape”, Dawn and Nancy's intentions were different from Maggie and Cheryl's. Dawn and Nancy appeared more consumed with their body image than Maggie and Cheryl. Their motivations for participating were therefore, to ‘improve’ their body image. Although this seemed to be a concern for Maggie and Cheryl as well, they appeared to place more importance on the overall health benefits of being active. When the workshop was completed, Dawn and Nancy displayed more ‘signs’ of elevated body perceptions which therefore decreased their fitness motivations. “I could go the rest of my life and never exercise again and be okay with that,” Dawn said to me in our interview following completion of the workshop. She elaborated on these feelings and the following conversation took place.

Dawn: I'm never exercising again after this. [laughter] Don't need to.

Kim: So did [the workshop] discourage you to exercise?

Dawn: I guess so.

Kim: Because of the lack of emphasis on-

Dawn: How good I have to look.

Kim: Right. So was exercise for you then, a way to look good?

Dawn: Yeah. Back in the day, yeah.

Nancy also expressed feeling more positive about her body after participating in the workshop. "I think it's the affirmation that okay, that you're not a size four anymore. [laughs]...It's more like, that I appreciate my body even more after. After the workshop, it's kind of like more affirmation," she told me. These feelings seemed to influence her motivations to be active. "I thought that [the workshop] would lead me to be more active. And at some point in the workshop something clicked like, hey you are doing something, you don't have to like, push yourself really hard like, you don't have the time out of your life to run everyday, or have the same luxury as you had before. So I think yeah, that's the change," she added. Maggie and Cheryl maintained an interest in keeping active. They both expressed an interest in pursuing yoga further after completion of the workshop.

In reflecting upon this, I considered what aspects of my own values were conveyed to the participants in such a way that may have lead some of them to decrease their fitness motivations. While of course, my intentions were to encourage each woman to engage themselves more in physical activity, I'm not sure I communicated this encouragement enough. Perhaps instead, I was focused more on challenging the participants' existing beliefs about their own perceptions of their bodies (attempting to enhance individual body image) as well as reassuring them that their efforts to be active came with rewards (one does not have to run marathons to receive health benefits from exercise). I also recognized that many of the women's motivations for keeping active were attempts at maintaining what I feel are unrealistic standards of beauty. I therefore tried to disassociate fitness from beauty, without balancing that disassociation with an

alternate physical activity motivator. Perhaps, however, we might ask ourselves if it is wrong to intervene on the association between fitness and beauty; if beauty motivates people to be active, where is the harm? Regardless, while I felt these consciousness raising details were and are very necessary to address, I may have failed to maintain an emphasis on the importance of continual regular physical activity.

Consciousness Raising: Ignorance is Bliss?

It may be a familiar occurrence for some, when one learns of something they wish they had not. Consciousness raising demands a discussion about whether it is detrimental to know about something that may not be good for you; is ignorance in fact, bliss? An internal dialogue precipitated during a post EYSW interview when one of my participants intrigued me with her reactions towards the group's body image discussions.

My participation in several women's studies classes during university enabled me to become critically aware of how the media operates to maintain women in a disempowering position. I was pleased that I had the opportunity to share this awareness with the participants of the EYSW. When I asked Maggie to share with me what she had learned from her participation in the workshop, her response was both encouraging and curious. She said, "I'm not really big on what goes on in the media, I didn't really realize how much or the amount of negative image that is out there about women, about women's bodies. But I started to take notice to that, it was one of the things I did start to notice." It was encouraging for me to know that much of the consciousness raising aspects of the EYSW enabled some of my participants to become more critical of the images they see in the media. I wondered, however, if this awareness was necessary or progressive for some of the women, particularly Maggie and Cheryl, to know. Maggie and Cheryl displayed an ease and comfort within their bodies. I speculated whether

presenting them with this curriculum was perhaps detrimental to their already optimistic perceptions of their bodies. Cheryl's interview responses confirmed some of my speculations. When I asked her how she felt about her body image after the workshop, the following conversation took place.

Cheryl: I'm not sure how it affected me, the body image thing. Because I wasn't really focusing on it. And [the workshop] made me focus on it more. And I wasn't really wanting to obsess with what I look like.

Kim: Did it address the negativity? Because that can happen.

Cheryl: Uhhhh, you know, it was kind of for me, it was like yeah, oh that's right that kind of bothers me. I think it made me realize that there are some things that do [bother her].

While both Maggie and Cheryl acknowledged this awareness was important for them to pass on to their daughters, their reactions provoke further consideration about the curriculum presented in the EYSW. Clearly, their relationship with the media is not one that influences how they perceive themselves. Perhaps this is because their experience is nearly vacant of media images. Or perhaps Maggie and Cheryl might suggest, their age and experience provide them with an important foundation by which they can refer to. Nevertheless, the facilitator of the EYSW and other consciousness raising groups, must be sensitive to individual unique experiences and how particular program curriculum might influence them.

Personal Reflection: Fat Fearing

November 5, 2003

I'm afraid I may have realized the biggest hypocrisy of my existence. Am I terrified of getting fat?

After a long “break” from running, doing anything physical on a regular basis, I started jogging again last February. At some point I think I decided to train for the Manitoba Marathon relay coming up that June. It was something to aim for, something to work towards. It was an awesome exercise experience. For the first time in a long while, I was enjoying running, primarily because I could really monitor my fitness gains. I could feel myself running faster. I could almost feel, day to day, an improvement in my fitness.

One day I stepped on the scale, something I never do. I think I was curious whether or not I had lost weight. It certainly wasn't my goal to lose weight, but I noticed my body composition was changing. People started noticing my body more so than they had before. They would ask me, “have you lost weight?” Or they'd comment that I was looking fit. The scale told me I had lost weight. I had never lost weight in my life. What was funny, was my reaction to the realization that I had lost weight. I was happy, or excited or something elated. And then I felt guilty that I was happy that I'd lost weight.

I stopped running in August. I threw my back out and simultaneously had a medical procedure that wouldn't allow me to do any weight bearing activities for three weeks. I got scared because I knew I wouldn't pick up where I left off three weeks from then. And I didn't. I kept making excuses for myself. “It's unbearably hot these days, I'm not running in this weather.” Then it turned cold early in September. I said to myself, “it's unbearably cold, I'm not running in this weather.” I think I started to notice my body around this time. I'd hit a bump in my car, and my body would jiggle where it wasn't jiggling two shorts months ago. I looked at my naked body in the mirror. Love handles.

When I crossed my legs, my quads felt soft again. Everything felt soft again. Perhaps I didn't look any different to anybody else, but I felt flabby, soft, even a little fat. "I have got to start running again," I thought to myself, "just get on with it."

I've been thinking a lot about this experience recently. Am I afraid to get fat? Am I afraid of my body changing? The answer may be yes. This realization makes me so angry with myself. I'm a complete hypocrite. Here I am trying to educate women to be happy with who they are, how they look, when I've never experienced what it's like to be "overweight". And when I do start feeling fat, I immediately try to combat it with exercise.

I wonder how much of my self-esteem is informed by other people reinforcing my physical self. Since I was about 16, I've always been reinforced for my physical appearance. I've never struggled with my weight and have never felt like I need to compromise myself in order to look more like the "ideal" feminine figure.

I wonder then, why am I doing what I'm doing? Why am I fighting society's physical expectations for women? Perhaps it is this fear of aging, of my body changing, or it getting bigger, that is preparing myself to deal with this inevitable transition. Perhaps even more so, these expectations enrage me. There is a huge injustice occurring in North America against women which is causing us to doubt ourselves and our individual beauty. This injustice is worth the fight.

I went for a run a couple of days ago. It felt so good. I was walking taller the next day, I was sore the next day, I felt stronger. When I looked at myself in the mirror, nothing had changed. But something inside me changed. A perception perhaps. Which will hopefully be enough to keep me running.

Final Thoughts

After sorting through the workshop and finally writing about the participants' experiences, it occurs to me just how significant the social support aspect of this intervention was. One might ask, did I need the physical activity portion of the program to influence the self-esteem and body image of the participants? I might suggest, that yes, it was necessary for me to include the activity, since first and foremost this was a *physical activity* intervention. Perhaps a more appropriate question might be, what are the implications of an activity intervention with success outcomes that appear to be directly linked to the social support aspects of its design? My awareness prior to commencing this research and the workshop was such that success for physical activity interventions often depended on social support dynamics integrated into the design of the programs (Leonard, 1996; Sonstroem, 1997; & Alfermann & Stoll, 2000). While much research investigating the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem suggests social support dynamics as contaminating the correlations between these variables, I would suggest that perhaps we are missing the point. Integrating social support into future physical activity interventions may be an extremely important determinant of physical activity success. Why aren't we integrating this dynamic into our interventions more?

As health educators, if our priority is to enhance the self-esteem and/or body image of our participants, we must take into consideration the many tools we can use to help these constructs flourish. Important to reflect on is the individual and the type of individuals in the intervention. What is meaningful to them? What are their expectations for the program? What are their goals? And what means can we use to accommodate their emotional and physical needs? I believe this program was largely successful in accommodating many of the participants' needs, simply because I was not only aware of

many of these variables, but I also employed a variety of tactics that the women seemed to positively respond to.

Furthermore, I would like to address the responsibility of the physical activity leader as key in facilitating rapport between oneself and one's client, as well as rapport among a group. This relationship is also imperative for maintaining participant's interest and success in a given physical activity intervention. I believe that the relationships I developed with my participants along with my positive attitude and enthusiasm for the workshop were important for the women's adherence to the program.

That said, I cannot forget about Dawn, who appeared to be less motivated to participate in physical activity after her involvement in the EYSW. This circumstance brought to my attention how significant my perceptions are and how these perceptions are conveyed in my delivery of the curriculum. This unique reaction encourages me to be reflective about the curriculum content, and how I may have presented my experiences and values in the 'collective reflective.'

I think this study illustrates how as health educators we cannot ignore the many emotional and physical dimensions of our participants. We must be prepared to reflect on these dimensions and qualify the experiences of our participants in order to provide them with interventions most suited to them. Adopting this kind of sensitivity is our responsibility. I think with this shift, we may find an increase in interest for physical activity as well as an increase in adherence.

I look forward to future Exercise Your Self Workshop endeavors in which these reflections can only improve the workshop's success.

A Final Reflection: Un(solved) Mysteries

Somebody once told me that no one should ever do research that was personally relevant to oneself. Fortunately, when this “advice” was offered, I was already in the thick of this research process.

At the beginning of this academic journey, I anticipated that I might resolve some of my own personal inquiries. But as I approach the end of my inquiries here, I resolve to understand that matters of the self are ever-evolving and actualizing with each experience one encounters throughout life and that how one derives meaning and understanding from their experience is always left up to the individual. With each of these experiences, I’ll keep looking within, curious for further awareness and answers to the mysteries of our Selves.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter of Consent

Letter of Consent to participate in the Exercise Your *Self* Workshop and Research Project

Project Title: Experiences of Women Participating in a Reflective Physical Activity and Social Support Workshop: Influences of Self-Esteem and Body Image

Summary of the Project

The project involves administering a reflective physical activity and social support workshop to a group of women. The intent of the project is to explore and describe each woman's experiences revolving around self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity.

The **Exercise Your *Self* Workshop** is a workshop designed by the researcher which will be administered for 10 weeks having one session per week. Each session is two hours in length whereby the first hour of each session is dedicated to some type of physical activity: stretching, walking, low impact aerobics, yoga and pilates. While some of the physical activity sessions will be facilitated by the researcher, other sessions will be facilitated by other qualified fitness leaders. The second portion of the workshop is dedicated to what the researcher has called "collective reflective". Within this allotted time, the researcher will facilitate discussion and reflection about personal experiences of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity. As well, the "collective reflective" is also meant to raise awareness and educate women about these issues.

Each session, except for the first and last, will be held in both the Dance Studio (Room 203) and the Pool Classroom (Room 212) at the Frank Kennedy Center at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Session #1 and session #10 will be held in Room 217 of the Frank Kennedy Center.

Each woman will be interviewed once prior to the workshop and once following completion of the workshop. Interviews will be semi-structured in nature. Questions asked will be relevant to the themes of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity in the hopes of eliciting stories and personal experiences of each. A tape recorder will be used to record each interview.

Observations will also be used as a method to further understand each woman's experiences revolving around self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity. Observations will be made throughout the duration of each workshop session, whereby a series of field notes will be taken immediately following each session.

I will also encourage each participant to journal throughout the duration of the workshop. Journaling will allow each participant to reflect on their experiences of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity, and their experiences of each within the workshop. I will also ask that each participant submit a piece of their journal writing for narrative purposes.

Handouts will also be administered throughout each workshop session. These handouts are meant to elicit information about self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity.

I will use narrative inquiry to recount and interpret each woman's experiences of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity. As well, this methodology will allow me to interpret whether the workshop influenced the variables of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity in any way. The intent, through meaning interpretation, is not to provide the reader with accurate claims of their experiences, but instead to offer a plurality of meanings to their subjective experiences of self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity. The objective then, is to provide a richer understanding of the phenomena under question.

Letter of Consent

I, _____ agree to participate in the **Exercise Your Self Workshop** and research project. The investigator of this project is Kimberly Templeton, and her thesis advisor is Dr. Janice Butcher of the University of Manitoba.

The purpose of the study is to explore and describe the experiences of women participating in a reflective physical activity and social support workshop designed to enhance self-esteem and promote healthier body images.

I understand that participating in the research project will involve attending the **Exercise Your Self Workshop** once a week for 10 weeks, whereby I will partake in a variety of low impact aerobics as well as engage in discussion about self-esteem and body image. Each session will be two hours in duration. I understand that I will meet with the researcher twice to be interviewed about these themes. Each interview will be tape-recorded and last one to two hours in duration. I will also be asked to journal and answer questionnaires about my personal experiences with self-esteem, body image and perceptions of physical activity. Journaling will be done on my own time, at my leisure for a minimum of 15 minutes per week. I will submit a journal entry to the researcher which I feel most comfortable with and which I feel represents my experience most thoroughly.

I understand that each session of the workshop will be held at the Frank Kennedy Center at the University of Manitoba, in Rooms 203, 212 and 117.

My participation in the workshop and research project is voluntary. I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time or refrain from answering any questions addressed to me.

All information I disclose will be strictly confidential; there will be no identification of me personally on any records. A different name will be used in place of mine during the transcribing phase of the research and in the final written thesis. Interview tapes, transcripts and other data will be destroyed when the thesis is completed.

Feedback will be provided to me to ensure that I am comfortable with how I have been represented in my narrative of the final written thesis.

My signature on this form indicates that I have understood to my satisfaction the information regarding my participation in the workshop and research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions I prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. My continued participation should be as informed as my initial consent, so I should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation.

Any concerns about my rights as a participant in the research may be directed to Kimberly Templeton (475-5918) or Dr. Janice Butcher (474-8640).

This research has been approved by Stan Straw (Chair of Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board). If I have any concerns or complaints about this project, I may contact the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122.

A copy of this consent form will be given to me to keep for my own record and reference.

Legal Name: _____ Telephone: _____ Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Appendix B

Exercise Your Self Workshop: Activity Schedule

Session 1: Orientation/Introduction

Date: Wednesday, April 9th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 117, Frank Kennedy Center, University of Manitoba

Length: approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours

Activity: none

Things to bring: yourself

Session 2

Date: Wednesday, April 16th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: PhysEd Lounge (then drive to King's Park)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Walking

Collective Reflective: Probing-sharing experiences of physical activity (Room 128)

Things to bring: walking shoes, appropriate clothing for weather

Session 3

Date: Wednesday, April 23rd, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Stretching for Relaxation

Collective Reflective: What is Self-Esteem? (Room 117)

Things to bring: comfortable, flexible clothing

Session 4

Date: Wednesday, April 30th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Low Impact Aerobics

Collective Reflective: Women of Color and Culture (Room 212)

Things to bring: running shoes, comfortable, flexible clothing (shorts, tee-shirt, sweatshirt)

Session 5

Date: Wednesday, May 7th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Pilates

Collective Reflective: Weight Preoccupation (Room 128)

Things to bring: comfortable, flexible clothing

Session 6

Date: Wednesday, May 14th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Pilates

Collective Reflective: How was our self-esteem developed?/How was our Body Image developed? (Room 128)

Session 7

Date: Wednesday, May 21st, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Yoga

Collective Reflective: The Media and Body Image (Room 128)

Things to bring: comfortable, flexible clothing

Session 8

Date: Wednesday, May 28th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Yoga

Collective Reflective: Exercise and Self-Esteem/Exercise and Body Image (Room 128)

Things to bring: comfortable, flexible clothing

Session 9

Date: Wednesday, June 4th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 203 (Dance Studio)

Length: 2 hours

Activity: Resistance Strengthening

Collective Reflective: Creating Positive Visualizations (Room 128)

Things to bring: comfortable, flexible clothing, shorts, sweatshirt/tee-shirt

Session 10

Date: Wednesday, June 11th, 2003

Time: 6:00-8:00 pm

Where to meet: Room 212, Frank Kennedy Center

Length: 1 ½ to 2 hours

Activity: none

Collective Reflective: Building Up Your Self-Esteem/Building Better Body Images (Room 128)

Things to bring: yourself

Appendix C

Sample Interview Questions

Interview 1: Pre-Workshop

1. What does self-esteem mean to you?
2. How would you describe your own self-esteem?
3. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced low self-esteem? How did you feel? What did you think? What did you do?
4. Can you tell me about a time when you experience high self-esteem? How did you feel? What did you think? What did you do?
5. What does body image mean to you?
6. How would you describe your own body image?
7. Can you tell me about a time when you felt poorly about/within your body? How did you feel? What did you think? How, if at all, did it affect how you lived, operated, performed, behaved?
8. Can you tell me about a time when you felt positive about/within your body? How did you feel? What did you think? How, if at all, did it affect how you lived, operated, performed, behaved?
9. Are you presently physically active?
10. What are your perceptions (if you have any) of physical activity?
11. How does being physically active/inactive make you feel (about your self-esteem, towards your own body)?

Interview 2: Post Workshop

1. What did you most enjoy about the EYSW?
2. What did you least enjoy about the EYSW?
3. Now that you have finished the EYSW, do you feel any differently about being physically active? How do you feel differently?
4. How do you feel about your self-esteem?
5. Do you feel the EYSW informed your feelings of self-esteem in any way? How?

6. Can you recall a particular experience within the EYSW that made you feel good about yourself?
7. How do you feel about your body image?
8. Do you feel the EYSW informed your feelings about your body/body image?
How?
9. Can you recall a particular experience within the EYSW that made you feel good about your body/body image?
10. Can you tell me three things you have learned since being involved in the EYSW?

Appendix D

Sample Worksheet Handout: Session 7

Handout: The Importance of Self-Esteem and Healthy Body Image

Why does it matter if you have low or high self-esteem?/Why is self-esteem important to you?

What does your low self-esteem look like?

-how does it affect the way you live in your body?

-how does it affect your relationships with other people?

-how does it affect the way you see yourself?

-how does it affect your potential?

What does your high self-esteem look like?

-how does it affect the way you live in your body?

-how does it affect your relationships with other people?

-how does it affect the way you see yourself?

-how does it affect your potential?

Appendix E

End of Workshop Handout: Activity Questionnaire

Session #10: Activity Questionnaire

1. Now that you have finished the **Exercise Your Self Workshop**, do you feel any differently about being physically active? If yes, *how* do you feel differently?
2. What was your favorite activity? And *why* was it your favorite activity?
3. Do you feel you might continue to be active outside of this workshop? Was there a particular activity that you enjoyed in the workshop that you might pursue further on your own?
4. How is your self-esteem? Discuss.
5. How do you feel about your body? Good? Bad? Neutral? Discuss.
6. How do you feel in your body? Good? Bad? Neutral? Discuss.
7. In what way has the **Exercise Your Self Workshop** impacted you? Can you go into detail?
8. What aspect of the workshop was most important to you: the exercise, the collective reflective or the social interaction? Discuss.
9. What aspect of the workshop was least important to you? Discuss.
10. Do you feel that the workshop has had an impact on your self-esteem? If so, discuss.
11. Do you feel that the workshop has had an impact on your body image? If so, discuss.
12. Do you feel that you have learned something of value from the workshop? If so, discuss.