

An Exploration of the Psychosocial Aspects of Weight Among College Students in the
College Environment

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my aunt Kimberly Hokkanen, who passed away September 2009, just as I was beginning the writing of my dissertation proposal. Kim had been larger than her peers all of her life, from childhood into adulthood. She died from a non-cancerous tumor that went undiagnosed after seeking health care for months. But her symptoms were always blamed on her weight and no extensive examination was ever conducted. The tumor grew and she died in the hospital a month after diagnosis, underweight.

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This dissertation is the result of not only the researcher's work but the assistance and patience of many others who made it possible. First, to the student-participants who volunteered to be interviewed and were willing to provide rich details in their experiences. Second, to the college students who I have interacted with over the past few years as a professor, your questions and discussions in class helped formulate the basis of this dissertation. A great amount of gratitude goes to my family, especially my husband of 30+ years, and my now grown children. Your patience, support and morale boosting kept me sane throughout this process. Thank you to my friends for being patient and understanding; I look forward to reconnecting with all of you.

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Abstract

An Exploration of the Psychosocial Aspects of Weight among College Students in the College Environment

The purpose of the study was to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight and the daily-lived experiences of college students within the college environment. Two research questions guided this qualitative research: a) How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students before and during college; and b) In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily life experiences within the informal and formal learning environments in college? A sub-question explored: In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight? A purposeful sample of 19 college students was recruited for participation from two large universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This study used an exploratory approach using naturalistic inquiry by collecting data through interviews with currently enrolled college students, within the environment of the college. The data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach through a series of coding processes and thematic analysis identifying themes describing weight awareness in varying states, or phases: weight concerns and conflicts, weight commitment, and weight acceptance. The study followed a modified grounded theory approach, which allowed for the development of an emerging grounded theory: A Model of Weight Awareness among College Students. The significance of the study is to provide a foundation for future theoretical research in understanding weight awareness, and how weight is experienced, as a part of psychosocial development among college students in the college environment. The proposed emerging theoretical model may be helpful in promoting the college as a weight-safe environment, reducing stigmatization and discrimination of weight, allowing

students of all weights and sizes to participate fully in college. The model may also be helpful in developing appropriate strategies for students to resolve conflicts with weight concerns.

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CHAPTER ONE

Weight, body size and shape have been major concerns among college students and college administrators since the early years of college in America (Lowe, 2003; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The concerns over weight have increased and become more emphatic in the past decade with the rise in global obesity, including obesity in the college student population (ACHA, 2011). The most recent data from the American College Health Association estimates that approximately 21% of college students are overweight and another 10 % are obese (ACHA, 2011). In response to the increase in overweight and obese students entering college, many colleges are implementing strategies to encourage students to maintain a healthy weight, with one college implementing a policy requiring overweight students to attend fitness/wellness courses. But these strategies fail to address the greater concerns college students may experience surrounding weight, including the daily-lived experiences and social construction of the meaning of weight in the college environment, and weight ideals among college students, that may shape their psychosocial development. College students enter college aware of their appearance and their weight, are aware of the obesity epidemic and the potential weight gain during freshman year. Weight is one more aspect of students' lives that colleges and the college students that is gaining increased attention in the college environment.

This dissertation research seeks to address the need to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students within the college environment. Currently, there is only a small body of literature describing the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students as a part of their daily-lived experiences that may shape their

identity development. A small body of literature describes the psychosocial aspects of weight among adult populations or individuals with eating disorders. But there has been little discussion regarding college students, the meanings they prescribe to weight and how these meanings are shaped by their being in college, and in turn how these meanings may shape their overall development as college students and whole individuals. This study attempted to fill the gaps in the literature and research investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment by interviewing college students. The interviews were the primary data collection method, collecting the narratives of currently enrolled undergraduate college students describing their daily-lived experiences in an effort to understand the psychosocial aspects of weight in the college environment, and an understanding of the meanings college students may prescribe to weight in the college environment. The narratives provided deep and rich data contributing to a greater understanding of the psychosocial aspects of weight, and the meanings of weight in the college environment. The findings may be useful for student development practitioners in developing appropriate strategies promoting positive psychosocial development among students who may be experiencing weight concerns. The findings may also be helpful for colleges attempting to address the health aspects of weight, while not exacerbating any distress students may experience due to weight concerns, by making the college campus a weight safe environment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore any relationship between weight and identity development, shaping or shaped by the daily-lived experiences, through interviews among college students attending a large private university and a large public

university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Using these narratives it was possible to explore the various psychosocial aspects of weight that may have shaped the development of these college students, as themes emerged during the data analysis process. This research attempted to clarify how students relate to their weight in the college environment, beyond having weight concerns, and if the weight has meanings that is shaped by, and then may have shaped their daily-lived experiences, and if these experiences then may have shaped their identity development as college students. An understanding of each of these issues could only be achieved through qualitative research, using an exploratory method and grounded theory approach, to describe the meanings and experiences, through the data collected during interviews and then analyzed for themes, concepts, and the development of major categories.

Research Questions

The research questions have been developed from a realist perspective in that the research is treating the unobserved phenomenon as real, the data was then meant to serve as evidence, and then be useful in developing and testing ideas about the existence and nature of the phenomena (Maxwell, 2005). The formulation of more precise research questions may be suitable for observable and measurable data, but this instrumentalist perspective was not appropriate for this study as it may have trivialized the topic being explored, and might have restricted the research questions to the extent that the concerns of the research would no longer be present in the data. The need to explore weight perceptions, the meanings of weight among college students in their daily-lived experiences required the research to use a very different approach with more abstract research questions. A grounded theory approach typically does not include research

questions, as the research allows the phenomenon is typically not known or little understood, but for the purpose of this research being a dissertation research questions were designed to be used as guides for the interview process, the data analysis and data presentation.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students?
 - a. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development before entering college?
 - b. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development during college?
 - c. In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight?
2. In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily life experiences within the a) formal and b) informal learning environments in college?

Context of the Study

Chickering and Reisser (1993) state in *Education and Identity*, “Adolescence inevitably brings increased attention to the body, and self-consciousness is heightened when students arrive at college” (p. 183). Weight, then, is another aspect of one’s self that needs to be considered along with gender, sexuality, and ethnicity as a part of identity, since weight has become highly connected to perceived social status over the past few decades (Falkner, et al., 2001). Body weight is often considered to be a representation of an individual’s moral character and to achieve an ideal weight is

equivalent to social achievement (Brownell, 2005; Wang, Brownell, & Wadden, 2004; Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). This then makes weight a major concern for many individuals whose experiences may be rooted in their fear of failing to meet the socially-idealized weight, and therefore fail in social achievement (Puhl, Moss-Racussin, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2008). Concerns and anxiety about weight have become so important in our current society it has become a central core in our self-understanding (Stearns, 1997). These weight concerns may shape an individual's daily life experiences, sense of self-worth, and formation of identities (Honeycutt, 1999; Aibel, 2003; Carr & Friedman, 2006; Finnie, 2007). The emphasis on weight in the college environment may contribute to "expectations regarding ideal body weight within the particular culture" (Sobal & Maurer, 1999) that may, in turn, be dependent on other social categories (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status). The following presents a discussion of the problems of practice and research, and provided the contextual areas of the rationale of this research as well as informing the findings and possible future research efforts.

Problems of Practice

In the American higher education system, a college degree has been viewed as an equalizer across diverse populations. But students who may be overweight (or perceive themselves to be overweight), and are concerned with their weight, are less likely to go to college (Canning & Mayer, 1966; Crandall, 1991; Crosnoe, 2004), and are less likely to remain in college to degree completion, than their thinner, non-weight concerned peers (Crandall, 1995; Crosnoe, 2007). Research has documented that overweight individuals are more likely to remain in a lower socio-economic position in comparison to their thinner counterparts (Carr & Friedman, 2005; Puhl & Brownell, 2001). So it would seem

a priority for colleges to make an effort to implement appropriate student development strategies and provide a weight-safe environment so that students with weight concerns will attend college, remain in college to degree completion, and participate fully in college.

In 2006, a small university in Pennsylvania, Lincoln University, adopted a policy of weighing all incoming freshmen, and those students with a Body Mass Index (BMI) over 30 would be required to enroll in a 1-credit course (Epstein, 2009; Hoover, 2009; Matheson, 2009; Riley, 2009). This policy and action, taken as a strategy for promoting health, may have jeopardized the success of certain students, who may have been concerned with their weight, in completing college. Given that the psychosocial aspects of weight were not taken into consideration, this policy may also have had some influence on the daily-lived experiences of the college students, and may have contributed to the construction of various meanings of weight in the college environment, and weight identities by the simple act of selecting students into a specific group determined by desirable and undesirable weight (BMI) status. Fall 2009, several students received letters from the college administration informing each student they would not be allowed to graduate May 2010 for failing to meet either the weight requirement or to enroll in the required course for students with a BMI over 30. The students of the college voiced their concerns about the discrimination they experienced and their segregation of the students into a specific category based on BMI and only this group of students would be required to take a fitness/wellness course.

It is important to note that this institution is also a Historically Black College-University (HBCU) with a large African American student population, but with growing

ethnic diversity in the student population as a result of an increased emphasis to recruit a variety of students. The students decision to attend this institution may have been based on a desire to fit in to the student population and be among others with similar identities. The colleges attempt to promote health among its students may have increased the students awareness of their weight, in an environment they may have assumed would be safe, and free from weight-based criticisms. The policy may have been potentially harmful to students with a BMI over 30, in not allowing them to experience college life similar to their thinner peers, but the act of weighing students could be considered an affront to one's sense of self for any student who may already be concerned with their weight. This policy focused on one side of the weight-health spectrum without consideration for students who may be underweight, or experiencing body image or eating disorders regardless of their weight. The college may have wrongly assumed that African American students don't experience body image disorders or eating disorders. The actions of this college's effort to promote health further highlight the need to understand the broader issues surrounding weight that may be negatively impacted by such policies.

The American College Health Association (ACHA) provides guidelines in meeting the health needs of college students among which is to reduce risk for individual illness and injury, and to advocate for safety, social justice, economic opportunity, and human dignity (ACHA, 2011). The practice of weighing students may not be safe for all students who are already experiencing body image dissatisfaction, weight concerns, or an eating disorder. The identifying of a specific group of students based on weight status (BMI), requiring overweight students (BMI>30) to attend a 1-credit course does not promote

social justice. A college education should be a social equalizer but if students are identified as overweight and then segregated from other students, this indicates the students are not as welcome to attend college, and may not be safe, or free from discrimination, while in college. These students may be less likely to go to college, or remain in college, and may be more likely to remain in a lower socio-economic status. The action of weighing students, regardless of the weight of the individual student, is a threat to human dignity and has the potential for negatively influencing one's self-esteem, self-worth, and development as whole individuals.

The implementation of the Lincoln University policy reflects the current greater social emphasis on weight and addressing the obesity epidemic. The obesity epidemic is in the forefront of the news, anti-obesity messages are present in nearly all media sources, and a great public health effort to prevent obesity. But with these well-intentioned concerns about the public's health, the rhetoric has led to an increase in the stigmatization of fatness and outright discrimination of obese individuals. The stigmatization and discrimination of excess weight is not only potentially harmful to overweight individuals, but also any individual who may be concerned with their weight.

Puhl and Brownell (2001) have conducted a great deal of research investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight among adults in the general population and have provided a foundation not only for more research, but also the application of strategies to minimize the negative psychosocial effects of weight stigmatization. They specifically highlight the need for the development of curricula to promote weight acceptance in the education environment. This study hopes to contribute to the work of these authors and others investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight and provide a foundation for the

development of appropriate strategies to address our lack of understanding in what weight means to college students. The findings of this study may be helpful in addressing the problems of practice in the college environment, as colleges attempt to promote health, but without the stigmatization of weight and potential discrimination students with weight concerns might experience or perceive will be present in the college environment. This study hopes to add to the understanding of the meanings of weight during daily-lived experiences in the college environment, and provides evidence for the need to implement policies making the college campus a weight-safe environment.

A key goal of this research was to address the need for a deeper understanding of the psychosocial factors associated with weight, weight perceptions, and the meaning of weight for individual college students. The findings of this study may provide student development practitioners with knowledge about how, and in what ways, weight perceptions may shape the identity development of college students during their daily-lived experiences in the college environment.

Problems of Research

Numerous studies have investigated weight as a public health issue, discussing the epidemic of obesity and the epidemic of eating disorders (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). But the concept of weight as a social problem and the psychosocial aspects of weight have received less attention, especially in the context of higher education (Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Several studies have investigated the experiences of overweight individuals, with weight concerns, in a variety of settings such as health care and employment (Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Merrill & Grassley, 2008), but few studies have specifically investigated the experiences of weight within the environments of college. The current

bulk of qualitative research, using a phenomenological approach, has explored the meanings and experiences of weight among individuals in health care settings or employment, and these individuals have been adults attempting to lose weight (Merrill & Grassley, 2008; Grant & Boersma, 2005). These studies though valuable in understanding the relationship between weight concerns, the meanings of weight, and the experiences shaped by the meanings of weight, fail to include the college-aged individual as they enter emerging adulthood, and may be more vulnerable to the social ideals of weight influencing their meanings of weight, and how these meanings may shape psychosocial development. Most of the research investigating college students has focused on the prevalence of weight issues, such as obesity, eating disorders, weight-related behaviors, body image concerns and the freshman 15. Several studies discuss the phenomenon of the emergence of the fat identity (Joanisse, 1997; Kirkland, 2003; Honeycutt, 1999; Owen, 2008; Sobal & Maurer, 1999), and how weight as a part of self-worth impacts identity (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Clabaugh, 2008), but fail to explore what this means to a college student and if there is any influence on identity development as college students in the college environment during their daily-lived experiences.

Weight, like many other personal attributes may likely influence and shape identities (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). The understanding of how weight, the ideal presentation of weight shaped by social and cultural contexts contributes to a meaning of weight, and the potential influence of the meaning of weight on identity and the formation of a weight identity has not been thoroughly investigated. Only in the past decade have sociologists and psychologists endeavored to address the gaps in

understanding the relationship of weight and the meanings of weight to life experiences and identity formation, calling for more exploration to understand the interaction between weight, as a physical trait, and as informing a social identity (Jaffe, 2008). These studies highlight a relationship in the social construction of weight and how individuals experience daily life with respect to their own meaning of weight. These studies also note greater attention needs to be paid to specific life transitions, such as going to college, and the influence of cultural expectations of the social processes involved in the construction of the meaning of weight. Carr and Friedman (2005) recommend future research is needed to “explore the ways that weight trajectories over the life course affect one’s perceptions of and attributions for experiences” (Carr & Friedman, 2005, p. 256). Neumark-Sztainer and Eisenberg (2005) recommend more qualitative research is needed to understand the relationship of weight and psychosocial well-being, specifically among teens and young adults, in understanding the meaning of weight and “how it relates to well-being” (Neumark-Sztainer & Eisenberg, 2005, p. 76).

The experiences and identities of college students have been explored in a variety of studies. Phenomenological studies have explored the experiences of African American students in HBCUs, the experiences of African American students attending predominantly white institutions, and the experiences of White students as minorities in HBCUs (Hall & Closson, 2005). Studies have explored the experiences of homosexual black men attending HBCUs (Ford, 2007), as well as the experiences of gay men in predominantly white institutions (D’Augelli, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1994), and several exploratory studies have investigated the experiences of women in college (Madden, 2008; Pinardi, 2006). These phenomenological studies sought to describe and then

compare the quality of the college experiences, and identity development of various types of students. These studies have been significant in contributing to our understanding the experiences of college students and the meanings of specific attributes (ethnicity, sexuality) being studied within their experiences and identity development.

The research base has broadened our understanding in the experiences of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality among college students within the college environment, and these studies began with a need to understand the meaning of the attribute within the specific context of the college environment, and the experiences of the students while being in college, and then how each of these may have contributed to the adopting of certain social identities and overall identity development. “In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women’s studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, p.2). Now is the time for building the research base with more serious research in understanding weight, not only as a physical attribute, but how it is experienced within specific contexts, the various meanings that may be prescribed to weight within these specific contexts, and the overall psychosocial aspects of weight that may shape identity development.

Since weight, the meanings or the value placed on weight, depends on specific cultural contexts, the meaning of weight then can change and may change especially during specific life transitions (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). Going to college is a time when students experience an increased attention on physical appearance and especially body weight, and being within the college environment may increase weight concerns, which

makes it increasingly important to understand how college students, like other individuals, “construct their weight-related identities and manage them in social situations” (Sobal & Maurer, 1999, p. 5). But to understand the construction of social identities that may be shaped by weight, research must first investigate the experiences of the individuals (college students) in a specific environment (college), and develop a greater understanding of these experiences and the meanings these individuals prescribe to weight in the context of the environment. This research has attempted to address the need to increase the understanding of the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents an overview of the theoretical foundation for this research. This study will use a constructivist paradigm with a grounded theory approach to collect data through interviews with currently enrolled undergraduate college students. The interview data was analyzed for themes describing the meanings the students prescribed to weight and the descriptions of daily-lived experiences. The findings of this study then contributed to the development of an emerging grounded theory describing weight awareness as an evolving process as part of a student’s psychosocial development. Much of the background for this research was based on three main theoretical areas: a) constructing the meaning of weight; b) psychosocial aspects of weight; and c) identity development, which will be discussed in depth in the literature review. The study was based in constructivism, and more specifically the social construction of weight for the describing of the meaning of weight, in the context of the students’ experiences in the college environment.

Constructivism

The paradigm of constructivism views reality as relative, based on “specific experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups and can change over time” (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 13). This approach of collecting data requires the researcher to interact with the individuals being interviewed for data collection, with an open mind, and without expectations and assumptions. This approach to qualitative research is growing in the field of student development as researchers and practitioners endeavor to understand and meet the needs of the diverse college student population. Sobal and Maurer (1999) recommend using a constructivist approach when exploring how weight has become viewed as a social problem. The authors argue that using an objectivist approach limits the research to particular conditions as problems, but “a constructionist examines the process by which people come to identify certain phenomena as problematic” (Sobal & Maurer, 1999, p. viii). The authors also suggest that using this perspective means that a social problem is based on the definition the society places on the problem, and is an evolving process. The constructivist approach facilitates the development of a grounded theory on how weight, as a social issue, becomes a social and personal problem (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). The constructivist approach was chosen for this present study in an effort to allow the meanings of weight to emerge from the students’ narratives and not from the researchers assumptions, and since weight is seen as a social problem, the meanings students prescribed to weight may have been influenced by the social definitions of weight.

Social Constructivism. The concept of social constructivism was valuable for interpreting the interview narratives, since the construction of the body is a social and

cultural process. This perspective, used by Sobal and Maurer (1999) was needed to understand our social perception of weight as a problem. Their work focused on how weight as a problem develops within specific social contexts, addressing the social construction of weight. Weight has a set of social meanings beyond the objective physiological aspects of weight. The presentation of the body, weight, size, and shape is often used as a visual symbol of moral character, personality attributes, and social status. Excess weight is usually viewed as deviant and something that should be corrected (weight loss), and is constructed socially as unacceptable (Foucault, 1979; Goffman, 1968). The social construction of weight can and often does predict the success or failure of an individual, based on their weight (Goffman, 1968).

Social Constructivism is based on specific assumptions based on values and beliefs of a specific culture or within a specific social context. The theory of social constructivism involves the development of knowledge that is socially and culturally constructed, reality is constructed through human activity, and learning is a social process. Social constructivism also considers identity to be socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed at both the institutional and individual levels (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the social constructivist perspective provided the framework for understanding how the students would construct meanings during their experiences involving human interactions, and specifically using the symbolic interactionist framework, which will be discussed more in depth in the methodology of Chapter Three.

Research Design

This was an exploratory study, using qualitative interviews with purposively

selected college students from two higher education institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The study design was developed to answer the specific research questions addressing the gaps in the literature in practice and research. This research required a qualitative approach, with a modified grounded theory approach, that would allow the exploration of the topic through the collected data using interviews, and then an analysis of the personal experiences described through the narratives and reflections of this population of college students. A more comprehensive discussion of the methodology and specific methods of recruiting students, collecting data and analyzing data is presented in Chapter Three, Methodology. The objective in using a qualitative method in this exploration was to allow a grounded theory to emerge through the research process; the research process was in turn guided by the principles of grounded theory, allowing the researcher to be immersed in the research as a participant-observer as well as researcher-interviewer.

As a grounded theory the data was collected through interviews with individuals who have knowledge of the topic (weight perceptions in the college environment) being investigated, with the goal that a deeper understanding of the meaning of weight and the experiences of the college students in the college environment would emerge through the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The data collection involved in-depth interviews with 19 student-participants, since grounded theory research typically involves interviews as a primary data collection method, allowing for rich descriptions of the participants' experiences. The grounded theory approach, as well as the constructivist perspective and social constructivism, have been used in various studies that informed this research and will be discussed in Chapter Two, Literature Review.

Significance of the Study

This study was based on the foundation of the earlier qualitative research investigating personal attributes that may interact with the daily life experiences of college students and shape identity development. The literature discussing the meaning of weight, and the experiences of other individuals also informed this research. This study and the findings may provide a useful foundation for future theoretical research in understanding the meaning of weight, the experiences of college students, the phenomena of weight-related social identities among college students, and future practical research in developing appropriate strategies to promote a weight-safe environment on college campuses. This study and the findings may also contribute to student development practice by increasing the understanding of the psychosocial aspects of weight during daily life experiences of college students within the college environment and social context of college and what this means for overall identity development of the college student.

Limitations

Several limitations needed to be addressed in this research. First, in the quality of the narratives the student-participants provided through the interviews and then the generalizability of the findings. It was expected that the student-participants would be truthful in their response, and the potential risks of self-reporting inaccuracies would need to be addressed through more in-depth probing during the interviews. This study may not be generalizable to other populations of college students, since the participants were recruited from two specific large universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The student-participants also volunteered to participate in the study, which

may indicate these students were less vulnerable to any risk, psychologically, during an interview discussing weight. The study population was also a small sample (n=19) and this presents its own limitations. But the interviews provided deep and rich narratives from the student-participants, making the use of this small sample appropriate, and may improve the transferability of the research within the specific context of the college environment. A more in-depth discussion of the limitations is presented in Chapter Four, Presentation of the Data.

Delimitations

The student-participants in this study were currently enrolled undergraduate students, aged 18-25 years, from two Mid-Atlantic universities selected for this study. Actual weight status was not considered in recruiting potential participants. All students were eligible for participation, including individuals who may be considered overweight or underweight by current societal standards or the BMI scale. Actual weights of each participant were not collected, instead the perception of personal real weight, as a description (thin, fat, average), was collected as well as the perception of an ideal weight, which was typically described as part of a comparison and identified various emerging themes, that described weight concerns and conflicts. The students were recruited from a diverse population and all students were eligible regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and weight. Recent research, discussed in Chapter Two, Literature Review, has documented the prevalence of weight concerns among various populations and provided the basis for including a diverse population of students for this study. The rationale for the sample population recruited for this study is discussed in Chapter Three, Methodology.

Assumptions

As a qualitative study, the research began with several assumptions by the researcher exploring the meaning the college students made regarding weight as a specific social problem, and the psychosocial aspects of weight (Creswell, 2007). It was assumed by the researcher that the interviews would provide accurate descriptions of the student-participants' experiences and their meanings of weight within the college environment. This study, being exploratory in nature with a grounded theory approach, used an inductive process with no hypothesis. It was expected that a set of hypotheses would develop as a grounded theory emerged during the data analysis process. It was assumed by the researcher that the hypotheses that might develop would then be tested in future research (Stebbins, 2001; Maxwell, 2005). The development of hypotheses prior to beginning this actual research process would have been inappropriate and would not have allowed for the flexibility or open-mindedness necessary for the data collection and analysis (Stebbins, 2001), and would not have allowed the use of a grounded theory approach (Maxwell, 2005) or the development of the emerging themes that formed the major categories, and the emerging grounded theory.

It is not the intent of this study to point out specific issues about weight, weight perceptions or weight concerns, but rather to bring to light the possible influence of weight concerns and the meanings of weight on the daily-lived experiences of college students in the college environment. The following presents the arguments for what this study.

What this study is. This study was an investigation of experiences of students through the perceptions of their bodies and weight within the college environment. This

study was simply seeking to describe the experiences of students with weight concerns, while in college, within the college environment, including formal and informal learning environments. This study also intended to lay the groundwork for further research investigating weight concerns among college students beyond the health aspect. It is hoped that this study would reveal to the reader that weight has a variety of psychosocial aspects, and is very much a part of our current social and cultural realms, specifically within the college environment.

What this study is not. This study was not intended to be a discussion about the development of body image disturbances or weight concerns. It is not a discussion about the triggers that may exist in the college environment that may increase the risk of some students with weight concerns in developing disordered weight behaviors or eating disorders. This study was also not seeking to determine the prevalence of body image disturbances or eating disorders among college students, nor the prevalence of overweight or obese students. This study also did not intend to contribute to the research and practical application regarding weight interventions for college students, but instead to provide the basis for understanding the psychosocial aspects of weight in the college environment.

Definition of Terms

The meaning of weight is constructed by structural conditions, cultural environments, and social processes, where weight is interpreted, negotiated, resisted, and transformed according to cultural definitions and expectations (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). We are only beginning to understand how the ideal presentation of weight is shaped by social and cultural contexts, and the role various types of organizations play in shaping

weight ideals, and therefore the meaning of weight. The meaning of weight in society relates to how weight is viewed according to the cultural attitudes and beliefs about fatness and thinness.

The psychosocial aspects of weight under consideration for this study were expected to help define the meaning(s) of weight for the individual students.

Psychosocial development involves the psychological development of the individual in a social realm. Specifically for this study the psychosocial development involved the attitudes and perceptions about weight the individual students held, influenced by the social and cultural attitudes of weight, which then informed the meanings students prescribed to weight, within the context of specific interactions in the college environment. The exploration of these meanings and experiences was facilitated with the use of terminology specific to understanding the psychosocial aspects of weight.

Body image is the internal representation of our own outer appearance and is considered a key component of the self. The perception of the body is associated with feelings and thoughts and may motivate certain behaviors in certain situations (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

Body image concerns are concerns about the body, or some aspect of the body, that may reflect dissatisfaction about the body or the specific aspect of the body, such as weight.

These concerns can often lead to specific regulatory behaviors in an attempt to alter the body or an aspect of the body such as weight (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002).

Weight concerns are one aspect of body image concerns when the individual may experience dissatisfaction regarding weight and the individual perceives their real weight as not meeting a perceived ideal weight.

Self-esteem is considered to be “both a stable trait and an unstable trait” (Crocker & Knight, 2005) and can fluctuate in response to specific events and experiences. An instability of self-esteem may be due to having a contingent of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Contingencies of self-worth are domains that can shape an individual’s short-term and long-term goals. Individuals will avoid certain tasks or situations in certain contingency domains in an effort to reduce any loss of self-esteem. The domains in which college students invest their self-esteem are: appearance (including weight), academics, others’ approval, family support, and religious faith (Crocker & Knight, 2005). These contingencies of self-worth have been found to shape a student’s behavior and daily life experiences while in college.

Body weight contingencies of self-worth is the tendency for people to base their self-esteem or self-worth on body weight and evolved out of the appearance domain of the contingencies of self-worth (Clabaugh, 2008).

Weight identities, like other identities, are continually open to change, change, throughout an individual’s life, and are constructed by the specific context of the environment or culture. Weight identities often change when there is a change in weight, (weight loss or weight gain). An individual’s weight identity can change in relation to cues in the social environment and the relating to weight ideals or weight expectation (Sobal & Maurer, 1999).

Social identities are continually open to change, and like weight identities are constructed by the specific context of the environment or culture the individual is experiencing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Identity is the foundation of how an individual may see him/her self, how they perceive others see them and is the basis to categorize an individual and the self as being a particular type of person. Identity tends to be more specifically grounded in socially constructed cultural categories that have been formulated by a cultural consensus of some attribute or personal characteristic (Erikson, 1959).

Subjectivity Statement

The concept of body image, and specifically weight concerns has become a common theme repeated by the undergraduate students I teach in health education courses, and in the work I have done with individuals in a variety of health, wellness, and fitness programs. Most of the individuals and students expressed in my courses at least some concern and dissatisfaction with their weight, with many taking specific measures to change or attempt to change their weight in an effort to fit-in, belong to a social group, or not be viewed negatively by peers. The actual weight, underweight, average weight, or overweight, of these individuals had very little to do with how they felt or thought about their weight. Most expressed wishful thinking about their weight, the only if I was thinner then I could do what I want to do, what I should do, what is expected of me to do with my life.

The conversations I have had over the past several years with a variety of individuals provided me with valuable insights into how these individuals relate to their weight, what their weight means to them within the context of current society and within a specific environment, how they categorize their social roles based on their weight, and live their lives according to how they feel and think about their weight. This has led me to wonder why weight matters so much for so many individuals, and specifically college

students. Most of the individuals were concerned with being viewed negatively because of their failure to be the socially-expected ideal weight.

During the development of this research, prior to data collection, I met with the several college administrators from both institutions, to discuss my topic and to gain approval to recruit students. One of the administrators openly voiced his negative opinion of obese students on campus, to the effect he did not like seeing obese students walking through campus, (as he looked out the window). He acknowledged that a weight ideal is not really about health, but that we should all strive to meet an aesthetic ideal to look like Americans. Our conversation became increasingly heated, until we agreed to disagree. He did agree to allow me to recruit and interview students. But as I recruited and interviewed students, I wondered if his attitudes were pervasive among college administrators, and if these attitudes may contribute to the experiences of college students.

Since our society holds quite negative values toward being overweight, but also incorrect assumptions about underweight individuals, does this influence the emerging young adult in their identity development and how they experience their daily life? Do college students with weight concerns wait until they feel or think they have achieved a more ideal weight, to go to college, to date, socialize, participate in classroom and campus activities? Or does weight have very little to do with how students experience college?

Study Overview

Based on the current emphasis on the weight of college students by the college students themselves and college administrators, it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to have a deeper understanding of how the variables outside the individual

student are experienced by the student. It is important to understand how these experiences relate to weight perceptions and how students prescribe meaning to weight during these experiences. An exploratory method, using qualitative interviews, was used with a grounded theory approach, and constructivist framework to develop an understanding about how weight-related phenomena, the meanings of weight and is shaped by daily-lived experiences and how these meanings may shape daily life experiences. The research sought to explore the experiences of college students and how these experiences might shape identity development.

This study will be valuable in providing the research in describing the experiences of individuals and their personal meanings of weight, that may be helpful in understanding the construction of weight as a social problem and the psychosocial aspects of weight in the specific environment of the college campus. This study has attempted to address one small piece in understanding the meanings and experiences of weight in a college population. The experiences of college students with respect to other attributes that shape identity have been investigated by other research, and weight is another attribute that should be considered in shaping identity, since weight has become an attribute that is commonly stigmatized today.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, presents the literature review and discusses the specific areas of research documenting various aspects of weight in college, beginning with a historical perspective of weight as a measure of fitness for college. The discussion of weight in college continues with the current concerns about weight, including the policy of Lincoln University. Chapter Three will present the methodology for this study, Chapter Four presents the data analysis and findings, and Chapter Five discusses the

significance of the research, the emerging grounded theory and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The weight of the student's body has been important, and held some meaning, to college administration and the students for decades. The specific meaning of weight to colleges or college students in the past or present is unclear, but the importance of weight is evidenced by the number of strategies colleges have taken to monitor student weight that continues today, as well as the numerous anecdotal accounts of students' concern about their weight. In the past, as it seems to be today, college students place some meaning to weight that relates to their identity as a college student; and colleges place some meaning to weight that relates to the student's fitness for college and success after college. For the purpose of the study, the literature review will focus on past research placing the student at the center of the meaning of weight, in an effort to build the foundation for research questions:

1. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students?
 - a. How, and in what ways does perception of weight influence identity development among college students before college?
 - b. How, and in what ways does perception of weight influence identity development among college students during college?
 - c. In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight?

2. In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within the informal and formal learning environments in college?

Most of the research investigating weight among college students has focused on the health aspects, with most of the recent studies discussing obesity prevention strategies. Other studies focus on the eating and exercise behaviors, prevalence of eating disorders, motivations for weight-related behaviors, and the phenomenon of the freshman 15. Only a few studies have documented attitudes about weight in college, but even these studies, though valuable in documenting anti-fat attitudes, fail to consider the meaning of weight for the college student within the college environment, the experiences of daily-life for these students, and the greater psychosocial aspects of weight. The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of weight and the daily-lived experiences of college students within the college environment, and develop a greater understanding of the psychosocial aspects of weight. The concept of weight in college has been important not only for college students themselves, but also for the higher education institutions. Colleges have been monitoring student weights, as well as implementing strategies for weight management. The following section will present a brief history and current context of why weight matters in college.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature relative to this proposed research. The first section provides information on the importance of weight in college, from a historical context, using weight as a measure of fitness for college; and the current aspects of weight in college, in the context of the current obesity epidemic. This chapter also presents a discussion about why weight is important to colleges and college students,

as well as body image issues among college students and the fear of fat, followed by a discussion of the psychosocial aspects of weight, including the meaning of weight, and the anti-fat attitudes prevalent in society.

The next section presents a discussion of the research exploring the experiences of college students, which argues for an understanding of the daily-lived experiences of college students relative to their weight based on the growing body of research documenting the experiences of college students relative to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The last section of this literature review presents a discussion of the psychosocial development, identity and social identities, and provides the basis for this proposed research, a need for exploration of the psychosocial aspects of weight, after understanding the meaning(s) of weight among college students during their daily-lived experiences in the college environment. This chapter concludes with an argument for the relevance in understanding the psychosocial aspects of weight for higher education practitioners responsible for facilitating student development.

Why is Weight Important in College?

Weight, body size and shape have been major concerns among college students and college administrators since the early years of college in America (Lowe, 2003).

Weight has been considered a measure of fitness for college historically and this assumption continues to prevail today. The meaning of weight though has changed over time, but continues to be important.

Historical Context

Women in College. In the early years of women entering college, during the late 1800s, weight was a concern among students and college administrators (Lowe, 2003).

Weight and body size/shape became a concern among college administrators in response to the critics, such as Edward Clarke, who believed that higher education would damage their “female apparatus” (Solomon, 1985). Women’s colleges like Smith College, and the first co-educational colleges like Cornell University required female students to be weighed weekly in an effort to dispel the criticisms that college would injure the female’s health (Lowe, 2003). The weight of female students became an indicator of “fitness” for being a college student, and was also used as an indicator of the success of the institution, with the weight statistics appearing in the institution’s annual report along with the financial statistics.

The female college students were also quite concerned with their weight, striving to gain weight and avoid any weight loss, since weight loss could lead to a forced withdrawal by the college administration. The female students would host weekly “eating” parties, and hoped to display a size/shape that represented the new identity of a female college student. The relationship between weight and body size/shape continued to evolve and change as time passed, entering the 1900s and into the 1920s and 1930s. The concept of body image, which includes body weight, size, and shape among women in college begins to become a phenomenon that continues today, as women become female college students.

Men in College. The weights of male students were monitored as well but for quite different reasons. The height and weight (anthropometric measures) were collected as data in an effort to monitor and then predict the relationship between mortality and anthropometric measures. The height and weight measurements of 2,500 students at Amherst College were monitored during 1861-1900, and linked to mortality data during

follow-up to 1949. These students were likely from families of middle and upper socio-economic classes “who were willing and able to send their sons to college” (Murray, 1997, p. 589). Similar anthropometric data was collected from male students at West Point and the Citadel (Murray, 1997; Stearns, 1997). “That body size in young adulthood affects survival prospects in later life is a common finding among modern populations” (Murray, 1997, p. 593). It was assumed that male students of greater stature would live longer.

Male students at the University of Oxford (Parnell, 1954) were monitored from 1947 to 1950 as part of the pilot student health service, with an emphasis on body shape. Earlier anthropometric measures did note a trend that those with “balanced mid-range body proportions” were more likely to succeed in college. The Oxford students differed from the male students attending American universities, in their lower levels of muscle and bone development. Parnell had been collecting data on body shape of university students throughout the 1940s and 1950s, finding that male students from private schools were taller and heavier than students from public primary and secondary schools. Similar trends were found at Cambridge University as well. Parnell (1954) sought to determine if body shape was a factor influencing selection into colleges or universities, since the differences “suggest that some kind of selection is operating” (Parnell, 1954, p. 370). The questions presented by Parnell addressed if this was self-selection by the student, or selection by the educational system. The author concluded, “The differences encountered are probably associated with progressive selection of men with high genetic endowment” (Parnell, 1954, p.378).

Male college students were not required to participate in regular weigh-ins at most colleges; however, female college students were required to be weighed at most female, and some co-educational colleges. The practice of weekly weigh-ins for female college students continued well into the 1970s, although the intent for monitoring weight had changed from preventing weight loss, to preventing weight gain. By the 1960s the phenomenon of freshman weight-gain was beginning to garner some attention. In the fall of 1966, the New York Times ran a headline, College Admission Hint: Lose Weight, in response to the recently released findings of the New England Schools Study (Canning, & Mayer, 1966). This study found that only 31.6% of obese girls continued on to college as compared to 51.9% of non-obese girls. A similar, though not as significant, difference was also seen among obese and non-obese boys (Cahnman, 1968).

Weight impacting college attendance, was again documented several decades later by Crandall (1991). Overweight students were not only less likely to go to college, but also less likely to receive financial support, more likely to be wrongfully dismissed from college (Crandall, 1994), and overweight students were subject to negative (anti-fat) attitudes from teachers at college (Crandall, 1995). As mentioned earlier, several studies have documented anti-fat attitudes among students, but recent research has also documented anti-fat attitudes of educators, and that these attitudes can affect the performance of obese students (Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Weight issues and concerns about weight continue to impact potential college students (Crosnoe, 2004), overweight high school seniors are still less likely to attend college, fearing the potential stigmatization of weight (Crosnoe, 2007).

Current Context

It is fairly obvious that weight is a concern still for many college administrators with the increase in the number of programs to promote healthy weight in college, anti-obesity campaigns, and the on-going discussion and debate over the freshman 15 (Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein & Deusinger, 2008; Lloyd-Richardson, Fava, & Wing, 2009). The global obesity epidemic is evident in the college population, which is why it is so important to understand the meaning of weight, and the experiences shaped by the meaning of weight for the college student with weight concerns, and may or may not be overweight.

The American College Health Association (2011) estimates that three out of 10, (approximately 35%), college students are currently overweight, this prevalence doubling over the past 10 years (ACHA, 2011). The prevalence of overweight and obese students in college is increasing, but not at similar rates in general society. The rise in overweight among individuals has led to more individuals concerned with their weight, attempting to lose weight, and these same weight concerns are occurring among college students (Anderson, Lundgren, Shapiro, & Paulosky, 2003; Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein, & Deusinger, 2008). Many college students may not actually be overweight, but perceive their weight exceeds the ideal expected weight for a college student (Byrd, 2007; Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008) and these perceptions of personal weight are often more important in young adults (Eaton, Lowry, Brener, Galuska, & Crosby, 2005). The perceptions of personal weight can lead to anxiety about fitting in at college, affecting their sense of belonging in college (Aibel, 2003; Byrd, 2007), which could shape their

daily-life experiences, and shape the construction of social identities and overall identity development (Jaffe, 2008).

Most students (70%) do gain a significant amount of weight between the start of college and the end of sophomore year, which has led to the phenomenon of the freshman 15 (Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein, & Deusinger, 2005). In a study investigating weight changes, as well as weight-related behaviors, college students (n=764) were recruited for initial height/weight measurements upon entering college as freshmen. Once these students had completed their sophomore year, 290 returned for a reassessment. Seventy percent had gained weight, though most gained less than the freshman 15 (Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein, & Deusinger, 2005). Although there were significantly fewer students assessed at follow-up, the authors believe the findings represent the overall student population. The failure to assess all of the original participants was discussed as a limitation. But no reason was provided regarding any attempts to contact all original participants to return for the second assessment. Participation was voluntary and those students not returning may have not returned for fear of having their weight assessed and/or evidence of weight gain. A more recent study assessing the prevalence of weight gain among male and female freshmen provided similar results, 70-77% of students gain weight during the freshman year. (Lloyd-Richardson, Bailey, Fava, & Wing, 2009). This study included students from two different, similarly-sized, universities, a state-public institution (n=904) and a private university (n=382).

The phenomenon of the freshman 15 has received a great deal of focus in several studies with the objective of trying to determine the cause(s) and understand why this

weight gain occurs when students are in college. College students do gain weight typically during the first two years of college, but most students gain only an average of five to seven pounds (Hoffman, Policastro, Quick, & Lee, 2006; Gropper, Simmons, Gaines, Drawdy, Saunders, Ulrich, & Connell, 2009). Regardless of the actual amount of weight gained during college, it appears that many students are concerned about their weight as evidenced by the anecdotal accounts of students regarding their fear of the freshman 15. The fear of weight gain while in college is rooted in the greater societal attitudes about weight and fat. Greater western society has long held strong anti-fat attitudes as well as negative attributions towards excess weight, and these attitudes and beliefs likely exist in the college environment as well.

Another issue of practice in higher education regarding the weights of students is the prevalence of weight bias and anti-fat attitudes among various groups of higher education professionals that continues to persist. Pedersen, and Ketcham (2008) documented weight bias in a student health clinic at a Western university. The authors assessed the attitudes and beliefs of the health care providers at the student clinic regarding weight, and caring for overweight and obese students, as well as the clinic environment to identify areas that may negatively impact the care of the overweight or obese student. Using a focus group of eighteen providers, and observing the clinic environment, the authors concluded that elements of the physical environment presented barriers to care for overweight students, as well as the strong anti-fat attitudes of many providers at the student health clinic. The author recommends student health clinics consider these findings for providing adequate care to all college students. This study demonstrates that this population of health care providers at a student health clinic held

anti-fat attitudes and highlights the possibility that anti-fat attitudes may be prevalent within a college campus.

College administrators have become increasingly involved in the development of policies and strategies to address the obesity among college students. The health of students has been a concern for administrators for decades through student health clinic services, extracurricular health and wellness activities, and 1-3 credit hour elective courses providing fitness activities or health education. With the increase in the number of students entering college as overweight, or at risk of becoming overweight or obese, colleges are making efforts, developing strategies, and implementing programs that are aimed at encouraging students to adopt healthier behaviors and decrease obesity. Nelson, Kocos, Lytle, and Perry (2009) recommend universities “take an active role in designing and evaluating weight-related health promotion intervention strategies” (Nelson, Kocos, Lytle, & Perry, 2009, p. 290). The objective of their study was to identify the factors underlying weight-related behaviors among college students. This qualitative study interviewed fifty full-time freshman and sophomore students recruited from a large public Midwestern university. The major themes that emerged revolved around food options available on campus, late-night eating, alcohol-related eating, as well as eating in response to stress or boredom. This study does emphasize health-related behaviors and not the psychosocial aspects of weight, but it is valuable in the interviews of students in understanding their perspective and relationships between weight and health behaviors. The specific recommendation of the authors asking universities to implement weight-related strategies to address obesity further exemplifies the attention colleges are placing on weight of the students. This attention, though well intentioned for health promotion,

fails to consider the greater psychosocial aspects of weight. At the same time of increased attention to address obesity among college students, still very little attention is paid to underweight students, or students experiencing body image or eating disorders.

One specific institution, Lincoln University, implemented a policy requiring all of their students with a body mass index (BMI) over 30 to attend a health/fitness course. The policy, implemented in 2006, required all incoming freshmen to be weighed, and BMI calculated. Those students with a BMI over 30 were then required to attend a health/fitness course specific for them, other students, with a BMI less than 30, were not eligible to enroll in the course. It was only recently, November 2009, that this policy was made publicly known, as several students were informed that they would not be allowed to graduate in May 2010 if they did not meet the BMI requirement (below 30) or did not enroll in the course during the Spring 2010 semester.

The implementation of the policy at Lincoln University led to protest by some students, arguing that this is a form of discrimination, and the requirement of an additional course, not related to academic major, would prolong completion to a degree, and prevent some from graduating with a degree (Riley, 2009; Matheson, 2009). One student who protested the requirement, Tiana Lawson, stated in an editorial in the *Lincolnian*, the student newspaper, that although the university policy may have had no intention to make overweight students feel “excluded, that is precisely what they have done” (Lawson, 2009). Another student commented that the policy did influence the students’ perceptions about weight, and that they were being specifically categorized and vulnerable to discrimination (Hardy, 2009).

The university decided, after heated discussions and national media attention over the many complaints about the controversial requirement, to no longer require students to be weighed, or BMI calculated. The university changed its policy but only to a certain extent. The new policy in deference to the administration's ongoing concern over students' potential obesity, as of December 6, 2009, requires all freshmen and sophomores to attend a two-credit health education course. Under the new policy, students will be evaluated during the course by the professor; and those students identified as not meeting fitness standards (including BMI) will be recommended to take an additional one-credit course (Ashburn, 2009). Although the requirement of being weighed, as well as the requirement of taking a course based on the student's weight, has been discontinued, the newer policy still places an emphasis on the student's body – weight and BMI, without considering the greater psychosocial aspects of weight.

It is unclear what this revised policy means to the students of this institution, and how the original policy and the revised policy impacts the experiences of the college students. The potential for discrimination was acknowledged by some faculty at the onset of this policy implementation, but was not considered as important by the administration implementing the policy, until the recent discussions and media coverage. The original policy could have resulted in serious consequences for the targeted students and several would not have been able to graduate spring of 2010, without the revised policy .

The intentions of the program were to promote health, and many colleges are providing health education programs. “The health of students is becoming an increasing concern as college campuses address the issues of retention and the academic success of their students” (Lyter, 1997, p.1). But this policy, though well intentioned in addressing

the health issues of students, has adversely affected retention and academic success of the targeted students. This policy failed to take into consideration the students' perspectives about weight and health in the college environment. The current policy, though not requiring students to attend a course based on BMI, still assumes the college students' need to have their weight monitored, which still has the potential of labeling and categorizing students by weight. Does this labeling and categorizing students by weight have greater implications in the student's life? Does this contribute to the meaning of weight for students and their daily-lived experiences in college?

A small body of recent research has investigated weight and academic success or pursuing a college education. Crosnoe's (2007) research has looked at the effect weight in high school has had on going to college. This investigation sought to determine whether obesity during high school was associated with attending college, using a sample of high school students in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. His study highlights the need to consider weight as a strong factor for attending college, which has not seriously been considered in past research. This study found that overweight girls were only half as likely to go to college, but there was no difference for overweight boys, compared to thinner counterparts. He concluded that the self-image of the girls is often linked to personal weight, either actual weight, or perception that personal weight doesn't match an ideal expected weight.

The students' thoughts about their weight, regardless of being real or perceived, appear to have greater influence on the student who is concerned about their personal weight. The student with more negative perceptions about their weight is less likely to pursue further academic achievement. This finding is supported by earlier research

documenting that perceived weight, body size or body image, predicts certain life-decisions and behaviors (Rosen, 2002; Sobal 2005). Students with negative perceptions of their weight had a class failure rate 24% higher than other students. Crosnoe's study collected data from 11,000 adolescent students from 218 schools beginning in 1994. Although, this research focused on high school seniors and their intentions to go to college, it is valuable to this currently proposed study as it lays the foundation of weight issues traditional-aged freshmen may be experiencing when entering college. He proposes, based on not only his various studies but also the research of several others, investigating the psycho-social aspects of weight, the social stigma of weight contributes to certain "psychological and behavioral responses that interfere with college matriculation" (Crosnoe, 2007, p. 241).

Crosnoe's research highlights the concerns adolescents entering college may have about weight and body size, or in other words body image. A great deal of research has investigated the phenomenon of body image among college students, finding that body image tends to be centralized on perceived weight and perception of an expected ideal weight, as well as motivating certain behaviors. The following is a discussion about body image among college students and weight as one attribute of physical appearance that is the most salient within the concept of body image today.

Weight and Body Image in College

Body image and weight concerns have been documented in a variety of populations, as well as among college students. Most of this research investigated the phenomenon of body image and/or weight through a health perspective. But a growing body of research is documenting weight and body image issues specifically among

college students and beyond the health perspective. Gillen (2006) documented the prevalence of body image development and concerns among individuals during emerging adulthood (n=434 college students). This study demonstrated the importance of weight status, gender, and ethnicity in the perceptions of weight and body image using surveys, but also used open-ended questions to assess perceptions of weight and body image in the school environment (college). The first study was then followed with a longitudinal study assessing body image development across the college transition, from freshman to senior year. The data revealed that although there was relative stability in most aspects of body image, body size and weight were concerns for most college students, with no ethnic differences. Women were more satisfied with overall appearance than men, but were more concerned with body size. The college women experienced more body image dissatisfaction related to weight, but improved in overall appearance satisfaction as they progressed in college. Gillen (2006) proposes that the college campus acts as a common ecological context that influences body image development, promoting similar beliefs and assumptions about appearance, weight and size among the college students.

This study provides valuable insight into the perceptions of body satisfaction and an emphasis on weight among college students. The use of a survey was appropriate for the purpose of this study in assessing body image development, but had the authors sought to understand the personal experiences of this development the survey would have not provided an opportunity to collect the necessary qualitative narrative data. How were the college students experiencing daily-life activities that may have been influenced by body satisfaction/dissatisfaction and how did the context of the college environment shape body image development for the students?

Many of the studies assessing body image among college students have relied on quantitative surveys, with a growing body of qualitative studies are beginning to inform the research and practice of body image concerns. An important qualitative study that informs this research interviewed college students, but with the objective of understanding body image development during the participant's adolescence (Field, 2002). The researcher who conducted the study interviewed female college students (n= 16) with the objective of gaining a greater understanding of the factors that influence body image development, identified by the body of qualitative research, and the interplay of self-efficacy. The interviews provided rich data deepening the understanding of body image development. The author noted that although the objective was to understand body image development in adolescence before college, one of the major themes that emerged was the emphasis on the freshman 15 having a significant impact on body image development in college.

A small number of studies have explored the relationships between body image, weight, and behaviors among college students. One study specifically investigated the relationship between the acceptance of the socially constructed ideal body image, actual body weight, body image satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and weight management behaviors among college women, by looking at the socio-cultural factors of college (Lyter, 1997). The purpose of Lyter's study was to investigate the link between socio-cultural factors on body image, the socially constructed ideal body image, its influence on the level of body satisfaction, and the impact on women's health, specifically the development of eating disorders or disordered weight management behaviors.

The sample population of first year college women (n=405) selected from a small Midwestern state university, completed a survey assessing sociological attitudes towards appearance questionnaire (SATAQ; Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995), and another survey assessing body image using the multidimensional body-self relation questionnaire (MBSRQ; Brown, Cash, & Mikula, 1990). Each student also self-reported weight and height for BMI calculation, and completed the Michigan State University Weight Control Survey (Rosen, Shafer, Dummer, Cross, Deuman, & Malmber, 1988). The population included a diverse group of college women, though the majority, as noted by the researcher were Caucasian females. This study was based on the assumption that body image dissatisfaction (centralized on perceived body weight) was highly prevalent and normalized among college students, and this “suggests that many of our best and brightest on our college campuses may not be able to work to their full potential due to the epidemic of eating disorders” (Lyter, 1997, p.1).

Although Lyter’s work focused on first year female college students, more recent work has documented the phenomenon of body dissatisfaction among male college students as well (Watkins, Christie, & Chally, 2008). Male college students were surveyed (n=188) to assess the relationship of cognitive and affective dimensions of body image and actual weight/BMI, were found to experience concerns about body weight and shape. Using Chi-square tests and ANOVAs to determine differences between 4 BMI groups (underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese) on demographics and body image measures, the researchers found significant differences in total body image, and body dissatisfaction ($p < .001$).

Using social comparison theory, this descriptive study found that the sample population of first year female college students were dissatisfied with their bodies, and did engage in risky and unhealthy weight management behaviors. The greatest predictors for both body image dissatisfaction and weight-related behaviors were greater internalization of the thin ideal, and increased BMI. This study noted that the results were similar for all the participating female college students, regardless of race or ethnicity, and concluded that BMI, actual weight, for male college students may be an important factor in identifying potential body image disorders in college men (Watkins, Christie, & Chally, 2008).

Lyter's interest in researching body image is similar to my own, and her experiences with college students and the body image dissatisfaction they experience in the college environment. She notes that students would often make negative statements about fearing becoming fat, wanting to be thinner, and being ashamed of their weight. These are comments I often hear from not only my students, but throughout campus. A more recent study by Jackson (2009) also looked at body image concerns and weight preoccupation, but focused specifically on female college freshmen. This study, using semi-structured interviews, supports earlier findings; many of the women, regardless of weight, were concerned about their weight, most female students in the study (n=235) described the influence of social comparison in the college environment. This study is valuable in its use of qualitative semi-structured interviews, as well as providing a better understanding of the experiences of college women that are centralized around body image and weight preoccupations. Jackson recommended future research to further investigate the experiences of college women in understanding the complexities of body

image issues, as well as developing strategies to address this phenomenon on college campuses.

Body image concerns, specifically around meeting an expected thin ideal may occur not only among Caucasian, but also African American female college students (Atlas, Smith, Hohlstein, McCarthy, & Kroll, 2002). Using the Thinness and Restricting Expectance Inventory (TREI) to survey female college students (200 African American, and 300 Caucasian), the authors found the measure to be consistent across race, and correlated similarly across race. The TREI was used to assess cognitive expectations for the consequences of thinness and restricting food intake, and may reflect the expectations of life improvement if one meets the thin ideal held by overall society today. Individuals, including female college students, may believe that with thinness they will also be more respected by others, more capable and in control. Although this measure is typically used to assess risk factors for eating disorders, it is helpful in understanding the pervasiveness of the drive for meeting the thin ideal among the general population, and the learned expectations for meeting the thin ideal..

These expectations may also lead to attempts to change one's self and these attempts may not always be successful. Weight is considered to be one aspect of self that can be easily changed, but when the expected pay-off doesn't occur or weight change fails, individuals may experience a sense of false hope. The false hope syndrome has been investigated with a population of adults with episodes of weight cycling (Olson, Visek, McDonnell, DiPietro, 2011) Although the study used adults, it is helpful to understand the relationship between the expectations of meeting a weight ideal and the expectations of an improved life overall.

The emphasis on weight and appearance among college students is evident by the fat-talk that many of these students engage in during college. Fat-talk, how individuals communicate about food and body/weight/shape, or appearance, typically begins during adolescence and often continues well into adulthood (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). But little is known about the prevalence of fat-talk among college students, how they talk about fat and weight (Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008). Ousley, Cordero, and White (2008) attempted to measure the amount of time undergraduate students spend participating in fat talk and explore the topics most often discussed, among 272 students (male, n=82; and female, n=190) students, randomly selected through the registration database. Using the 2002 Weight Management, Eating, and Exercise Habits survey, the authors found that fat talk was prevalent among all of the surveyed college students, whether or not they engaged in disordered eating, and most students placed emphasis on weight, size, and shape; students compared bodies with other students and peer pressure to be thinner, or not fat, did relate to body satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008).

This study is valuable in highlighting the phenomenon of fat-talk and the importance college students place on fat and weight in college. Although, there were some limitations noted by the author, i.e., the survey had not been tested for validity, and there was only an 18% response rate. The authors recommend future research to investigate the fat-talk phenomenon among college students, and the underlying meanings of the comments about weight, and the concept of weight loss for acceptance typically experienced by the students. The authors also recommend college health professionals consider strategies to reduce the impact of fat-talk in the lives of college

students. This study, like many other studies investigating weight among college students, did approach the research through a health perspective and the impact of fat-talk on health behaviors, but it does allude to the impact of fat-talk, and emphasis on weight, among college students in the social realm of college. Fat-talk is a prevalent phenomenon in our society that has become so acceptable and expected it has become a normalized discourse in our society today. The fat-talk statements often indicate more than merely criticizing one's own weight, or someone else's weight, but also indicates mood, self-worth, and predicts certain behaviors (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994).

As mentioned earlier, the actual weight of the individual is not as important as the perception of weight in the concerns about weight, An individual who perceives their body as overweight, and not actually overweight, will experience more body dissatisfaction and actual weight should not be included in assessments of weight and body dissatisfaction (Faith, & Allison, 1996). Matthews (2009) investigated life satisfaction and disordered eating among college students, by surveying students (n=723) to assess life satisfaction, eating behaviors and weight perceptions. The results showed that weight perceptions significantly correlated with life satisfaction ($p < .05$). The author recommends future research explore the social norms of the college environment, and the development of social norming techniques that will facilitate a de-emphasis on weight and the idealized thin body to an ideal that is more appropriate to mediate the relationship between poor weight perceptions and life dissatisfaction. The findings of these studies support the decision to not collect BMI or weight data for the current study exploring the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment.

Lyter (1997), like many other of the studies discussed, recommends colleges develop and implement courses addressing concerns about weight, appearance, fitness, nutrition, and body image; as well as recommending colleges address the factors on college campuses that reflect socio-cultural influences about weight, shape, and appearance. This study provides valuable information regarding the importance of weight among a specific group of female college students. Several more recent studies investigating body image perceptions and weight among female college students have found similar results (Latty, Carolan, Jocks, & Weatherspoon, 2007). A smaller number of studies have documented this same issue of body image and weight among male college students, finding similar results that women report (Drewnowski, & Yee, 1987; O’Dea, & Abraham, 2002).

The studies discussed in this section highlight weight as a dominant facet of body image, as well as the relationship between body image development and the environment of college, and the social culture of college as well as why weight has become such a major concern for many college students. The findings of each of these studies is valuable, but only alludes to the meaning of weight for the individual college students and what the college students may be experiencing in daily life in college relative to that meaning. The various quantitative surveys used by the research investigating body image, and weight as a factor of body image leading to the greatest dissatisfaction are inappropriate for the purpose of describing the psychosocial aspects of weight, the meaning of weight, and experiences in college. Most of the research investigating body image and weight concerns among college students has focused on the development of eating disorders, and health-related behaviors. But a growing number of studies are

moving beyond this perspective and exploring weight concerns and body image and the relationships to self-esteem, contingencies of self-worth, as well as participation in daily-life activities. These studies are important to consider as a foundation for this proposed research, in making the connections between weight concerns, self-esteem, and the daily-lived experiences of the student in college.

Self-Esteem and Self-Worth

A group of studies considering weight and body image have focused on self-esteem and self-worth. These studies have found that body image and weight perceptions consistently influence self-esteem and self-worth, to the extent that some researchers have proposed that weight is a contingency of self-worth. A study examining the relationships among self-esteem, body image, and health related behaviors, found that self-esteem and body image were significantly related among a population of female (n=267) and male (n=156) first-year college students, attending a large southwestern university (Lowery, Robinson-Kurpius, Befort, Hull-Blanks, Sollenberger, Foley-Nicpon, & Huster, 2005). This study also supports the earlier research documenting body/weight dissatisfaction is reported by the majority of college students. The research began by collecting data in 23 classrooms, during mid-semester, at a 90% completion rate, using a demographic sheet, the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996; $\alpha = .76-.89$ body surveillance, $\alpha = .68-.76$ body control, $\alpha = .70-.84$ body shame), the Weight and Appearance Visual Analogue Scales (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; $r = .76$, $p = .001$), the Contour Drawing Rating Scale (Thompson & Gray, 1995; test-retest reliability = .78), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = .79$), and a 15-item measure of physical fitness/health related behaviors ($\alpha = .80$).

Through MANOVA and ANOVA (to reveal gender differences) the data analysis indicated that the low self-esteem of male students was significantly related to higher body shame ($r=.21$, $p<.01$), and the self-esteem of female students was related more to body image dissatisfaction and body surveillance ($r=.30$, $p<.001$), and then body shame ($r=.40$, $p<.001$). The results of this study are valuable in the documenting that body image concerns are not exclusive to female college students; male college students may experience body shame, which in turn has a influence on self-esteem. The authors do note several limitations in the lack of ethnic diversity, so the findings can only be generalizable to Euro-American male and female traditional-aged college students.

This study also highlights the phenomenon that attractiveness is important for social success. This may be especially true on college campuses where people are rapidly assessed for physical attractiveness. The male students may be experiencing more body shame, and greater influence on self-esteem since men are now also being pressured to conform to a thin and muscular ideal, and men are increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies, want to lose weight and increase muscle tone. The researchers recommend future research investigating the same relationship of self-esteem and body image include a more diverse population, and a variety of colleges in different locations. The location of this college in southwestern United States may influence body image ideals differently than if the college were located elsewhere.

Two more recent studies investigated body image and self-esteem have also found a relationship between body image and self-esteem among college students, Byrd (2007) and Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, (2009). Byrd (2007) sought to understand the relationship between actual weight or BMI and body image satisfaction, self-esteem, and

self-perception level differences among African American and White females. Initially, the data showed that African American females demonstrated more positive body image, and weight did not predict self-esteem. But when urbanicity and socio-economic status were included as covariates, the difference between White females and African American females disappeared. The African American females did report greater satisfaction with overall appearance, but were similarly concerned about weight as reported by the White females.

The participating sample of students (N=113; W=65, AA=47) volunteered through the psychology department of a mid-size university in East Texas, all were unmarried and 18-25 years old. The data was collected using a survey instrument comprised of several previously tested items measuring body image, weight perceptions, self-worth, and psychological status and a demographic sheet (actual weight/height, computed BMI, and ideal weight). The limitations stated by the author, are the small proportion of African American females (16%) of students that participated in the study as compared to 74% White female students. I would add also, since participation was voluntary, the African American females who did volunteer may have done so based on their own perceptions of weight and body image being similar to the White females. Another limitation that should be noted, but was not mentioned by the author, is the location and type of institution the students were recruited from. As noted by previous studies, location and type of institution could skew the data by the type of student who attends the institution. This study also is limited to women, and future research should include men, as recommended by the author.

The study by Byrd (2007) is valuable though in reinforcing the evidence that self-esteem can be influenced by body image, self-esteem is often influenced by environmental and social factors, and self-esteem is linked to mental and emotional health, perceived social approval, and self-perceived abilities. The findings are similar to a study examining body image concerns, self-esteem among college students (Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009). This second study did include male college students, and attempted to determine if gender acted as a moderator in the relationship between contingent self-esteem and body image concerns, including weight and muscularity. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyze the data from surveys measuring the relationships among gender, contingent self-esteem, and body image, collected from first year undergraduate students (n=359, 59.1% female). The female students did report higher levels of contingent self-esteem and greater concerns about their weight; males reported some concerns about weight, but reported greater drive for muscularity. The results of this study provided evidence that there is a relationship between contingent self-esteem and weight concerns. The concept of weight as a contingency of self-worth/self-esteem will also be presented.

Another study looking at self-esteem and body image among college students investigated how weight concerns may impact the leisure activities of college. The researchers identified the gap in research as needing to understand the effects of body image on daily life activities and experiences. In examining the relationships among body image, beliefs about appearance, and leisure participation/non-participation among college female students (n=116) recruited from a private university, and comparing them to adult women's (n=76) participation/non-participation in leisure activities, survey data

showed a strong relationship among body image, beliefs about appearance and leisure activity participation (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006). Using the Body-Image Assessment Scale (Thompson & Gray, 1995), the Beliefs about Appearance Scale ($\alpha=.94-.95$; Spangler & Stice, 2001), and a scale to measure hierarchical leisure constraints to assess the relationship between body image concerns (including weight) and leisure constraints ($\alpha=.77$ to $.82$; Raymore, 2002). The authors describe the concept of “leisure constraints” as factors that “inhibit people’s ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend more time doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction” (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006, p. 312). The authors further define leisure constraints as falling into three categories: structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal; structural constraints were defined by physical obstacles, location, and resources; interpersonal constraints were defined by relationships and interactions between individuals; and intrapersonal constraints were defined by a reflection of individual attributes and psychological states such as fear, stress, or enjoyment.

The authors note the plethora of research that has examined the constructs of body image, the development of body image, and the contributing factors on the development and maintenance of body image, with much of the recent research indicating that body image does in fact affect self-esteem and “self-esteem affects leisure participation and constraints” (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006, p. 315). This study provides the basis for an essential component of this current doctoral study, by specifically investigating the potential relationship between body image, self-esteem and leisure activities, and finding a relationship does exist. My study will also add to their research, as they recommend

future research is needed to explore the effect of appearance concerns on the leisure lives of specific populations, such as college students.

A limited body of work has focused specifically on participation in leisure activities finding that it is not only the participation or non-participation in an activity that must be considered but also the level of enjoyment the individual experiences in the leisure activities (Raymore, 2002). An individual's level of self-consciousness is one major factor that influences the enjoyment of an activity. The individual may participate, but be unable to fully experience or enjoy the activity if they are self-conscious about their bodies, specifically their weight. Individuals that may be self-conscious about their weight or body may participate in activities but may use certain strategies to make themselves less visible and not fully experience or enjoy the activity (Raymore, 2002; Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006).

The findings of Liechty, Freeman, and Zabriskie (2006), highlight, at least among college women “body image negatively affected their day-to-day social interaction” (p.315), and that the self-perceptions of body image, specifically weight, positively related to levels of confidence and more importantly the perceived influence over social interactions. This finding is supported by another study investigating the quality of life and self-concept in first and second year college students based on body satisfaction (Nguyen, 2007). Research investigating body image, self-esteem, and day-to-day living experiences should consider the social, emotional, and physical development that may be delayed by concerns about body image and weight, based on the findings that body image does influence self-esteem and self-concept, and the recent research documenting the

relationship between body satisfaction/dissatisfaction and relationships, social and emotional development, and perception of self-worth.

The impact of weight on well-being appears to affect many students regardless of race/ethnicity (Powell, 2006), gender (Crosnoe, 2008), or actual weight (Carr & Friedman, 2006). Other quantitative studies have focused on the prevalence of body image, obesity and weight-related health behaviors among college students. These studies have provided early evidence that both male (63.5%) and female (60.4%) college students seem to be equally concerned with body weight, and are currently attempting to change their body weight (DeBate, Lewis, Zhang, Blunt, & Thompson, 2008). This same study also found that the weight concerns of the college students were strongly influenced by the internalization of socio-cultural attitudes about weight. This study is important and informs this currently proposed study, pointing out that weight concerns are prevalent among the college student population, emphasizing the need to investigate this issue. But this study, being quantitative, does not address what weight means to the college student, and how the meanings of weight might shape the student's daily-life experiences.

In the effort to address the obesity epidemic in college, college administrators should also consider what weight means to the college student, just as what gender may mean, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. The perceptions of weight, and what weight means in the context of college has not been thoroughly considered in sociological or other theoretical research. As earlier presented, a small, but growing, number of studies are finding a relationship between body image, with an emphasis on weight concerns, self-esteem, and the impact on daily life activities. These studies are valuable in the evidence

documenting the relationships between weight and self-esteem, but they fail to document the actual experiences of students in the college environment in relationship to their weight, and what weight means within the context of college. The surveys used by each of the studies are valuable tools for the purpose of understanding body image, and the relationship of body image and self-esteem, but quantitative surveys are unable to fully capture the depth of description in understanding daily-lived experiences of college students. The current doctoral study is attempting to continue and expand upon the previous work, by focusing on the individual students' experiences of participation/non-participation in daily-life activities on a college campus, in the formal and informal learning environments, and the meaning of weight during these experiences.

Attitudes about Weight and Fat

A great deal of research and literature has investigated, documented and discussed various dimensions of weight among college students, including health and body image. Most college students are less concerned about their weight and health, and are more concerned about weight and social acceptance. College students will participate in weight behaviors in an effort to be accepted and fit-within the expected appearance (weight) ideals of their college peers (Finnie, 2007; Byrd, 2007). Research has found that how students perceive their own weight (in comparison to others), not their actual weight, is more likely to influence self-esteem, body image satisfaction, and health related behaviors (Lyter, 1997; Lowery, Robinson, Befort, Hull , Sollenberger, Foley, & Huser, 2005).

A Fat Phobia Scale was developed in 1984, as a 50-item, five-point semantic differential fat phobia scale (Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly, 1993). A study to evaluate this scale was

conducted by Robinson, Bacon, and O'Reilly (1993) and then modified into a short form (Bacon, Scheltema, & Robinson, 2001). The purpose of the 1993 study was to test a scale to measure anti-fat attitudes and specifically the fear of fat. The authors also planned to evaluate its reliability and validity, determine any correlating factors of "fat phobia" (Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly, 1993, p.468) and conduct an experiment designed to decrease fat phobia. The authors define fat phobia as "a pathological fear of fatness" (Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly, 1993, p. 468), and this fear would be expressed with negative attitudes and stereotypes about fat people.

The study by Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly (1993) comprised of two studies were conducted to test the Fat Phobia scale and used subjects from the same sample. The first study, N=1,135 were recruited from random settings in a metropolitan area (422 were college students), the second study used a sub-sample from the first study, N=40. The second sample was selected since they were recruited from a self-esteem/body image course being conducted at a mental health clinic. The first study analyzed the data ANOVA and multiple comparison tests on the fat phobia scores. The data results showed that individuals who were not overweight were more likely to have fat phobic attitudes than overweight individuals ($df=1, 1055; F=8.2943; p<.004$), younger individuals (<55yrs) were more likely to have fat phobic attitudes than older individuals ($df = 1, 1002; F = 9.51116; p<.03$), and women were more likely than men to have fat phobic attitudes ($df = 1, 1089; F = 4.5996; p<.03$), and individuals with more than a high school education were more likely to have fat phobic attitudes ($df=1, 1133; F = 6.8336; p<.009$).

The second study, using the smaller sub-sample of women had completed the Fat Phobia Scale before participating in the self-esteem/body image program for the first study. The women then participated in several sessions for the second study designed to increase positive perceptions about fat people, and then completed the Fat Phobia Scale again. The authors state

that sixty percent of the participants showed lower scores in fat phobia. Paired t-tests showed significant reductions; $t(39) = 8.88, p < .001$. The authors conclude that the Fat Phobia Scale has strong reliability and validity. But they do note the limitations of the study being in the study design, since the sample included in the first and second study and prior interest in body image, and weight. Another limitation is the lack of control to compare the Study 2 sample against. This tool may be useful in measuring the fear of fat but does not assess any relationship between the fear of fat and resulting attitudes or belief, or any connection to the stigmatization or discrimination of fat.

The more recent study using the Fat Phobia Scale was conducted specifically to develop a shorter version of the original 50-item scale (Bacon, Scheltema, & Robinson, 2001). The tool was shortened to 14 items and was tested by comparing it to the original. A sample of 255, similar to the original sample of 1135 was recruited and completed the original 50-item survey as well as the newer 14-item shorter version. The 14-item short-form showed good reliability ($\alpha = .91$) and good correlation with the original 50-item scale ($r = .82$, original sample; $r = .90$, new sample). The limitations to this study are a repeat of the original, since they chose a similar sample to test the reliability of the new scale in comparison with the older scale. This Fat Phobia scale would need to be tested in a more randomly selected population as well as an experimental design with a control group to compare the data against for more generalizable conclusions.

It has become a fairly common attitude and belief to think of “weight as a barometer of a person’s character ” and “body weight has become one of our most potent markers of social status” (Oliver, 2006, p. 6). The negative social attitudes about weight and fatness continue to be held by many college students, believing that “becoming fat is

the worst thing that could happen to a person” and that individuals who are fat are simply lazy with no willpower (Oliver, 2006, p. 61).

Anti-fat Attitudes. Several studies have examined the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of weight among college students using a variety of surveys. Allison, Basile, & Yaker (1991) attempted to develop a tool to assess anti-fat attitudes, and then examine the relationship between these anti-fat attitudes and any stigmatization or discrimination of weight. The study included several populations, including undergraduate (n=72) and graduate students (n=52) and members of a fat activist group (n=1,514). As a result of this study, the survey tool, Attitudes Toward Obese Persons (ATOP) scale, a 20-item, 6-choice Likert scale, was found to have good reliability in measuring anti-fat attitudes among undergraduates ($\alpha=.79$); and most strongly correlated with the Beliefs About Obese Persons Scale (BAOP), an 8-item scale ($\alpha=.65-.82$). A factor analysis revealed three factors involved in the attitudes towards and beliefs about obese persons: different personality (23%), social difficulties (11%), and self-esteem (8%).

Crandall (1994) also developed a 13-item instrument to measure anti-fat attitudes with three categories (Dislike of fat people, Willpower, and Fear of fat), using a population of college students. This scale has been the most widely used and modified over the past decade. Morrison & O’Connor (1999), developed a shorter 5-item instrument, from the original Anti-Fat Attitude (AFA) scale (Crandall, 1994) to measure anti-fat attitudes, comparing its reliability and validity to Crandall’s measure. The modified AFA scale no longer included the Dislike of Fat People believing this component lacked validity, and replaced it with a new category of items, Belief in a Just World. The modified version was found to be similarly reliable as compared to the

original longer version ($\alpha=.75$). The shorter version of the Anti-Fat Attitudes Scale (AFAS) has been the most widely used in assessing attitudes about weight and fatness. The AFAS has been modified by others, using only certain components of the survey. Assessing the relationship between personal weight concerns and anti-fat attitudes was recently explored using the Willpower and Belief in a Just World components of the AFAS, as well as the Stunkard scale to assess personal weight perceptions and concerns (Harvey, 1999). The original study by Morrison and O'Connor (1999) tested the AFAS, using a variety of populations from adolescents ($n=1452$) and university students ($n=424$). The authors concluded that the AFAS provided satisfactory reliability for both men and women, and that men scored higher on the AFAS than women, as predicted by the authors. Weight and weight perceptions influenced overall AFAS scores as well.

All of these studies began with the purpose of developing an instrument to measure anti-fat attitudes, testing the validity and reliability using college populations, but all the studies also provided evidence that the college populations participating in the studies held very high levels of anti-fat attitudes. Other studies have measured anti-fat attitudes using these same measures among specific types of college students, such as exercise science students (Chambliss, Finley, & Blair, 2004), pre-med students and dietetic students (Puhl, Wharton, & Heuer, 2009).

Felts (2005) investigated anti-fat attitudes and body image dissatisfactions among college students ($n=187$) using the original AFAS survey and found that weight stigmatization was present in the college population, with males holding greater dislike for excess weight for females, attributing the weight to low willpower, but females expressed a greater fear of fat than males. The students were currently enrolled in a major

Mid-Western University, aged 18-24 years, and recruited through an automated research subject pool as well as through face-to-face recruitment through classes. Students were compensated with a research credit. Felts also used a survey to assess body image dissatisfaction developed by Davison and McCabe (2005), which included sections: Body Image, Body Change, Body Image Behavior, and Physical Attractiveness, and used correlational analysis to determine if AFAS scores related to body image dissatisfaction scores.

The results of the data reveal that a positive relationship existed between the AFA scale and the Body Change, indicating that the more importance placed on body appearance, the higher degree of anti-fat bias. A positive relationship was also found between AFA scores and Body Image Behavior, revealing the tendency to hide body shape if dissatisfied and efforts to improve body increase as AFA increases. Also, a positive relationship was found between AFA scores and tendency's to compare appearance and body to others. The author recommends future research is needed to understand the way weight is viewed in a diverse population, and documenting the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and anti-fat attitudes is only the first step in understanding the social meanings of weight in college.

The limitations of this study may be in the geographical location of the institution located in the Mid-West, but the sample size was fairly large and may be representative of the students at the institution and others located in the Mid-West. Although the AFAS scale has been validated and considered reliable, no statistical information was provided on the validity or reliability for the Body Image Dissatisfaction scale. Similar results were found in a study investigating the relationships between personal weight concerns,

personality and anti-fat attitudes (Harvey, 1999). Respondents (n=158) were asked to first describe their perceptions of certain terms relating to body weight and size, and then completed a survey measuring anti-fat attitudes. These studies highlight the relationship between the prevalence of anti-fat attitudes and body image dissatisfaction, and the need for further research in understanding this phenomenon, as well as the emphasis on weight as central to body image dissatisfaction.

The relationships of anti-fat attitudes to other prejudicial and gender-related attitudes was tested by Lopez, Lewis, and Cash (2006) using 179 undergraduate participants to complete measures of prejudicial attitudes, including anti-fat attitudes. Using multiple regression analysis the data showed that several factors predicted anti-fat attitudes: males, whites, and gender-typed individuals, as compared to women, and African Americans. After controlling for demographics, social desirability, gender-role, racism, and homophobia significantly correlated with anti-fat attitudes. This study is valuable in noting the salience of anti-fat attitudes similar to other attributes that are often stigmatized in our society. The research exploring gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality has found that individuals possessing a stigmatized attribute are more likely to experience daily-life activities differently than others. If anti-fat attitudes are prevalent in a society, then a greater number of individuals possessing the attribute (fatness) or perceiving themselves of possessing the attribute, then the experiences of these individuals will be impacted by the potential stigmatization.

Psychosocial Aspects of Weight

Psychosocial theories are the foundation for research interested in how people think about themselves and the world around them, as well as how they feel, behave, and

interpret meanings of experience (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). A great deal of research using psychosocial theories, in understanding the experiences and development of college students, provides evidence of the relationship between certain experiences of being a college student and developing into a healthy human being (Erikson, 1959; Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). One of the primary developmental theories informing this research is Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth), which describes several stages of development that involve two processes of acquiring knowledge.

This study is informed by psychosocial theories since weight is such a highly salient issue throughout western society, and especially so for college students who are already concerned with physical appearance and fitting in at college. The specific stage of Piaget's development theory that applies to this study is the fourth stage of formal operational development. At this stage, knowledge is acquired and is then placed within knowledge structure and describes the changes in development most college students may experience while in college. At this stage individuals (college students) may be in the midst of trying to understand who they are and what their place is in the world is highly influenced by the ideology of current society. If society is critical of weight, and the meaning of weight relates to personal worth, then college students in this stage may think and feel about themselves and their weight in comparison to the social ideals of weight and what weight means to greater society.

It is the intention of this study to further the research and practice involving body image, weight, and any relationships between weight perceptions, and the meanings of weight to self-worth, as well as a greater understanding of the psychosocial aspects of

weight, and highlight the need for more research to understand the relationships between weight concerns, self-worth and overall well-being among college students. This study also would like to highlight the need for further research investigating the possible development of social identities based on the students' meaning(s) of weight, and the consideration that weight may have an impact on how individual students experience daily activities in the college environment.

Psychosocial Development

Erikson (1959) believed that the integration of multiple identities is a hallmark of healthy psychosocial development. The basis of identity theory began with structural symbolic interactionism, and involves how an individual makes meanings associated with performing a role, and emphasizes the behavioral outcomes associated with that role. Identity is a “dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world” (Josselson, 1987, pp. 12-13). Piaget’s work in psychosocial development provided the foundation for current theories of student development, as he sought to “describe the process of change” that occurs as individual progress towards adulthood.(Pascarella and Terenzini, 2004, p. 27). The seven vectors of Chickering and Reisser (1993) further add to the psychosocial development of college students, and propose that a deeper understanding of sense of self needs to consider specific attributes, the first of which is “comfort with body and appearance” (p.181); as well as “sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyles, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, and self-acceptance and self-esteem” (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 181).

Piaget believed in constructivism, in that the creation of knowledge occurs through interactions between the individual's current understanding and the environment, and worked through two processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation involves the process of taking in information about the environment and incorporating it into an already existing schema, or knowledge structure. Accommodation is the process of changing current schemas or creating new ones when the existing schemas are not able to make sense or meaning of experiences. Individuals may distort information during assimilation to make it fit the available schemes, but eventually the individual will need to correct the distortion with a changed or new schema (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

The theoretical model of Piaget assumes that knowledge is constructed as individuals interact with the environment, with a constant process of trying to balance assimilation and accommodation. The conflicts that naturally arise during experiences are believed to promote development, by requiring the creation of new schemas. Although accommodation can take time, as the individual tries to resolve the conflicts between the new information and the existing schemas. But as individuals mature, and thinking becomes more complex, with more schemas to make meaning of new information, accommodation can occur more quickly, allowing further development towards maturity. This model is useful in describing the changes in thinking that students may experience in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As the students' lives become increasingly complex, the schemas must evolve, becoming more complex, differentiating from and integrating with other schemas. As the students' ways of thinking progress, building on previous knowledge, with newer schemas able to resolve conflicts and make sense of

experiences. “Development proceeds through a process of preparing for the shift to the next, more complex stage, and once attained, expanding, and integrating gradually within the stage” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 7).

Although Piaget’s model describes a series of four stages towards mature adulthood, there has been some criticism by other psychosocial theorists that these stages do not accommodate for differences in how individuals interact with the environment, and make meaning of these experiences. The model describes development as occurring along two dimensions: a concrete view of the world (egocentric) to a more abstract view (reflective). But not all individuals may progress through development at the same pace or sequence along these two dimensions. Gilligan’s research on women’s concepts of self and morality found that Piaget’s model does not adequately describe the experiences or the meaning making of experiences, resolving of conflicts of women (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004). The critics note that Piaget’s model fails to consider that knowledge can emerge from firsthand experience, understanding another’s ideas, and can occur during conversation and collaboration with others. The model also fails to describe the possible evolution of humanizing values, which involves the removal of old knowledge structures, beliefs, and attitudes (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

As student development theory has progressed over the years, as well as overall psychosocial research, broader perspectives have evolved. An increasing number of theories focusing on how students make sense of their self in the world around them, and this development may occur randomly with unpredictable changes. Current research on student development suggests that many individuals entering college are not at operational reasoning, which Piaget’s model proposed should be occurring at 12-17 years

of age. Psychosocial development continues to progress, but at various rates for different individuals (Evans, Forney, DiBrito, 1998). Various psychosocial theories may be helpful in understanding the development of individuals, specifically college students, as they progress into adulthood, including social identity theories as a way of categorizing self and others.

Social identity theory evolved out of work on social categorization (Tajfel, 1982) and involves two processes of identity formation: self-categorization (how one places his or her self within social groups) and social comparison (the process of fitting into or out of a social group by comparing one's personal attributes to those of others in social groups). Social identity is a form of self-labeling, i.e., I am a woman, I am a feminist, I am American. Social identity also involves the adoption of certain normative behaviors, characteristics, and values of the particular group the individual may self-categorize and therefore believe they belong. Most individuals have multiple social identities and these identities can change in reference to the context, environment, or social group. This theory then is essential in examining and understanding how an individual may compare him or herself to others; and how an individual is influenced by the comparison of others in a social group.

Social identity theory and identity theory have many similarities and differences. Both of the theories are aimed at understanding the self and have many overlapping concepts, but each approaches the understanding of self from different directions, with different goals and focus on different concepts of identity. For the purpose of this research social identity will be considered first since it involves the self-categorization of

individuals (students) in reference to the context (being in college), environment (the college campus) in comparison to a social group (college student population).

Identity development among college students can be viewed as occurring in stages from freshman to senior years. Medalie proposed a model of development as a mini-life cycle with each year of college life bringing new challenges and expectations. Freshman year is a time of transition requiring the student to divest themselves of the family and invest in being a college student (Divestment and Investment), followed by the sophomore year of choosing a major, and awareness of the future (Consolidation and Choice), the junior year is marked by the expectations of mastering knowledge and skills and more seriousness of studies (Mastery and Commitment), and ending with the senior year of preparing for the future outside of college (Anticipating the world beyond). It is important to consider the transitions students may undergo as they progress through their college years and how certain attributes may influence each of these stages. Medalie's model considers the college years as a time of consolidation as the student searches for identity.

Medalie (1981) applied this model in addressing student development issues among students facing academic, diversity and gender role challenges. Her work is valuable in describing the challenges college students face, and how those challenges change as college student progress through their academic years. In the same challenges with gender roles that women may have faced in college years ago, students with weight concerns may face certain limitations and expectations as well. College students entering college during their freshman year may be very concerned about the freshman 15 weight gain, but as the students progress, this weight issue may no longer have meaning to them,

but instead weight, the perception of weight, may take on different meanings and possibly affect choices in major, being able to commit to studies, and decisions about the future.

The majority of the research exploring identity in college students has used a more developmental and psychological framework, and only a few recent studies have used a sociological approach. Researchers using a sociological approach to identity development consider the environment as an important part of development and growth as an individual. This approach to understanding identity development is based on the assumption that an individual's identity is an interplay of three parts: "the person's felt identity (self-concept), the person's presentations of his or her identity to others (presented self), and the identity attributed by others to the person" (Kaufman, & Feldman, 2004, p. 465).

Kaufman and Feldman (2004) interviewed a sample of college students (n=82) with the objective of explore how students form identities in college. The authors focused on several domains of identity using the college as the context of social interaction, where students come in contact with others in various settings. The authors' hypothesis that the social interactions shaped the identities of the students was supported by the findings. Using a symbolic interactionist approach, and considering the social structural location of colleges, the study was able to conclude that the students' identities were shaped by their college experiences. "College is an arena of significant boundary crossing in which individuals are engaged constantly in the construction of their felt identities"(Kaufman, & Feldman, 2004, p. 491). As the student moves through college and the college campus, he or she is interacting with the environment and others in such a

way as to affect change in his/her self-concept in each place and each interaction. The sources of college effects can vary in the type of face-to-face interaction, social comparisons made by the students to other students, and the structure and organization of the institution itself. “Students tend to adopt personal and social qualities appropriate to the positions to which schools are chartered to assign them” (Kaufman, & Feldman, 2004,p. 492). College students will assign identities to themselves and others with respect to how they see the college as a social environment and learning institution.

Identity status and weight preoccupation was examined by surveying a sample of female college students (n=107) from two colleges (Herzog, 1997). Using ANOVA to determine if there was a relationship between weight preoccupation and identity status, the researcher found that there was very little relationship in most of the four status domains of identity. The women who had not committed to an identity reported a significantly higher degree of weight preoccupation than women who had committed to an identity. The author then conducted follow-up interviews (n=6) to explore from the women’s perspectives the relationship of weight preoccupation and identity status. The narratives revealed that women take several factors into account when choosing identities. Herzog’s interest in the research was to better understand the relationship of women’s identity status and eating disorders. This study had several limitations in its findings, but did find that identity development may be more difficult for women as a result of gender role expectations both in and out of the classroom. These findings are important to consider in the possible ways weight can influence psychosocial development.

Psychosocial Development. Psychosocial development involves the “growth or changes related to how students view themselves and their abilities, the relationships they have with others in their lives, and the future directions of their lives, which encompasses adult development and career development” (Gardner, 2009, p. 17). Several studies have looked at psychosocial development among college students and the roles involved with various social identities.

Huftalin (2006) used phenomenological research methods with a constructivist framework to explore the movement efforts of college students in becoming more open to differences in social identity. This study chose to use an exploratory approach since few studies, mostly quantitative, “have focused on the students’ voices in describing the movement and their experiences around difference” (Huftalin, 2006, p. 1). The researcher used criterion-based sampling to recruit five participants for in-depth interviews in an effort to describe how the students experience and make meaning around the different social identities of other students. After thematic analysis, the data revealed that student the movement on accepting differences in social identity was “fluid, contextually based, and recursive, and it was closely tied to their own identity growth” (Huftalin, 2006, p.1).

Weight and Social Identities

The symbolic interaction perspective contributes to understanding social identities by recognizing the complexities of creating and maintaining an identity in a particular social situation. Social identity involves self-labeling, and therefore is a role-identity, determined by the meanings of the social role (Van Manen, 1990; Crotty, 1998). The symbolic interactionist framework is used to study social interaction, either direct or indirect interaction among individuals as well as the social context of these interactions.

For the purpose of this study an understanding of the self-labeling in specific social settings will be achieved through the interviews and what students describe about their interactions in various college settings. This framework allows the researcher to examine the interactions, the context of the interactions, and the feelings, thoughts, and interpretations of students as they experience college life in the classroom, and throughout the campus.

Understanding the growing phenomenon of weight and social identities that merge to form weight identities, and the emerging fat identity, is being studied and discussed by scholars, giving rise to a new scholarly field of fat studies. Fat identity is conceptualized as a social identity that is very much influenced by the context of the environment, the social interactions experienced by the individual, and is learned through each of these and the social and personal values placed on weight, fat, and fatness. Fat identity is learned through exposure to the various messages about weight, and since weight is an attribute that is very personal, can hold unique meanings for each individual there is not a standard that defines what is a fat identity, rather fat identity should be considered as something that is fluid and changeable.

Jaffe (2008) conducted in-depth interviews (n=40) and used data from a large national sample with the objective of exploring the formation of fat identities, by deconstructing the visible trait (weight) that forms the identity and the social meaning (fatness) the trait represents. The author was determined that several factors influence the formation of a fat identity, and most individuals had a threshold as the point at which fatness became a part of their self-concept. The study also found that the age of the individual played a role in the formation of the fat identity, with younger individuals

being more concerned with the social aspects of being fat, more likely to perceive discrimination based on weight, and more likely to internalize weight-related social messages. Although, this study used a small sample for the in-depth interviews, it still provides valuable insight into understanding the social forces that can influence the formation of an identity. It is also one of the very few studies investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight and the phenomenon of the fat identity. Jaffe concludes that future research should use the model she presented in exploring the formation of identities around weight.

Meaning of Weight

Weight is a highly salient issue in current Western society (Sobal & Maurer, 1999), and many college students enter college with weight concerns or develop weight concerns while in college (Aibel, 2003; Gillen, 2006). Recent research investigating weight among a variety of populations provides evidence that weight can and often does impact self-esteem, self-worth, and the construction of social identities. But it is unclear what this means to the college student while in college. This research is being undertaken in hopes of bringing to light the need to consider weight as a factor that influences the college student in the psycho-social dimension, and should be considered a possible factor that influences identity development. Weight has become discussed publicly as a social problem, which further intensifies any meaning individuals, and a society attribute to weight. Kwan (2009) proposes that there are several competing meanings about weight and the body. Her work explores weight through three cultural frames (medical, social justice, and market choice) and found that each frame prescribes very different meanings to weight. She recommends future research use in-depth interviews to explore how

individuals define themselves as well as how the body is experienced in daily-life activities (Kwan, 2009).

There are no current studies that have explored the meanings and experiences of weight among college students, and none of these studies has considered weight and the influence of weight on daily –life experiences among college students. Neumark-Sztainer & Eisenberg (2005) recommend more qualitative research is needed to understand the relationship of weight and psychosocial well-being, and specifically among teens and young adults in understanding the meaning of weight and “how it relates to well-being” (p. 76).

Sobal and Maurer (1999) in *Interpreting Weight* address the need to understand the meaning of weight:

“Definitions of weight depend on specific cultural contexts. Weight definitions change throughout the life course, but they are especially evident during life transitions. During these times, our attention to body weight and appearance are especially heightened. Cultural expectations regarding people’s weight may change to accommodate changes in their social roles” (p.5).

The need for understanding what weight means to college students has recently been highlighted by Kristen Crepezzi (2007). In her discussion of *Fat in College: A social overview*, she proposes that weight and fatness, and what it means to be fat in college needs to be understood. She describes herself as a fat woman while in college, on campus. In her discussion of fatness in college she describes her own experiences as a college student with weight concerns – being self-conscious about her weight. A specific situation she describes at the library –

I put my books on the desk and mentioned I had a book on recall. The thin young man behind the counter avoided eye contact when he came back to me holding the book that proclaimed the title *Fat Politics* (Oliver, 2006) in large bold letters. He looked at the book and then at me and asked, “This one?” I have never been more embarrassed in a library before. As I gathered my books to scuttle out the door, the student worker looked at me and burped, loudly and obnoxiously. (Crepezzi, 2007, p.61)

Through several informal conversations she had with other college students she found that her experience represented many of their experiences, and many of their experiences were similar to her own – sitting in chairs, desks, walking through classrooms and through other campus settings. She provides a brief discussion on what weight means to the college student with weight concerns and the need to further understand how the students’ meanings of weight may impact their daily life experiences in college.

Experiences of College Students

The experiences of college students have been a topic of interest among researchers interested in exploring some aspect of the individual’s identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality. Many of these studies have used a qualitative approach in understanding the experiences of college students, in an effort to understand the meaning of a specific human attribute, such as ethnicity or sexuality. A phenomenological study (Ford, 2007) examined the lived experiences of gay Black men as undergraduate students from a historically Black college or university. The author sought to understand the experiences of these students with respect to being a Black gay male in the Black community that is typically not as tolerant of homosexuality as other

communities. Using autobiographical sketches and interviews, several themes emerged regarding their experiences, many involving some form of harassment. The author provides several recommendations for student development practice, first noting that this population of gay Black males deserves respect at HBCUs and the college administration should be aware of that need, provide policies and implement strategies for a more tolerable environment for students.

A study investigated the experiences of undergraduate students of color while attending a private, predominately white institution (Garcia-Sheets, 2008). This two-phase, mixed-methods, study sought to understand the impact these experiences had on their sense of belonging. The quantitative survey measured the concept of stigma vulnerability using the Prejudice Perception Assessment Scale, finding no statistically significant variable predicted stigma vulnerability. The qualitative phase used a phenomenological approach exploring the perceptions of the college experience with students in unstructured focus groups. These qualitative focus group interviews revealed significant themes describing how students of color perceived the campus environment. The application of these findings may be useful in building a more inclusive environment that promotes diversity among college students.

The body of research exploring the experiences of college students in relationship to some attribute, such as sexuality or ethnicity, in a specific environment has continued to provide a substantial foundation for practitioners in student development, and providing a basis for further research in an effort to understand the needs of a diverse student population. It is in this approach that this current study will continue to explore a specific human attribute, weight, within a specific environment, the college campus, and

describe the experiences of these students that may be shaped by the students' meaning(s) of weight within the context of the weight emphasis in our current society and specifically in college.

Conclusion

Weight has been a concern for college students and administration throughout the years of higher education in the United States. The concerns have varied over time, from weight as a measure of fitness for college, mortality, and fitting in as a college students, to concerns over weight gain, the Freshman 15, and today the global obesity epidemic. Many colleges have taken some initiative to address these weight concerns, including requiring the weighing of students, and required courses based on BMI. But these efforts may not be considering the broader psychosocial aspects of weight that may be experienced by the college student in an environment that is emphasizing weight as important and being given considerable attention by students and college administrators. A growing body of research is evolving in the psychosocial aspects of weight, providing a greater understanding of the prevalence of anti-fat attitudes that may drive personal weight concerns, as well as weight stigmatization. This new realm of study is also providing an understanding of the various meanings of weight among specific populations of individuals, but not college students.

College students, ages 18-23, are in the stages of transitioning from adolescence into emerging adulthood (Medalli, 1981), body image development (Gillen, 2006; Lyter, 1997) experiencing body image concerns that can influence self-esteem (Byrd, 2007; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009) and possibly influence daily-life college experiences (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006; Nguyen, 2007; Jaffe, 2008) and

these experiences may influence identity development (Herzog, 1997; Kaufman, & Feldman, 2004). A great body of research has been describing the experiences of college students with relationship to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and even socio-economic status. This research evolved over the years as the need to understand the growing diversity in college students became apparent, and specific attributes of an individual do impact how a student experiences daily life in college. In this era of weight being a salient issue, it is necessary to consider weight as a personal attribute, similar to gender, sexuality and the others, in its possible impact on the daily-lived experiences and identity development of the college student in the college environment.

The research presented in this literature review is valuable in documenting the emphasis colleges and college students place on weight, as well as documenting the prevalence of body image dissatisfaction and weight concerns among college students, the relationship of weight concerns and self-esteem and self-worth, and the participation in activities. But these studies only document these phenomena without providing a deeper understanding of what weight, weight concerns, weight as a contingency of self-worth, means for individual college students. This deep meaning can only be understood through narratives of the students' experiences in daily-life activities in the college environment.

This study is seeking to understand how college students think and feel about themselves and their weight, how they behave or act/interact with others within the college environment based on how these thoughts and feelings, and interpret the meanings of their experiences in an effort to construct a meaning of weight. This study will also seek to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship of weight, the meaning

of weight, and the daily-lived experiences and psychosocial development among college students in the college environment.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight after understanding the meaning(s) of weight among college students within the context of their daily-lived experiences in the college environment. The population of this study included currently enrolled undergraduate students at two large universities. A qualitative research design was used to explore the daily-lived experiences and the psychosocial aspects of weight among the college students that were interviewed for this study. The meaning of weight for individual college students in the context of their daily-lived experiences was identified through the semi-structured interviews, and using a grounded theory approach the data revealed how and in what ways the perceptions of weight may influence identity development among these college students before and during college, as well as how these weight perceptions were integrated into their daily-lived experiences within various interactions within the college environment.

This chapter presents the research paradigm, theoretical constructs, research questions and corresponding interview questions, the population, data collection strategy, data analysis method, overall research design, human subjects consideration, and the limitations of the methodology in this research endeavor.

Paradigm of Inquiry

As mentioned in Chapter I, this study used the constructivism paradigm of inquiry, the lens through which the researcher views the world, and provides the framework in which the research takes place and indicates the core beliefs of the researcher that will be used for data interpretation (Bentz & Shapio, 1998). The study

sought to understand the meaning of weight, a personal attribute, for college students within the college environment, a specific social setting, using a naturalistic inquiry method. This method allowed for an exploratory and grounded theory approach, in designing the interview constructs, conducting the interviews, as well as analyzing the interview data. This research was informed by symbolic interactionism and grounded theory.

Research Design

A non-experimental, qualitative design was used to explore the daily-lived experiences, and the psychosocial aspects of weight. This research design was chosen based on the objectives of non-experimental qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005) and its appropriateness in trying to understand the experiences of the college students, as a group of individuals (Creswell, 2007). This study was conducted in the educational setting of two major universities, with the goal of providing a basic understanding of certain factors within an educational context that could not be easily manipulated. Weight perception and weight attitudes were chosen as the two variables that could not be controlled by the researcher. In exploring this phenomena of weight perceptions and weight attitudes in the context of the college students daily-lived experiences, the research was conducted in the natural setting of the college environment, guided by research questions that addressed issues that may have been very personal to the research participants (Creswell, 1998).

Theoretical Constructs

This study used the constructivist paradigm as well as the framework of symbolic interactionism to understand the meanings of weight as constructed by the college students within the specific social context of the college campus. Currently, there is little

theoretical foundation in understanding the meaning of weight among college students in the college environment, which made the use of the grounded theory approach necessary. The grounded theory approach was necessary in this research's effort to collect descriptions of students' experiences, present the concepts that emerged in the data analysis and develop a possible theory, or provide a foundation for future theoretical research investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight. The grounded theory approach complimented the use of the constructivist paradigm to explore and describe the specific phenomenon, the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment, through qualitative research methods (Maxwell, 2005).

Symbolic Interactionism. The symbolic interaction perspective contributed to the understanding of the social identities of the college students by recognizing the complexities of creating and maintaining an identity in a particular social situation (Van Manen, 1990; Crotty, 1998). Social identity involves self-labeling, which contributes to role-identity, and is determined by the meanings of the social role. The symbolic interactionist framework was used to study the social interaction, either direct, or indirect among individuals as well as the social context of the interactions. This framework allowed the researcher to identify the specific social interactions, the self-labeling, role-identities, and the meanings the students prescribed to weight during the interviews and the data analysis process. The symbolic interactionist framework allowed the research to examine the interactions, the context of the interactions, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and the meaning- interpretations of the daily-lived experiences as described by the students.

Grounded Theory. Grounded theory is a research methodology that evolved out of symbolic interactionism (Crotty, 1998), and is a specific way of gathering information about a concept that is not yet understood, with little scientific knowledge. The grounded theory approach usually follows a specific series of steps in the data collection and data analysis process, which is completed in such a way that allows a possible theory to emerge directly from the data (Maxwell, 2005) with the developing theory emerging from the interviews and the researcher's observations (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). As expected, all of the student-participants in this study experienced the phenomenon being explored, each student described various psychosocial aspects of weight and his/her daily-lived experiences in college. As themes emerged during the interviews, and supported by themes identified in the data analysis, the development of a theory began to emerge specific to this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

A constructivist grounded theory approach is often used in sociology, education, and psychology, and allows for a more interpretative approach to qualitative research “with flexible guidelines, a focus on theory developed that depends on the researchers’ view, learning about the experience with embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships ...” (Creswell, 2007, p. 65). This research, following this approach, emphasized the values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of the individual participants, and not the specific methods of research.

Interview Research

Interview Research involves meeting with the participant, asking specific open-ended questions, and collecting the narrative telling, usually by audio-recording and note-taking, of a specific phenomenon or topic being explored (Maxwell, 2005). The

interviews for this study were conducted in such a way as to gain access to the observations of others and descriptions of their experiences being explored for a deeper understanding of the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment. Through the use of interviews, the researcher was able to learn the experiences of the students, and what the meanings of these experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and the researcher was aware that this was a very personal interaction with the participants. The face-to-face interview was necessary for this research as it allows for the deeper probing or follow-up questions that would, and did, provide richer data when trying to describe a topic that may be very personal to the participant. Although interview research can be time-consuming it is a valuable method of data collection when exploring an aspect of daily living that has not been studied thoroughly. The interviews for this study were time intensive, ranging between 20-90 minutes. The longer interviews provided richer details in describing the daily-lived experiences of college students and the meanings each prescribed to weight. During the interviews, it was important to keep in mind that the interviewer is also part of the interview, and may have had some influence on how the participant responded to the open-ended questions, or continuing participation in the interview (Siedman, 2006).

Research Questions and Interview Constructs

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students?
 - a. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students before college?

- b. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students during college?
 - c. In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight?
2. In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-lived experiences within the a) informal and b) formal learning environments in college?

The two primary research questions, and sub-questions, guided the interview questions. The research questions were addressed through open-ended questions (see Appendix C) and were designed using a social constructivist approach, and used Van Manen's (1990) four constructs for understanding the lived experience as well as the four domains, describing body image, identified by Cash & Pruzinsky (2001). Table 1 presents the interview questions used in the data collection for research question one exploring the relationship of weight perceptions and identity development for the individual college student in the college environment.

Table 1

Research Question One: How, and in what ways, does the perception of weight influence identity development among college students? A) Before college? B) During college?

| Interview Question | Theory/ Paradigm | Rationale |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| Were you aware of your weight during any of these experiences? If so, describe that experience. | Social Constructivism | Body image domain: Cognitive (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2001) |
| Describe yourself physically. What terms do you use? What terms have you used in describing yourself prior to college? Describe your feelings about weight before college? | Social Constructivism | Body image domain: Emotional (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2001) |
| During college What do you think is the ideal in weight, physical appearance for college students? What did you think before college? What terms have you used to describe other students' weights or bodies? What do you think weight means? | Symbolic Interactionism | Body image domain: Perceptual (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2001) |
| Have you tried, or are you currently trying to change your weight? IF so, what are the primary reasons for changing your weight? | Social Constructivism | Body image domain: Behavioral (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2001) |
| Describe any concerns you may have (had) about your weight while in college; before college. | Social Constructivism | |

It was expected that using open-ended questions based on the four domains of body image (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2001), a meaning of weight for the college students would emerge. It was also expected that the meanings of weight will vary with each student, but common themes embedded within the meanings would emerge as well. These assumptions were based on the small number of qualitative studies that have developed interview questions investigating the meaning of weight and so informed the development of the interview questions of the present study. Joannisse (1997) explored the experience of overweight women, with the questions: What does fat mean to you? What do you think it means to others? And, How has fatness made an impact on your life? (p. 149). These interview questions are similar to those used by Jaffe (2008) who also used Van Manen's four constructs of the lived experience in her investigation of fat identities and the experiences of the participants.

The second primary research question was also explored using open-ended interview questions, using a phenomenological approach, as presented in Table 2, and were designed using Van Manen's four constructs of understanding the lived experience: the lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived human interactions (Van Manen, 1990). These questions were more in-depth and personal than the initial interview questions exploring the meaning of weight. The student-participants were asked to describe their first day in college, as well as a specific event that may have caused them to be concerned about their weight while in college (questions 7-8). The interview questions from this point became more specific about their feelings and thoughts about the event and their perception or awareness of their weight during the event (questions 9-14). The fit between the individual and the social context in this study focused on the intimate social

space in which individuals, college students, live their daily lives in the formal and informal learning environments in college.

Table 2

Research Question Two: In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within the informal and formal learning environments in college?

| Interview Question | Theory/Paradigm | Rationale |
|---|-----------------|---|
| Tell me about your first day in college | Phenomenology | Understanding the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) |
| Tell me about your experiences in college: A specific experience in the classroom A specific experience on campus | | |
| Describe any awareness of your weight during these experiences | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived body (Van Manen, 1990). |
| Describe your awareness of your weight or size at this time. | | |
| What were you feeling at this time? | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived body (Van Manen, 1990). |
| Tell me what you may have been thinking. | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived body (Van Manen, 1990). |
| How did you feel about yourself? | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived body (Van Manen, 1990). |
| How did you feel or think about your body and the space around you? | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived space (Van Manen, 1990). |
| Were you aware of or sensitive to time passing? | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived time (Van Manen, 1990). |
| Describe a specific event or situation that occurred in college that may have made you aware of your weight or size. | Phenomenology | Understanding the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) |
| Probes: Same as above | Phenomenology | Construct: Lived human interactions (Van Manen, 1990) |
| Tell me about any specific interactions with others. | | |

These interview questions were developed based on previous work examining the experiences of individuals and used a phenomenological approach. Jaffe (2008) asked: Can you recall any specific experience that led you to decide that you're overweight (p. 184). Petz (2006) also conducted a qualitative interview study exploring the experiences of being overweight, with questions focusing on how participants perceived their weight, and the experiences of daily life based on those perceptions of weight, specifically social relationships and social roles in a particular social realm.

Additional interview questions were developed to delve deeper into the experiences of the students in various settings, formal and informal learning environments, on the college campus, and describe any relationship with identity development. Table 3 presents the interview questions used for a deeper exploration of each of the research questions. The format, and a more detailed script of the semi-structured interviews is provided in Appendix C.

Table 3

Additional Interview Questions

| Interview Question | Theory/Paradigm | Rationale |
|---|-----------------|---|
| Do you utilize any of the student services? Why or Why not? Does your weight have any influence on your decisions to use or not use these services? | Constructivism | Understanding the daily life activities of college students |
| What has been your experience with using student services? Describe any awareness you had about your weight. | Constructivism | Understanding the daily life activities of college students |
| Describe a specific experience, interacting with others. | Constructivism | Understanding the daily life activities of college students |
| Describe a specific experience on campus. Have you ever felt self-conscious about your weight on campus? Describe your feelings and thoughts about your self during this experience. | Constructivism | Understanding the daily life activities of college students |
| Describe a specific experience in the classroom. Have you ever felt self-conscious about your weight in the classroom? Describe your feelings and thoughts about yourself at this time. Do you have any comments or questions that you believe would be helpful in understanding this topic that I have not asked? | Constructivism | Understanding the daily life activities of college students |

As the interview with each participant progressed the researcher noted any statements or phrases pertaining to weight and how the student expressed any concerns about weight. These statements were further probed during the interviews based on the students' descriptions of personal weight, awareness of weight, terms used to describe self and others, and other interview questions relevant to weight perceptions, as shown in Table 4, in an effort to understand how students prescribe meaning to weight.

After each interview was completed with each student-participant the interview data was analyzed initially for emerging themes. A more thorough discussion of the data analysis will be presented later in this chapter and Chapter Four presents a discussion of the findings.

Table 4

Sub-question: In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight?

| Interview Question | Further Probes |
|--|--|
| Were you aware of your weight during any of these experiences? | How is your awareness of weight in the college environment different than your awareness of weight outside of the college environment? |
| Describe yourself physically. What terms do you use? How do you feel about your weight, size, or shape? | What does weight mean to you? What does the term fat mean to you? |
| What do you think is the ideal in physical appearance for college students? | Do students categorize themselves by weight, and then place themselves into certain social roles? |
| Describe a specific event or situation that occurred in college that may have made you aware of your weight or size. | How did the specific event or situation influence how you felt about your weight? How did your weight influence how you experienced the event or situation? |

*Based on Sobal and Maurer (1999), Interpreting Weight

Population and Sample

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of college students, expressing weight perceptions, while attending college. The research participants in this study were selected as a purposive sample of college students with a goal of recruiting a minimum of 15, for a total maximum of 30 participants. It was expected that the purposive sample of participants, expressing weight perceptions, would provide data that would be more detailed and specific to this phenomenon and would then add to the understanding of the lived experiences of each participant (Patton, 2002).

Two higher education institutions, a large private university and a large public university both located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, were selected as sources for the student populations of potential participants. The large private institution is located in an urban environment with a student population of over 20,000 students, and the public institution is a state university located in a more suburban to rural environment with an average of 32,500 students. These two institutions were chosen based on convenience to the researcher, who is a faculty member at the larger private institution, and the public institution is within a short distance from the researcher's home. It was expected that the participation rate would be similar at each institution, and provide similar data through the interviews with participating students. Although the data from the interviews from students attending each institution were similar, it was difficult to recruit students at the public institution. This issue will be discussed more fully in the limitations section of this chapter.

The sample population of purposively selected students was expected to include 15-30 individuals from both institutions for the face-to-face interviews. This sample was

considered an appropriate number of participants, as a larger sample would have limited the time the researcher would be able to commit to interviewing and analyzing the data from each interview. It was the intent of this exploratory study to limit the number of participants so as to provide quality, in-depth descriptions of the experiences of the participants. The total number of participants included 19 student-participants from the total of 20 recruited and interviewed. One student-participant's responses were excluded for various reasons and will be explained later in the limitations section of this chapter.

Participants were recruited using flyers posted throughout the two college campuses, as well as distributed to various departments and schools within the college. Potential student participants were also recruited through face-to-face contact with students on campus. The face-to-face recruiting method provided the greatest number of recruits overall. Only one student-participant from the public institution responded to a posted flyer, all other student-participants from the public institution were recruited through face-to-face contact. Approximately seven of the student-participants from the private institution were recruited through face-to-face contact, with only two student-participants responding to posted flyers, the remaining participants were recruited for participation using the snow-ball method of recruiting. Student-participants that had completed the interviews recruited more participants, by inviting other students they may have felt would be interested in participating in this research.

Student-participants were not recruited directly from the population of students currently enrolled in the course taught by the researcher. As a familiar presence on the campus of the private university, the researcher was able to recruit potential participants more easily through casual conversation with students. Most students recruited through

face-to-face conversation were contacted in common areas of the campus, in front of the library, in the lobby areas of the main student center, and outside in front of academic buildings. While recruiting students, the researcher presented the flyer describing the student and conversed with the potential participant. If the student expressed interest, the researcher provided brief information about the topic being investigated; and if the student expressed further interest the researcher provided more detailed information about participating in the study, and a time for scheduled for the interview. Several of the student-participants completed the autobiographical sketch (see Appendix B) at the time of the face-to-face contact, while scheduling a time for the interview, and other student-participants completed the form just prior to the interview.

Sample Population

The participants for this study, as intended, were (1) current undergraduate college students at one of the two Mid-Atlantic universities; (2) able to complete the autobiographical sketch; and (3) able to recognize the emphasis of weight in our current society, and how this emphasis might contribute to their own weight perceptions. The researcher did anticipate sampling difficulties, as is common in most exploratory studies, and the sensitive nature of the topic, knowing it is difficult to recruit a truly representative sample of the population (Stebbins, 2001). But the nature of this topic required the participants to be a purposive sample, in an effort to collect rich and thoughtful data.

The sample of participants consisted of 19 young men and women, between the ages of 18-25 years, and currently enrolled at one of the two higher education institutions included in this study. Defining the sample population was based on the goal of gathering information about the experiences of college students within the college environment.

College is typically an environment in which many young individuals progress through emerging adulthood, and this development process often intersects with a variety of factors including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, as well as aspects of physical appearance. This study sought to describe how and in what ways weight might intersect with the development of college students in the college environment.

Individuals participating in this study were not currently experiencing an eating disorder and did not have a history of eating disorder diagnosis. This was determined during initial contact with students, through the discussions about the study and during the interviews. The researcher made an early decision to exclude any student who may have a history of disordered eating behavior for two reasons; first, to reduce any potential harm to the student during the interview as questions probed deeper, and second, to limit any potential outlier responses that might skew the data analysis and findings. The participants volunteered to participate and were recruited through various methods, including flyers posted throughout campuses, face-to-face recruiting and snowball recruiting. Approximately 30-35 students expressed interest in participating in the study, but several students did not meet the age criteria, being over age 25 as returning-adult students. All adult students were attending the public institution, and expressed disappointment in not being able to participate. Another student, meeting the inclusion criteria, volunteered to participate but was unable to do so due to availability in scheduling the interview. She was married, working full-time, and a full-time student at the public university.

College students were selected as the appropriate population as they were living the experience being explored by this study, with student-participants recruited from two

large Mid-Atlantic universities, one private and one public, during 2010-2011. Twenty students participated in the interviews, completing consent forms and biographical sketches. After all interview data was analyzed, the researcher chose to exclude the responses from one student-participant as outlier data, making the total study population 19 student-participants. A more in-depth discussion of the study population is presented in Chapter 4 as part of the findings of this research.

Interview Protocol

The study investigated the experiences of college students in the college environment relative to the students' personal meaning(s) of weight required a qualitative exploratory approach using interviews. The interview protocol was:

- A. Answer the specific research questions: 1) How, and in what ways does perception of weight influence identity development among college students, before and during college? And, in what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight? 2) In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-lived experiences within informal and formal learning environments?
- B. Interviews of 15 to 30 participants recruited from both sites were to be audio-recorded for transcription and further data analysis.
 - a. The demographics of the participants were collected either prior to or at the beginning of the interview.
- C. The interview was guided by specific open-ended questions and further explored with subsequent questions based on the participants' responses.

Interview research is complex and time-intensive but this format allowed for deeper probing into the topic being investigated, and concepts that arose during the initial exploratory questions. The interviews were conducted in such a way as to gain access to the descriptions of their experiences and observations that may have involved how and in what ways these involved weight perceptions.

Data Collection Procedures

In this study, the researcher sought to gain an understanding in how students make meaning of weight, in what ways their weight has meaning in the college environment, and how these meanings related to their general sense of self-worth and self-esteem, and if weight played any role in their identity as college students. This is a topic that needed to be explored as little research has addressed weight perceptions, the meanings of weight, weight concerns and the experiences of weight in college. A more detailed view was needed, and by studying these students in the college environment during the academic year as current college students, this needed greater understanding may have been achieved through this research. The data collection procedures that were followed during recruiting and interview processes, involved not only the specific data collected during the interviews but also the observations of the researcher during the interviews and while recruiting students.

The data collection process and analysis was time consuming. It was helpful having a plan to guide the interview process and the audio-recording for later analysis (Patton, 2002). The audio-recording device(s) were checked prior to the interviews being conducted, and interviews were conducted in locations on campus that would be free from outside noise. The interviews at the private institution were conducted either in the

researcher's office or in one of the study rooms in the library. The interviews at the public institution were conducted in one of the study rooms in the library.

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study included the autobiographical sketch, the interviews – interview recordings and transcripts, as well as the researcher's notes documenting observations taken during interviews, and observations of various campus environments during recruitment. Although the sample size was small, with a total of 19 student-participants, those participating in the interviews provided more detailed data than the researcher anticipated, allowing for a deeper understanding of the topic through the thick descriptions provided by the interviews and observations.

Biographical Sketch. The biographical sketch collected the necessary demographic data of each participant, including age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, institution currently enrolled and attending, and academic year. Each student was also asked to provide a pseudonym to represent his/her identity. Students were also asked why they chose the institution they were attending, what they liked most and least about the current institution they were attending, and if they had attended any other college, and why they transferred from this college. The sketch form was provided to the potential participants prior to the interview.

Interviews. The study used face-to-face interviews, averaging 60 minutes, two of the interviews were only 20 minutes, but most interviews were longer than 60 minutes, with one interview over 90 minutes. The interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for each participant on the college campus to maintain the naturalistic setting. The researcher was prepared for each interview with audio-recording

device(s) and the followed the detailed interview protocol. The researcher had experience in conducting interviews having conducted a pilot study of this interview format and questions prior to the beginning of the formal study. Each interview began with an overview of the study, the interview process, and the confidentiality and length of the interview.

The interview questions addressed several aspects of the student-participants experiences, including their behaviors, opinions and values, feelings and perceptions, as well as knowledge about the specific topic, weight perceptions. The interview began with more fact-based short answer questions, prompted by the information on the biographical sketch, in an effort to familiarize the participant with the interview process. This allowed the student-participants to feel more comfortable as the questions became more in-depth with more personal questions about their weight perceptions. The interview questions focused on the in-the-present questions, using past and future oriented questions which were meant to encourage the students to reflect back on previous experiences or project forward in the context of their current experiences.

Reflective Journal. In an effort to facilitate the data collection and analysis process, the researcher documented several observations noted during the interviews, observations of students in common areas of each college campus, and the researcher's personal experiences and interpretations of the research process. It was important for the researcher to document these details as they proved valuable in the data collection and data analysis processes. This also allowed the researcher to acknowledge and consider the influence of any personal subjectivity throughout the data collection and analysis processes. These notes also allowed the researcher an opportunity to process and reflect

on personal experiences during the research process (Van Manen, 1990). Keeping a journal aided the researcher's cognitive process, that allowed the researcher to be immersed in the research process while also describing the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge that may influence the research process, and data analysis. This reflective thinking process allowed the researcher to address practical problems, like the difficulties in recruiting students to participate that arose during the research process. The greatest benefit of the journal was the learning experience it provided in the details of the research process.

The data collection included the autobiographical sketches of each student-participant, the interviews and the researcher's journal. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed into a text document, with files stored electronically that will remain secure with access limited to the researcher. The sketch forms and researcher's journal are secured as well with access limited to the researcher. These materials will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

Data Analysis Procedures

The primary approach to the data analysis used grounded theory in an effort to gain a better understanding of why weight matters in college, the meaning the students prescribed to weight in their daily-lived experiences. The phenomenological approach was also used to allow for the natural telling of the deep descriptions of the students' experiences. The interview transcripts were primarily analyzed by repeated and intensive readings of the transcripts, which identified the first emerging themes. The researcher read the interviews several times, identifying emerging themes from each student-participants' responses. The succeeding readings allowed the researcher to identify more

specific phrases and words corresponding to these themes. A more detailed description of the data analysis process is presented in Chapter Four.

Since the data was collected through multiple means, interviews, autobiographical sketches, and researchers notes, it was analyzed in a variety of ways (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The data analysis occurred over a series of steps: first the data was summarized into themes, then clusters of themes, and finally into major categories of themes. The next step involved organizing the data in a visual form to identify any patterns, similarities, differences or gaps, and was accomplished using a software application, MindNode (see Appendix H). The process continued with a constant comparison of the interview responses, the researcher's journal and the autobiographical sketches.

The coding process of the data analysis was a time intensive task as well, with the initial coding occurring during the interviews, as the researcher documented any key words or phrases, body language, or emotional states of the participants. It was important for the researcher to take notes during the interviews since these became important in the development of the emerging themes. The next step in the coding process occurred during the transcription of the audio-recordings of the interviews. As the researcher listened to the audio-recordings, noting significant phrases, as well as changes in voice, hesitations, the initial coding was validated through this process. The text transcripts were then reviewed several times, noting more key phrases, observations, and specific terms. This open coding continued by compiling all the interview transcripts for comparison and was used to identify the emerging themes and then major categories of information, followed by axial coding to identify specific categories of themes to focus on as core categories that center around the axial code, and the data analysis was completed with

more selective coding, which was facilitated by the use of a previously developed guide (see Appendix E) which was helpful in formulating the labels of the major categories of themes.

Thematic Analysis. The data analysis involved thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and identified several emerging themes from the raw data (Van Manen, 1990). Since qualitative research requires a very detailed data analysis to improved the trustworthiness of the experiences described by the participants, the researcher began the thematic analysis early in the data collection process and continued well after all interviews were completed and transcribed into text. The emerging themes that were identified in the first few interviews were confirmed through the successive interviews with other student-participants, and with each interview it was possible to identify the relationships between the themes. Once these relationships were identified, the themes were grouped into statements, phrases and words as units for continued thematic analysis, which facilitated the development of a comprehensive description of the student-participants' experiences. This description was then further informed by the researcher's notes and observations, which contributed to the development of a possible grounded theory describing the meaning and essence of the experience of weight perceptions in college.

The data analysis identified the major categories, with related themes, to be presented in the results section in Chapter Four. The emerging grounded theory that is proposed by this research will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Data Presentation

After the interview data was analyzed, the identification and categorization of themes completed, the data was then prepared for presentation in such a way as to portray the experiences of each student-participant in quotes and stories. The categories of themes were then used to develop the story of each participant, using their biographical sketches and the researcher's notes. The data is presented according to each major category and related themes supported by the specific quotes and stories of the student-participants. The data is also presented in such a way as to show the relationships between the themes and is intended to facilitate the readers' understanding of the concepts presented. An accurate representation of the data for research using a grounded theory approach is the result of following the planned out steps in the analysis process. Following this detailed and extensive process of data analysis, it was possible to interpret the experiences of each participant, and their experiences as a whole, and present the propositions about the themes as well as develop a grounded theory (Creswell, 2007).

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be maintained by using specific strategies to safeguard the accuracy, consistency, and validity of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study used well-established methods of inquiry, data collection and analysis, by remaining close to the narratives of the participants but then also creating distance during the data analysis to maintain objectivity. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, which provided thick and deep descriptions of the experiences of the student-participants. Prior to beginning this study, the researcher was aware of the need to address the trustworthiness of the data and data analysis process.

The researcher considered several criteria that are often considered essential in strong qualitative research: credibility, triangulation, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This consideration brings this qualitative work in line with the validity, reliability, and objectivity of quantitative research.

The strengths of this naturalistic inquiry became greater with each subsequent interview, with the observations of the participants during the interviews and the use of follow-up questions during the interview to confirm responses. These tasks provided the opportunity for member checks and strengthened the credibility of this research. The researcher's notes and observations provided triangulation with the interview narratives. The transferability of the data analysis findings were addressed by the researcher thoroughly describing the current context of the research and any assumptions of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research required the researcher to be deeply involved with the student-participants during the face-to-face interviews and with the data throughout the data analysis process, enhancing the credibility and validity of the data analysis and the findings.

The documentation of this research process described in this chapter and with further details in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, also improves the dependability of this study. This study could be replicated using the same procedures described by the researcher. The trustworthiness of this study was strengthened by the attempts of the researcher to confirm the results of the data analysis. Trustworthiness was confirmed in two steps, first during the interview process with follow-up questions, asking participants to reflect on their earlier responses and second by the use of an alternative data analysis process. The findings of the data analysis were confirmed by the use of a computer

software program designed specifically for the analysis of qualitative data. The data analysis using this program highlighted the frequency of terms, phrases and concepts present in the student-participants' responses and confirmed the hands-on data analysis conducted by the researcher. The program allowed the researcher to readily create tables of the themes, verifying the thematic categories previously identified by the researcher.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted during the Fall semester of 2008 and Spring semester of 2009 to test the interview questions and develop appropriate follow-up questions. The pilot study involved interviewing two graduate students who described being aware of their weight, and described weight perceptions and weight concerns. The researcher met with each participant for two interviews and contact by email over the academic year. The researcher developed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions for the initial interview. The researcher then contacted the participant by email for reflections about the interview questions and to schedule a second interview with the modified open-ended questions. The second interview provided richer data as a result of the newer-modified questions that were developed in partnership with the researcher and participants. The researcher continued to contact the two participants over the next several months for further feedback in the development of more appropriate questions and re-phrasing of questions.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by using coding and thematic analysis. The responses of the pilot study interviews provided unexpected themes that then contributed to the development of the interview questions used in this larger study. The researcher expected themes involving interactions with

other students, which did emerge through the initial data analysis, but the researcher did not expect the emerging themes involving interactions within specific environments on the college campus. These themes emerged in the current study with greater detail as a result of the questions developed during the pilot study. Another theme that emerged in the pilot study involved elements in the environment, such as the desks in classrooms, which was also confirmed by responses in the current study. Both participants in the pilot study described having to navigate through the classroom, and negotiate the space of the desk. Other themes that emerged during the pilot study involved interactions with specific formal and informal contacts in college, and these were confirmed by the responses of the student-participants of the current study.

The original pilot study interview questions consisted of 5 basic questions: Could you describe being aware of your weight during a specific experience in college as an undergraduate student? How did you perceive your weight at this time? What did you think about your weight during this experience? What did you feel, emotionally, about yourself during this experience? What, if anything, did you do during this experience? The two students, though graduate students, were able to reflect back on their experiences as undergraduates, and this reflection was considered by the researcher to be trustworthy descriptions of their experiences. During the interviews and through email conversations after, the responses were confirmed for validity and more importantly the two participants were able to guide the development of more appropriate questions for the current study. The first question was modified to be broader, and simply ask about a college experience, with a follow-up question inquiring about weight awareness during

the experience; and additional questions to include experiences in the classroom and campus., and interactions with others.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in any research, but especially so when the research has a personal individualized topic. The ethical treatment of the participants in this study was considered a priority throughout each phase of the study, from the recruiting of the participants, to the interviews, and well into the data analysis process. The researcher avoided forcing students to participate during recruitment, and attempted to recruit participants face-to-face in a non-confrontational manner. Potential participants were provided with all necessary information, and no deception was involved in recruiting student-participants. During the interviews, the researcher also attempted to create and maintain an atmosphere free from harm, and students were informed they could end the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable or threatened by the questions. The privacy and confidentiality of each participant was maintained by the use of pseudonyms chosen before the interviews.

The researcher also followed the guidelines provided by each of the higher education institutions, the large private university and the large public university, for conducting research among each student population. The researcher submitted the research proposal for approval, and began recruitment of participants once approval was granted in May 2009. The informed consent for participants (Appendix D) was approved and briefly, yet thoroughly describes the purpose of the study. Each student-participant completed a consent form prior to completing the autobiographical sketch and before beginning the interview process. Once the student agreed to participant by completing the

consent form, and completed the sketch form, the individual interviews were scheduled and then conducted on the appropriate college campus.

The interviews were conducted in specific areas of the college campus that provided privacy and comfort, allowing the students to feel at ease and able to speak freely about their experiences. The researcher asked for approval from each student-participant to audio-record the interview, all participants agreed and were told the recordings would be destroyed at the completion of the research. Participants were also informed of their right to stop the interview, stop the audio-recording, and the right to continue at any time.

Limitations

Several limitations of this qualitative-exploratory research needed to be addressed in the discussion of the data analysis and results. The primary limitation in generalizability of the results is due to the study's limited population. The study population recruitment involved a non-experimental purposeful sampling method, from two large universities, a public and private, in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This population may not represent students attending institutions of different sizes or types or different regions of the United States. But this method was necessary for this study since the population is specific to college students, the topic is very personal in nature, and the topic is specific to the context of the college environment, and the emphasis on weight among college students.

The small sample size of 19 student-participants may have limited the transferability or generalizability of the study's results, but a small sample allowed for more time during each interview and for a thorough data analysis of the interviews and

transcripts. The number of interviews and observations were limited due to resource constraints. The greater length of time for each interview allowed for deep descriptions from each participant, with the longer interviews allowing for confirmability and trustworthiness of the data analysis and data findings. Although the interviews were a self-report format that could hinder the credibility of the research, the responses are considered by the researcher to be truthful, and were confirmed by the consistent responses of each interview participant and the concepts that were described by more than one, to many, of the participants.

The researcher's subjectivity also needed to be considered during the research process, as well as during the data analysis and the discussion of the study. The researcher often has some pre-existing knowledge or understanding about the topic being explored and the specific population at the specific sites, which is often the basis of the research endeavor. The researcher of this study is also faculty at the large private university teaching courses that include the discussion of weight, weight perceptions, weight ideals and weight concerns. The researcher also has knowledge of these topics as they pertain to the college students. The researcher has had a long and extensive engagement with the various topics involving weight and daily-lived experiences. The researcher also needed to consider that the student-participants could have been influenced by the social culture and the societal attitudes about weight and weight ideals.

Summary

The current study began with the goals to address two overarching research questions in an effort to understand the experiences of weight in college. The study explored the experiences of currently enrolled college students, freshmen to seniors,

between 18-25 years of age, in the college environment, and the role weight may have played in these experiences, and how these experiences may have interacted with identity development. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach and provided the foundation for exploring the research questions, since this approach allows the research to describe “the experience from the standpoint of those who live it” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 522). The grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to formulate an emerging theory that was grounded in the interview responses of the student-participants. An emerging theory began to develop early in the data analysis process with the first few interviews, and continued to develop with subsequent interviews and throughout the data analysis process.

The validity of the research was addressed by the researcher adhering to the basic principles of the grounded theory approach throughout the research process. It may be difficult to conduct an exact replication of this study, but future research could verify the collection of the data and provide a further understanding of the findings of this study, presented in Chapter Four. Future attempts in this study should use the same methodology and similar settings, but with the understanding that other factors may influence the ability to replicate and interact with the data leading to different conclusions, presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students within the college environment. This chapter describes the demographic information, profiles, and experiences of the participants, the data analysis process, and the results for each research question that guided the study. An interpretation of the data, with implications and recommendations will be presented in Chapter Five. The findings of this qualitative research, using a modified grounded theory approach, uncovered complex and varied relationships exist between weight, perceptions of ideal weight and real weight, weight concerns and conflicts, coping strategies to manage weight, and psychosocial development during specific experiences of college. The findings describe the significance of interactions within the college environment, interactions with certain individuals while in college, acting as transitional events in either increasing or decreasing weight awareness, and how the level(s) of weight awareness may shape the identity of college students while in the college environment.

Research Questions

A modified grounded theory approach was chosen for this topic since grounded theory typically begins with a specific research situation, for this study that situation is the college environment and weight perceptions. The application of a modified grounded theory approach was influenced by the existing literature and current theoretical models; specifically the psychosocial theories of Piaget's developmental theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student development, and Medalie's (1981) mini-life cycle phases of college students. Within the situation of college students in the college environment and their psychosocial development, the task

of the modified grounded theory approach was to understand what was happening; how, and in what ways, are the psychosocial aspects of weight experienced in the college environment? The exploration of this topic was guided by two primary research questions, with sub-questions.

1. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students?
 - a. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development before college?
 - b. How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development during college?
 - c. In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight?
2. In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within the a) informal and b) formal learning environments in college?

Summary of Data Collection

The data collection methods were based on the need to gather information about the experiences of the individuals living in the specific situation being explored. This was achieved by interviewing and observing 19 college students on each of the two college campuses selected as sites for this research. As a modified grounded theory study, the data collection included interviews, observations, and conversations with notes being taken during each of these events, as well as biographical sketches. The modified grounded theory approach guided the data collection process by recruiting college students in the college environment, the data analysis with constant comparison of the

data as it was collected and the interpretation of the data into coherent and descriptive narratives of the experiences of college students in relationship to weight perceptions.

Participant Demographics

Nineteen students were recruited and interviewed for this study. The sample of participants for this study consisted of 19 men and women between the ages of 18-25, enrolled at one of the two colleges, a public institution and private institution in the mid-Atlantic region, chosen as sites for this research. Defining the sample population was based on the goal of gathering information about the experiences of traditional-aged (18-25 years of age) college students within the college environment and specifically any weight-related experiences, as well as the meaning of weight within the context of college. College is typically the environment many young individuals, traditional-aged college students, progress from adolescence and through emerging adulthood, and student development is a crucial concern for most colleges and are dedicated, with an effort to promoting the development of the student into a whole individual prepared for the adult world.

A diverse population of participants was considered appropriate for this research, to include diversity in gender, sexuality, ethnicity and institution type. The researcher decided against a comparative analysis with the various different types of students and the two institutions. This was an exploratory study with the objective of collecting data describing the experiences of college students in the college environment and any comparative analysis would not have been appropriate in the identifying of themes and major categories or the development of the emerging grounded theory describing weight awareness among college students in the college environment.

Population Sample and Characteristics

College students were selected as the appropriate population as they are living the experience being explored by this study. Student-participants were recruited from two large Mid-Atlantic universities, one private and one public during 2010-2011. Students were selected for participation by meeting the following criteria: current study at one of the two universities, and traditional-age 18-25 years. Additional students were interested in participating, but did not meet the inclusion criteria, being beyond traditional age. The average age of the final sample (N=19) is 19-20 years of age (M=19.4), comprised of seniors (n=8), juniors (n=7), sophomores (n=2), freshman (n=2). The sample population of 19 student-participants was comprised of approximately 70% females (n=13) and 30% males (n=6).

This was an exploratory study so demographic variables were not controlled. The population was predominantly European-American, 55% (n=11), followed by Asian American, 25% (n=4), and African American, 20% (n=4). Most participants (n=18) identified as heterosexual, with one female identifying as lesbian. Table 5. Participant Characteristics, presents the characteristics of the participants, five of the participants attended the public institution, with 14 attending the private institution, chosen as sites for this research. Four of the five participants from the public institution chose to attend this college because the it was “near home”, with additional reasons being an older sister attended, and in-state tuition. Eight of the 15 participants from the private institution chose to attend based on the location of the college being in Washington, DC. Eight of the 19 participants (40%) chose the institution based on their degree program interests. Five of the 19 participants (30%) transferred into the private institution during the

sophomore or junior years of college. Reasons for transferring involved not “fitting in,” feeling “lost,” or “overwhelmed,” a culture emphasizing appearance, athletics, and desire to attend college in a major city.

Table 5

Participant Characteristics

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Academic Status | Institution |
|---------------|-----|--------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Dee | 18 | Female | African American | Freshman | Public |
| Melissa | 18 | Female | European American | Freshman | Private |
| Jane | 19 | Female | African American | Sophomore | Public |
| George Cooper | 19 | Male | Asian American | Sophomore | Private |
| GG | 19 | Female | European American | Junior | Private |
| Gail | 19 | Female | European American | Junior | Private |
| Maria | 19 | Female | European American | Junior | Private |
| JC | 20 | Female | Asian American | Junior | Private |
| Bob | 20 | Male | African American | Junior | Public |
| Dre | 20 | Male | African American | Junior | Public |
| Rick Ross | 20 | Male | European American | Junior | Private |
| Allegra | 21 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |
| Jean Valjean | 21 | Male | European American | Senior | Private |
| Darcy | 21 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |
| Fred | 21 | Male | European American | Senior | Private |
| Rachel | 21 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |
| Janette | 22 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |
| Jane Smith | 22 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |
| Steffie | 23 | Female | European American | Senior | Private |

Participant Profiles

The profiles of the participants describe the information each provided on the Biographical Information form (Appendix B), as well as some of the personal information from the interviews and the researcher's observations. The participant profiles are presented as background information necessary in understanding the daily-lived experiences, meanings of weight, and how the meanings of weight were integrated into their daily-lived experiences. The profiles also provide a brief synopsis of the experiences of each student participant revealed during the interviews.

Dee. Dee was an 18 year old, African-American female attending the public mid-Atlantic college and is from the nearby community. She chose this institution because “my older sister came to college here” and the location, since the university is close to home, and many of her friends also attend college here. She added that what she likes least about attending college, “more work than I expected”. She identified herself as overweight, “bigger than most, well I am the biggest of all my friends”. She added in her self-description, “Fat, I say it a lot. Sometimes I try to make a joke about it”. Dee spent the summer before entering her freshman year of college losing weight specifically to enter college, “trying to fit into college, and make friends”, which she said she didn't have to worry too much about since some of her friends from high school attend the same college. She believes that weight means a lot especially as a freshman. “We're all trying to fit into college”. She has been and continues to be concerned with her weight, and felt like she needed to lose weight, “because I should, I was going to college”. “I didn't want to be the *one* in college. She believes that entering college is an opportunity for her to

begin a new life. Dee has “always been big”, and added that she would like to be average, “just to be the same as my friends”.

Melissa. Melissa, was an 18 year old, Asian-American (Indian) female attending the private Mid-Atlantic university, chosen for its location in Washington DC. She loves the city, the atmosphere of the city, being in the city, and the area around the university. She believes the education here is great and had only heard good things about the college from others, prior to coming freshman year. She is disappointed that the university does not seem to have a strong school spirit, and thinks “maybe because there’s no football team”. Melissa described herself as average, “I’m not overweight”. But she expressed a desire to lose a few pounds, to “feel more comfortable”. Before entering college, Melissa was concerned about her weight, thinking she would “need to be thin here” and “I thought I had to be thin at first so I could enjoy college, be a college girl”. She also adds, “I know a lot of students, mostly girls, are very self-conscious about their weight”, for appearance ideals and “not at all about health”. She is currently trying to change her weight, and goes to the gym, “I know its not the right way to think of it, but I go to lose weight, not to be healthy.” She also worried about gaining the freshman 15, “Everyone talks about it”.

George Cooper. George Cooper, was a 19 year old, Asian (Indian) male attending the private Mid-Atlantic university, chosen for the degree program, with plans to continue on to enter the medical program. He likes the area around the college, and the several interesting opportunities for internships, as well as sight-seeing, and other activities. George identified as fat, always has been big, “I’m the biggest in my dorm”. He described himself as overweight, “I did the BMI – I’m 31, same as in high school. I

know it. I know its bad, I'm definitely on the bad side". He is actively trying to change, lose, weight. He described his efforts, past and current, to lose weight, "I always saw myself, still see myself as having to lose weight". In high school, he attempted weight loss several times, and would lose a few pounds, "its hard to get started". But while in college during his freshman year he lost weight, "by accident". He didn't go on a diet to lose weight, "I just live a different lifestyle". He began freshman year concerned that he might gain weight, "bracing for the freshman 15", he added, "I didn't think about losing weight my freshman year".

Jane. Jane was a 19 year old, African-American, female, identifying as lesbian, attending the public mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college based on its nursing program, and likes the atmosphere of the college the most, but dislikes that the college is "somewhat far" from home. She described herself as having an average body, but "some days I feel better about my body than others". She adds, "I'm generally thick, thick and proportioned, proportioned well". She has tried to change, lose, weight in the past, and continues to try but lacks the resources to maintain a routine. Jane described her body as average, though "some days I feel better about my weight and body than others". She believes that weight is important to many college students at first, but then "it changes while you're in college". She is "sort of trying to change" her weight, but it's not "really something I'm trying hard at". She lost weight the summer before entering freshman year of college, and was disappointed when she gained it back during freshman year.

GG. GG was a 19 year old, European-American, heterosexual female, attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose this institution based on its location and "wanted to be in DC". She likes the city life and great professors and likes the college

overall. She transferred from a large public university in the mid-West, which she attended during her freshman year, transferring to the present college to begin her sophomore years. She attended the previous college in the mid-West as a tennis athlete, on scholarship. But was disappointed with the emphasis on athletics and not academics for athletes. She knew within the first week of freshman year at the public mid-Western college that she would be transferring. She chose the private mid-Atlantic university because “I wanted to be in the city”. She is from nearby Maryland and “so, I just wanted to come back to the DC area”. GG described herself as average and added, “I think I could lose a few pounds”. She was an athlete in high school and considered herself in good shape then, but no longer an athlete, she feels “out of shape” But she is not actively trying to lose weight, “I’m not going to go on a diet or anything to lose weight”. She adds she’ll lose the weight once she starts working out again. But she admits, “weight means a lot, because it’s your looks”.

Gail. Gail was a 19 year old, European-American, heterosexual female attending the public mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college because it was near home. She likes that most of her classes are in the same building, but doesn’t have many friends, and none of her high school friends are attending college at the same university. Gail described herself as average, “I know my BMI is normal, healthy, but some days I feel fat”. She had been “pretty big, muscular athletic” in high school as an athlete swimmer, adding that “I’ve never been skinny”. She worried about gaining weight, “the Freshman 15” in college before coming to college, since she was a swimmer in high school and would not be an athlete swimmer in college. She lost weight at first, since it was a new routine, but by the middle of the first freshman semester she began to gain weight, and

didn't realize how much weight she had gained until the end of freshman year. "I knew I was gaining weight, and I felt uncomfortable. I didn't feel like me anymore".

Maria. Maria was a 19 year old, European, heterosexual female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She was an international student, and chose the private institution for its location, and program in international affairs. She likes the location of the college, being in the city, as well as close to her home country's embassy, being surrounded by the World Bank, IMF, and embassies. She doesn't like that the tuition is so high. She attended a private English-speaking foreign school at home in Afghanistan. Maria described herself as "well, healthy, dynamic". Maria holds views about appearance and body ideals that are not typical of many Western female students. She idealizes the voluptuous, curvy female form, adding "I think skinny is not good, skinny is unhealthy. I think skinny is actually exhausting, when you are trying so hard to be thin". She believes that she is at the weight most appropriate for her, but recognizes that the students "are a little bit way too concerned about weight". She is not trying to change her weight, and likes that she has gained some weight since entering college, "In my culture, women are very curvy, voluptuous" and "I never paid attention to my weight before, at home". But she has internalized some of the weight emphasis, and experienced some concern about weight gain, "Thank G-D, I never got the freshman 15".

JC. JC was a 20 year old, heterosexual, Asian female, attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college for its medical program, and likes the "tough classes that challenge me despite the stress that they cause". But she also states that the "tough classes" is what she likes the least, "I live in the library". She did not live in the dorms during her first two years, living with her two older brothers (also students at the same

college) in an apartment near campus. JC described herself as toned, “I’m strong and fit”. JC believes that weight is important to some college students, and she has had some concern, “but at the same time, I’m not going to waste my time trying to look like that if I’ve got school work I need to do”. She goes to the gym to workout, but unlike most female college students she lifts weights, most “girls go to the gym, but will never go to the weight room, never”. “They just want to be thin, not fit really, its not about health for them”.

Bob. Bob was a 20 year old, African-American, heterosexual male, attending the public mid-Atlantic university. He chose the college for its location, and in-state tuition, and many of his friends also attend college here. But he dislikes that the college is “too far from everything”. He expressed that most students complain that there’s nothing to do unless you go home on the weekends. Bob described his body as “average” though he’d like to be more muscular, “But, I’m ok”. He believes that girls should be not too thin, but not too fat also. But it really doesn’t matter for males. He added that he knows “weight matters to a lot of students, especially the girls”.

Dre. Dre was a 20 year old, African American, heterosexual male, attending the public mid-Atlantic university. He chose the university because it is “close to home” and his friends attend the same college; “I have classes with most of my friends, so its fun”. He dislikes that there is “no social stuff to do” on or near campus. Dre described himself as “big and tall” and he doesn’t think about his body and what it looks like too much. He just wants to finish college.

Rick Ross. Rick Ross was a 20 year old, heterosexual, European-American male attending the private mid-Atlantic university. He chose the college because of its location

in the city, and likes the people and location the best about attending the institution. He dislikes some people though. He attended another institution, in a large eastern city, prior to attending the present college, just to meet the necessary academic requirements to be able to attend college at the present institution. Rick is concerned about his physique, and described himself as “very cut, toned, trying to get bigger and more defined”. He expressed that he is “overall happy with my body now”. But he had been “thin and lanky” in high school, and “never liked being thin” and was self-conscious about his size before. He likes the size he is at right now, “I’m about 186 lbs at 6’3”, but would like to be 200lbs. He believes that there isn’t a specific ideal physical appearance for male college students, “to most guys, they just want to be normal, not underweight or overweight”. But he adds, “girls they want to be light, skinny, thin. Girls have more pressure to be thin”. He had been a baseball athlete in high school and almost played baseball for a southern college, but he decided he wanted to focus on his studies, make his own decisions. As a high school baseball athlete he “had to maintain a thin body”, and was always skinny in high school, which made him self-conscious about his size. “I had no intentions to gain weight before coming to college or getting bigger, but once I got here I decided to get bigger”. This decision may have been influenced by one of his freshman year roommates, “he’s a big dude”, and began working out in the weight room with him during freshman year.

Allegra. Allegra is a 21 year old, European-American, heterosexual female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college based on its location in Washington DC. She rushed a sorority during her freshman year, but “didn’t stick it out”. Allegra described her body as strong. She is satisfied with her body and weight

now. “I was heavier, and felt overweight, but I really wasn’t. I didn’t even gain the freshman 15.” She has tried to change her weight several times during sophomore and junior years, but “now this fall, not so much, I’m not trying to change my weight”. She adds, “I’m so much stronger than before. So I feel strong. I’m more comfortable than I was.” She also believes that weight “means a lot” for college students, “we are all more aware of our weight” because of the current societal emphasis on the obesity epidemic and “the freshman 15”.

Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean was a 21 year old, heterosexual, European-American, male attending the private mid-Atlantic university. He chose the college based on its academic programs and location in Washington DC. He likes the location, being in Washington DC, as the best part about attending this college, and dislikes “the red tape and the cost of living”. Jean Valjean states that he is “slender, very thin” which makes him concerned. But he adds, “I’m a healthy weight”, as well as “Slight, relatively attractive”. He did try to gain weight several times, “but not anymore, I just feel more accepting now”. Most of his weight concerns were relative to gaining weight for better athletic performance “I just wanted to get a little stronger”, and another reason he adds, with a laugh, “to attract girls”. Jean Valjean also believes that weight is important, “it plays a huge role in whether or not someone is found attractive”. And college students “make judgments about people based on weight.” But adds, “different people have different preferences for what they consider attractive in terms of weight”.

Darcy. Darcy was a 21 year old, heterosexual, European-American female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college for its academics, specifically the program in public policy and its location in DC. She likes the many

opportunities available to students on and near campus, as well as the atmosphere of diversity on campus. She dislikes the structure of the business school. Darcy described her body as “petite and athletic, curvy. Curvy but thin”. Darcy did gain weight during freshman year, but not the freshman 15 she anticipated, “no one else noticed I gained weight” and then did attempt several times to lose weight, “I just didn’t feel my best”. She is not currently trying to lose weight. She believes most students do worry about their weight. Darcy did not worry about her weight in high school, “since I was a three season athlete”. She added that one of her best experiences in college was study abroad in Australia, and did not worry about her weight, “I want to enjoy the whole culture”.

Fred. Fred was a 21 year old, European-American, heterosexual male attending the private mid-Atlantic university. He attended a small private college in the Midwest during his freshman year, and knew within the first week he would transfer to another college. He chose to transfer to the present college because of its location in Washington DC, and his major in political science. He likes being in Washington DC the best about attending this private college, but dislikes the “bureaucracy” of the school. He chose to leave the smaller private college in the Mid-West because, “I didn’t like the social scene or the town I was in.” He also stated “I didn’t fit in to the athletic environment” at the small private Midwestern college, adding that “everyone works out and goes to the gym”. He considered transferring from the present private mid-Atlantic university within the first semester of his sophomore year, because he “didn’t like being lost in the crowd in the large lecture halls, teachers didn’t even know who I was” and “I didn’t fit in the appearance-norm of male students”. He wanted to attend another college and almost transferred again but changed his mind. Fred stated that “weight is a really complex thing

to deal with in college” emphasizing the need for feeling comfortable and being comfortable in college, the specific college environment. He didn’t worry about weight before college, but admitted that he is “conscious of it” now, adding “I don’t think its any different than other college students”. Fred described himself as “on the slimmer side. I feel like I’m in good enough shape. But I’m not very fit. I’d like to be in better shape”. He doesn’t think there really is an ideal, or “there shouldn’t be, but also believes that guys should have a little muscle, be strong.

Rachel. Rachel is a 21 year old, European-American, heterosexual female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose the university because, “I wanted to live in DC and go to this business school”. She likes most about attending here, the living in the city and exploring different areas, but likes the least the feeling she doesn’t “fit in with most of the student body”. Rachel described her body as “athletic, fit”. She added that, “Im not fat, but according to the BMI, I’m obese”. Rachel has experienced several events involving rejection based on her weight size, with two key experiences occurring during her high school years, and another during college. Being told by a college professor that she did not look like a runner, when she joined a running group at the college. She did attempt weight changes/losses during high school, and when first in college, but later focused on fitness and athleticism. “I’ve become significantly less concerned. I have so many other things to worry about.” She was most concerned about her weight during freshman year, “10 out of 10”, totally concerned that everyone was staring at my body”.

Jane Smith. Jane Smith was a 22 year old, heterosexual, European-American female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She chose the college because she

liked the environment and being in the city, and likes the many opportunities available for students on and near campus. She dislikes the lack of true diversity at the institution. She began her college career at the present institution, but left after freshman year to return home and attended another college in the Eastern U.S., near her home. She then returned to complete her junior and senior years at the private mid-Atlantic university. She was “never aware of my weight growing up. I was a pretty active kid”. She didn’t believe she would gain weight in college, “I remember thinking the freshman 15 was something I wouldn’t have to worry about”. She did gain weight in college and did try, “but not very hard” to lose weight several times during sophomore and junior years. Jane Smith is happy with the way she looks, “My BMI is good, I have a healthy body image”. But she adds that there are “parts I don’t like”. She was not currently trying to change her weight. Jane Smith believes that students do think about weight, “a lot of my friends have scary weights or goal weights, scary weights you try to avoid”. She admitted that although weight is important to students, “I think its not supposed to be like that”.

Janette. Janette was a 22 year old, Asian, heterosexual female attending the private mid-Atlantic university. She is an international student, growing up in Turkey, but of Korean ancestry, and attended a private English-speaking foreign school at home. She chose this college, “because I want to go to medical school” and likes being able to meet people with diverse backgrounds and interests. She dislikes the cost of tuition of the present institution. Janette described her body as healthy, but “I think I’m fat and want to be thinner”. She has tried to lose weight after her freshman weight gain, and did lose weight, “but I gained it back the next year, and had to lose it again”. She admits that, “I’m trying to lose weight, still” because she wants “to go back to what I was before

coming to college, because I feel like that was the ideal for me. I don't feel like me now". She also emphasized, "I'm short. I have small hands and feet". Janette states that "weight is something every students thinks about, even if they don't talk about it".

Steffie. Steffie is a 23 year old European-American, heterosexual female, she transferred to the private mid-Atlantic University after a one-year break from college, after completing two years, at a smaller private college in the Midwest. She transferred to the present college to complete her junior and senior years and chose the institution because of the specific program in Women's Studies and Public Policy. She likes the program and location of the college best, and least likes the lack of a strong community among the student population. She left the smaller private college in the Midwest because it wasn't a diverse student population, and there was "so much emphasis on appearance and wearing the right clothes". She wanted to attend a college with more diversity, more options, and more things to do outside of the campus. She expressed that at the smaller private college in the Midwest, "you either went to the gym or you partied". Steffie described herself, as short and average, "but I have to convince myself of that, I always want to say, at first, that I'm fat". She believes "weight is really important in college; its definitely a value judgment". She has tried to change her weight often during her college years, even though she knows "I'm not fat" and "I know that my weight really has very little to do with my self worth". At the beginning of college, she worried about her weight, "So I could be accepted and look like a college student, that I thought I should look like." She wasn't worried about her health, "I thought if I was thinner, I'd be a better person, I would be more like, others would think I was a better person". As she nears the

end of her college years, she is trying to become more comfortable with her weight and body.

These profiles were developed using the information provided on each participant's biographical sketch form, details revealed during the interviews, and the researcher's observations. Conducting the interviews, on the respective college campuses the student attended, provided valuable insight into understanding the experiences of the participants on the college campus. The interviews were conducted on each college campus, within the context of the environment being investigated, at a time and place the participant preferred. The interviews began with broad, non-invasive, less sensitive questions to build rapport. As each interview progressed the questioning became more personal, in a conversational tone to fully engage the student-participant. After the first few interviews were completed, the interview questions evolved to include additional questions, the modification of questions or changes in the sequencing of the interview questions. An initial data analysis process began at this point, and further guided subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

The data collection process involved primarily interviewing of students within the college environment, as well as observations during interviews, and observations of each specific college setting. The interviews were recorded for transcription, and the interviewer-researcher took notes during interviews noting key words, phrases, and any body language/facial expressions of the participant for further data analysis. As suggested by Glaser, the grounded theory should begin to emerge within the first several interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The grounded theory for this study

did begin to emerge within the interviews with the first 4-5 students, which was then further supported by subsequent interviews, and then guided the continued data collection and data analysis process. Constant comparisons between the interviews were made with each subsequent interview, as well as the researcher's observations, conversations, and the researcher's journal reflections in an effort to further develop and test the developing grounded theory.

Data Analysis Process

The units of analysis for this research were: (a) interview transcripts, (b) interview notes, (c) researcher observations and reflective notes, and d) biographical sketches. The process of data analysis followed the recommendations of Glaser's (1967) work in first beginning initial coding during the interviews, continuing the initial coding with the transcribed interviews with the biographical sketches, followed by axial coding, including interview notes, researcher observations, and then categorizing the codes into specific categories during selective coding using additional external materials. These categories then become the findings for each research question. The following is a detailed description of the process taken in coding and categorizing data for this study.

Initial Coding. Initial coding began during the interviews, with the identification of major themes emerging with each consecutive interview, as well as a constant comparison of the interview responses. During the initial data analysis the researcher was able to see a pattern developing regarding the responses about the weight-related experiences of the student participants. The interview process and questions were modified into a more conversational style, allowing the participants to speak more openly and freely about their experiences in college. The audio-recordings of each interview

were transcribed immediately following the interview, allowing the researcher to insert notes taken during the interview and observations, in an effort to minimize any loss of important data, and improve the validity of the data analysis, interpretation and representation.

Axial Coding. The open coding continued until all interviews were completed, and transcribed. The data analysis at this point used an open coding process with major themes being identified, much of these identified by the specific interview questions. After open coding, the interview and observation data was further analyzed to reveal deeper themes. The axial coding analysis was confirmed by using HyperResearch*, a software program designed specifically for the data analysis of qualitative interviews. This axial coding process revealed more specific themes, as sub-categories of those identified in open coding, which were then further analyzed for relationships.

Selective Coding. The next step in the data analysis process involved more specific, selective coding, identifying the inter-relationships between all codes/themes identified in the open and axial coding steps forming categories. The relationships between the emerging themes, were identified, by using a software application designed for organizing and outlining ideas as mind maps. This conceptualization of themes and inter-relationships then identified the major categories. This application allowed the researcher to adopt a more objective approach in analyzing the data facilitating in addressing each of the research questions. The relationships of the major categories and related themes with each of the research questions, and sub-questions will be presented in the findings section.

Identifying the Major Categories

The major categories of data, created during selective coding as themes emerged, are used in the discussion of results section as well as in Chapter 5 during the discussion of data interpretation. Categories were first determined by how often an initial or axial code, emerging theme, occurred in the overall data from all interviews/transcripts. A few categories emerged with higher frequency than others, and these categories were found to be connected to other categories, forming a core category, and the others becoming sub-categories or related themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The major categories provided the framework in answering each of the major research questions, with the related themes providing the deeper descriptions of each category. The four major categories were identified as 1) Weight Awareness; 2) Weight Concerns and Conflicts; 3) Weight Commitment; and 4) Weight Acceptance.

Each of these major core categories was influenced by specific experiences involving interactions in the formal and informal learning environments of college and these experiences involved several related themes describing various transitional events. Related themes that weave between and through each of the major categories were identified as a) weight awareness before college and during college; b) weight is more than a number; c) the span or disconnect between a perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight; d) coping strategies with managing weight and body; and e) student interactions within formal and informal learning environments in college. The major categories and themes provide a foundation in answering the research questions for this study and enhancing our understanding of the meanings students prescribe to weight, the

perceptions of weight before and during college and how these perceptions are integrated into the daily life experiences of college students.

The sub-themes emerging during the interviews and data analysis that inform the answers for the research question describe weight awareness as being experienced before and during college, weight being more than a number, with students experiencing a disconnect between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight. Student-participants also experienced various levels of weight awareness and employed the coping strategies in specific formal learning environments such as in classrooms and negotiating desk space, and informal learning environments such as dorms while interacting with dorm-mates, other campus areas interacting with family, faculty, staff, and friends. The daily life experiences of students and their weight awareness was described as part of being a college student, belonging and fitting-in as a college student and being accepted by peers and being able to enjoy college, living college life to the fullest. The responses described specific daily life experiences as being transitional events prompting a change in weight awareness, and experiencing either weight concerns and conflicts, or weight commitment, or weight acceptance. The development of the major categories and the related themes and sub-themes is shown in Table 6 Major Categories, Related Themes and Sub-themes.

Table 6

Major Categories, Related Themes and Sub-themes

| Major Category | Related Theme | Sub-theme |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Weight Awareness | Weight awareness before college | Looking like a college student before and during college |
| | Weight awareness during college | Going to college |
| | Weight is more than a number | Being accepted by peers Fitting-in, belonging, feeling comfortable |
| Weight Concerns and Conflicts | Disconnect between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight before and during college | Conflict between looking like a college student and being a college student |
| | Coping strategies with managing weight and body | Weight change attempts Attempts to conceal weight or body Interactions with formal (faculty, staff) and informal (friends, dorm-mates, family) contacts within informal and formal learning environments |
| Weight Commitment | Identity consolidation | Being a college student |
| | | Participating in college life |
| Weight Acceptance | Living weight | Living college life to the fullest |
| | Living college live to the fullest | Aware of future, being an adult Able to reflect back on college experiences |

Weight Awareness. Student-participants were asked to describe their perceptions of weight and their responses described an awareness of their weight during specific experiences, often involving comparisons during interactions with other students, roommates, and friends. Weight awareness varied according to the context of the

situation or interaction described by the student-participants, some interactions became transitional events and either contributed to a heightened state of weight awareness, or led to a diminished state of weight awareness. Student-participants described awareness of their weight in comparison to a discrepancy between a perceived ideal weight, to be a college student, and perceived real weight. Weight awareness was described with weight having meanings of being a college student, looking like a college student, looking like other college students, fitting-in at college, and being accepted by others and peers.

Weight awareness was described, by the student-participants, as being experienced during specific interactions within formal learning environments, such as classrooms, and informal learning environments, such as residence halls. Interactions with others, such as faculty and staff, family, dorm-mates and friends also contributed to the students being aware of weight in college. These interactions acted as transitional events prompting a shift in how weight awareness was experienced, being concerned with weight, being committed to one's own weight by abandoning a weight ideal, or accepting one's weight as a living weight.

The responses described weight awareness as a fluid, evolving, construct that then influenced how they experienced this awareness. Weight awareness was then identified as the foundation for the remaining three major categories identified during the data analysis. The next three major categories describe the foundation of weight awareness, experienced in varying degrees, by the college students during daily college life. A heightened state of weight awareness, as described by the student-participants, contributed to experiencing weight concerns and conflicts with their weight and a perceived ideal weight. A lesser state of weight awareness was described by students as

becoming less concerned with meeting a perceived ideal weight and instead experienced an increased commitment to their own weight and body, and at the same time a consolidation of their identity as a college student. Several student-participants described another level or phase of weight awareness, weight acceptance, being aware of their weight, but with weight having less value, not only as college student but as emerging adults preparing for their futures outside of college.

Weight Concerns and Conflicts. The student-participants described their perceptions of real weight as being in conflict with the perceptions of ideal weight for being a college student, which contributed to a heightened state of weight awareness. The greater the perception of disconnect between ideal and real weights contributed to the student experiencing weight concerns and conflicts. Students described having concerns about their weight in comparison to the perceived ideal weight, and in comparison to other students. Students described being concerned with their weight and not meeting the perceived ideal weight to look like a college student, look like other students, and no longer being a previous weight before college. The student-participants described experiencing various conflicts with their own weight in comparison to a perceived ideal weight, or other students' weights, as well as conflicts with being a college student and looking like a college student. In an effort to cope with these weight concerns and conflicts, student-participants described employing specific strategies to manage weight and body, either through weight change attempts, or in negotiating space or relationships to conceal weight or minimize any attention towards weight and body size.

Weight Commitment. Several student-participants described making active and purposeful decisions to no longer adhere to, or compare themselves against, a perceived

ideal weight. The student-participants made a decision to focus on their college experiences and participate in activities they may not have when experiencing weight concerns and conflicts. The student-participants were consolidating their identity as a college student, and described being invested in being a college student. Student-participants described still attempting to change weight, but with less emphasis on meeting a perceived ideal weight. Although student-participants described being committed to their own weight, and a gradual abandoning of meeting a weight ideal, students described still having occasional weight concerns experiencing some conflict with not meeting perceived ideal weight.

Weight Acceptance. Student-participants in the process of further consolidating their identities as college students described being aware of their development as adult individuals and became further invested in their futures. Students describing weight acceptance, were no longer experiencing heightened weight awareness, and instead chose to live college life to the fullest and described being aware of their life after college, and weight was not a consideration in their identity after college. Student-participants described some weight awareness, but this awareness was less likely to be experienced as weight concerns or conflicts. The student-participants were not only more committed to their weight, they were also more likely to participate in healthy behaviors, regardless of weight, and regardless of being different and not looking like they should participate in the activity.

These major categories describe weight as it is experienced by college students in the college environment and provide the answers to the first research question, as they occur during the lived experiences as college students, interacting with others in various

college environments. These interactions address research question two by describing how the major categories identified are integrated into the daily life experiences of college students.

Research Question Results

After an extensive and comprehensive analysis of the data, the researcher determined that sufficient data had been collected to address the research questions and support the discussion of a possible grounded theory. As the major categories and related themes were being identified, a pattern began to emerge allowing the researcher to conceptualize the meaning of the findings, addressing each of the research questions. An overview of the findings for each research question is presented below, in Table 7. Research Questions and Results, following with an in-depth discussion of the thematic categories that emerged in the data analysis.

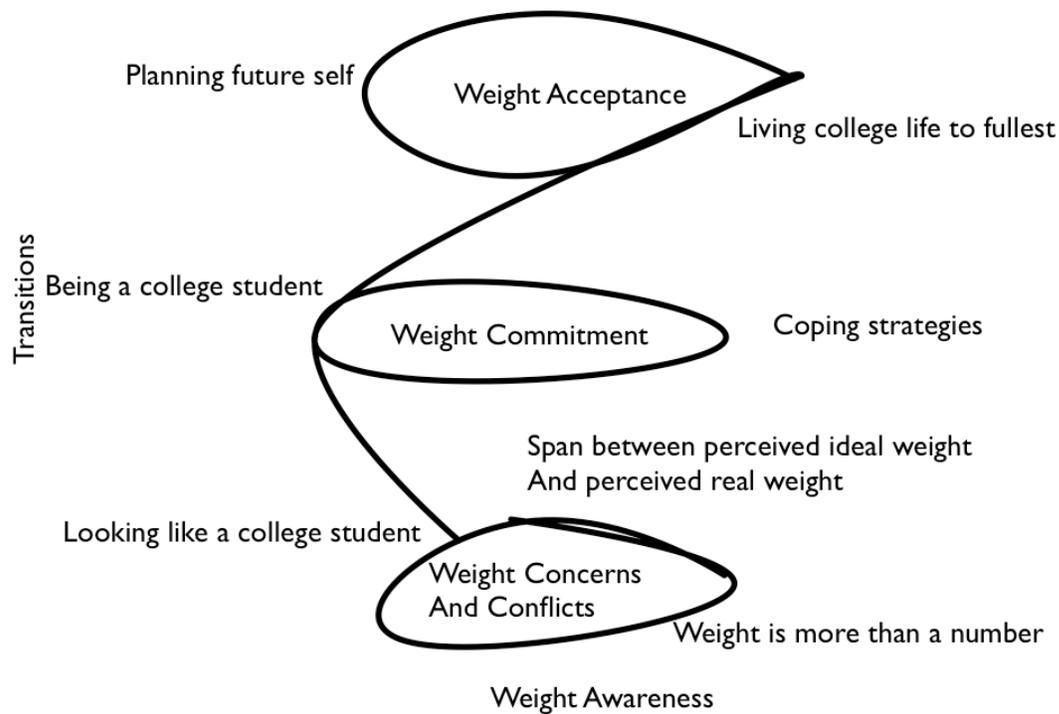
Table 7

Research Questions and Results

| Research Questions | Major Categories and Related Themes |
|--|---|
| RQ1: How, and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development: | <p>Weight Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Weight awareness before b) Weight awareness during college c) Weight is more than a number <p>Weight Concerns and Conflicts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Disconnect between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight b) Coping strategies with managing weight and body <p>Weight Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Identity Consolidation b) Being a college student c) Participating in college life <p>Weight Acceptance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Living weight b) Living college life to the fullest |
| RQ2: In what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within | <p>Catalysts in changing weight awareness and weight perceptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Interactions within formal learning environments b) Interactions within informal learning environments c) Negotiating space and relationships within formal and informal learning environments |

Research question one addressed the perceptions of weight before and during college, and the meaning of weight for students in college. The major categories and related themes identified during data analysis indicate college students enter college with some expectation of weight ideals to look like a college student. The expectations of meeting a perceived weight ideal contributed to experiences of weight awareness during specific interactions in the college environment.

Figure 4.1 The Emerging Grounded Theory of Weight Awareness



Research Question One

The following is a discussion of the major categories that answer research question one, how, and in what ways does weight perception influence identity development, before and during college and the meanings students prescribe to weight. The first major category, weight awareness, forms the foundation for the subsequent major categories, weight concerns and conflicts, weight commitment, and weight acceptance. Each of these major categories is described with the related sub-themes, identified during selective coding, that are strongly interconnected within each major category and also link to each of the other categories. These major categories described more specifically how weight perceptions contributed to the varying degrees or states of

weight awareness, and how these (weight concerns and conflicts, weight commitment, and weight acceptance) then influenced the student-participants' psychosocial development.

Weight Awareness

Weight awareness, was described by the students as a comparison between a perceived ideal weight and their perception of their real weight, a comparison to the other students, or a comparison to a previous weight and was experienced before entering college and during college. The results describe the student-participants entering college with varying degrees of weight awareness and continued to experience variability during college. Weight awareness was often triggered by specific interactions within specific college environments or interactions with specific individuals, as students attempted to fit-in at college, and desired to look like a college student. Student-participants experiencing heightened weight awareness described being concerned with the disconnect between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, and adopted specific strategies to cope with this conflict. Table 8. Descriptions of Self, presents the varying degrees or states of weight weight awareness of each student-participant.

Student-participants provided various terms for describing themselves as well as describing other students. Specific terms were used more commonly by specific groups of students based on gender and ethnicity. Four students described themselves as *overweight/obese/ big* with two being female students (a freshman and a senior) and two male students (a sophomore and a junior). Two students, both being male, described their appearance as *thin* or *thinner* than other male students, and both desired to be *bigger*, more muscular. No female students described themselves as *thin*, but instead used the

terms *average* or *healthy*.

Table 8

Descriptions of Self

| Participant | Self–description |
|------------------|--|
| Dee | I'm overweight, bigger than most, the biggest of all my friends. Fat, I say it a lot. |
| Melissa | Average. I'm not overweight. I know I'm average. But I would feel more comfortable if I lost a few pounds. There are certain areas that I would change. I'm not as toned as I would like to be. |
| Jane | I have an average body. Some days I feel better about my body than others. |
| George Cooper | I'm overweight. I'll be honest. I know I am. I did the BMI – I'm 31. Same as in high school. I know it. Bad is an appropriate term. |
| Gail | Average now, I was bigger freshman year. I know my BMI is normal, healthy, but some days I feel fat. I'm short, 5'2". I have slightly bigger thighs than I would like. But I'm okay with them now. |
| Bob | Average. I'd like to be more muscular. But I'm ok. |
| Dre | Big. Tall and big. I don't think about it too much. |
| Rick Ross | Very cut, toned, trying to get bigger and more defined. So I just want to be big. I like the size I'm at right now. I'm about 186lbs at 6'3". Overall happy with my body now. |
| JC | I think I'm really toned. I'm strong and fit. Alright, I think I could lose a few pounds. |
| GG | Average, out of shape. I feel alright. I could lose a few pounds though. |
| Maria | Well, healthy, dynamic. |
| Rachel | Athletic, fit. I'm not fat, but according to the BMI, I'm obese. |
| Steffie | Short, I'm average. I always want to say, at first, that I'm fat. I know I'm not. But I have to convince myself of that. |
| Fred | I'm on the slimmer side. I feel like I'm in good enough shape. But I'm not very fit. I'd like to be in better shape. |
| Jean Valjean | Slender, very thin. A healthy weight. Slight, relatively attractive. |
| Janette | Healthy. I'm short. I have small hands and feet. I think I'm fat and want to be thinner. |
| Jane Smith | I'm happy with the way I look. BMI is good. I have a healthy body image. But there are parts I don't like. I'm thinner than average I guess. |
| Allegra | Strong now. I'm satisfied. I was heavier and felt overweight, but I really wasn't. Today, though I would describe my body as strong. |
| Darcy | I'd say I'm petite and athletic, curvy, curvy but thin. |

Other terms the student-participants used were also influenced by ethnicity with the Asian female students using the terms *small* and *diminutive*, and *petite*; and African-American females and males using the terms *thick* and *proportioned well*, for describing female bodies. The majority of female student-participants described themselves as average or normal, but still desired to lose weight to be thin. One female student, Rachel, and one male student, described themselves as obese. Dee, described herself “as bigger than most”, Gail described herself as average now, but being bigger during her freshman year, and as never being thin in high school. These descriptions of weight were often put into context with comparisons to an ideal weight, as well as comparisons to other students or previous weights. The comparisons contributed to the experiences of weight awareness described by the student-participant, and the meanings of weight. The meanings of weight, certain body size and shape related terms varied by gender or ethnicity, but the concept of weight having meaning for college students in the college environment was described by all the student-participants. The themes of ideal weight before and during college emerged within the first few interviews as student-participants described a desire to *look like a college student*, and with further prompts the details of these ideals were provided and supported by responses in subsequent interviews.

Weight awareness before college. The descriptions of their own perceived weights were often compared to a perceived ideal weight they expected they should achieve to be a college student; Before college, “I was thinking I needed to be thin here” (Melissa) and during college “Girls should be thin, pretty” (Gail). Several female student-participants were concerned with meeting the expected ideal before coming to college, with a few students attempting weight loss before entering college in an effort to

look like a college student. The responses indicated that most female students believed there was a weight ideal for female college students before entering college, “girls should be slender” (Melissa) and the female student-participants described the a comparison between perception of their real weight compared to an ideal weight before college, “I thought I had to be thin at first so I could enjoy college, and be a college girl” (Melissa). Most male student-participants described being aware of an ideal, but not concerned with their own weight or size until arriving at college, “Hadn’t thought about it before college” (Bob). Female student-participants were more likely to not only idealize a specific weight/size to look like a college student, but also idealize a previous weight or size from high school, “I was an athlete, that was my ideal” (GG).

Several responses described weight awareness in college as compared to weight awareness in high school. The environment of high school, being in the same building with the same students, may contribute to increased emphasis on weight awareness, as compared to the varied and different environments of college.

Rachel provided a detailed description of several events that contributed to her weight awareness.

When I was 16, I wanted to be a counselor and they said I didn’t know enough about camp. I thought it had to be my size, because I was bigger than what they thought a counselor should be. I’d been going to that same camp since I was 7. Just before this, I was rejected from my ice-skating team that I had been with since I was 6. I felt that it was because I was one of the larger girls on the team. I probably was the biggest girl in the group. So it all started when I was 15-16 years old (Rachel).

Rachel's awareness of her weight and size in high school continued as she entered college, "I was concerned about my weight before coming to college and tried to change my weight" (Rachel). This statement is supported by the responses of several student-participants describing attempts to change weight as they prepared to enter college. But most male student-participants were less likely to describe weight awareness and attempts to meet an ideal before entering college.

Being an athlete or active in high school seemed to mediate weight awareness and concerns in high school. "I played baseball in high school, so I didn't think about my weight" (Rick Ross). Some female students expressed not being concerned with their weight or meeting an ideal before college, "I didn't worry about my weight in high school since I was a three-season athlete" (Darcy). Gail had been a swimmer in high school and described her previous weight and body as "big, athletic" but when entering college she knew she would no longer be an athlete swimmer and became concerned about her weight, as well as potential weight gain, during freshman year. Maria had also been an athlete before coming to college and stated, "I never paid attention to my weight before".

The student-participants expressed that they had expected ideals for college before entering college, but these ideals differed by gender, with female participants idealizing thinness and males idealizing muscularity/ being bigger. Weight awareness, and the span between a perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, continued for some students during college. Dee lost weight over the summer before entering college because she felt like she "needed to lose weight, because I should; I was going to college" (Dee).

Comparing my high school experience to my college experience, I feel like, for myself, but moreso for other people, there's less of an obsession about weight in college than in high school. I think high school is this really intense focus. Everyone is kind of under a microscope in high school, as far as body image, more so than in college. Maybe it's because you live where you ever you live, it's not like spending eight hours a day with the same group of people like you do in high school. In high school you spend 8 hours with the same people going from class to class, in the school, so there's more time to observe each other, to be more critical about each other's weight and appearance, ore time and opportunity to be mean also (Jean Valjean).

Weight awareness during college. Weight awareness changed for several student-participants while in college, with an emphasis on a perceived ideal weight, which increased weight awareness was described as occurring during the early years of college. Weight was described as being noticed by other students, and being an important part of an expected appearance ideal, "For most students, I think it's all about appearance... It's pretty important, especially here, to look a certain way, or at least try to look a certain way" (Melissa). Students enter college aware of the potential for weight gain during their first years, the freshman 15, (Penney, 2006) while at the same time also attempting to reach an expected ideal for what a college student should look like (Field, 2002).

The responses indicated that most female student-participants believed there was a weight ideal for female college students before entering college, "girls should be slender" (Melissa) and the female student-participants described the a comparison

between perception of their real weight compared to an ideal weight before college, “I thought I had to be thin at first so I could enjoy college, and be a college girl” (Melissa). Steffie, like Melissa, wanted to look like a college student, “I worried about my weight, so I could be accepted and look like a college student, that I thought I should look like” (Steffie). Jane, an African American student described herself as average, “thick” and “proportioned well,” and stated that the ideal for female college students “should be average, regular, not too big, but not too thin either”. But Jane also had lost weight over the summer before entering college and worried about gaining weight in college, and was disappointed when she regained the weight she had lost, “I gained it all back freshman year” (Jane).

Male student-participants described a muscular physique as ideal “Males should be muscular” (George Cooper), and described attempts to achieve the ideal. Female student-participants were still describing a desire to be thinner, to look like a college student, “Girls should be thin, pretty” (Gail), “Tall and skinny for girls” (GG). Dee, an African American female student, described herself as overweight, “bigger than most,” stated “I don’t think there really is a true ideal. It’s ok to not be thin, but then its hard for me” (Dee). But Dee also lost weight over the summer before entering college because she felt like she “needed to lose weight, because I should; I was going to college” (Dee). Jane, also an African American student described herself as average, “thick” and “proportioned well,” and stated that the ideal for female college students “should be average, regular, not too big, but not too thin either”. But Jane also had lost weight over the summer before entering college and worried about gaining weight in college, and was

disappointed when she regained the weight she had lost, “I gained it all back freshman year” (Jane).

Weight awareness changed for several student-participants while in college, with the emphasis on meeting a perceived ideal diminishing over time as the student invested in college life and being a college student. “In college and after you should be fit and toned, not too big, but definitely not skinny, for men and women. They should be fit” (Rick Ross). As student-participants invested in being a college student, the ideals began to change, “Females should be more average, regular, not too big, but not too thin either. Males should be muscular, but not too buff” (Jane). Gail provided a similar response as well as acknowledging that weight shouldn’t matter in college, “But really average. I know it shouldn’t matter, but it does. The ideal is not normal, but it should be not too skinny, not too overweight” (Gail).

George Cooper described a different ideal for himself, as compared to the other male college students, “Males, I think, well everyone talks about the V-shape. I’m not as into that image really”. He also added, he just “wanted to be a healthy weight” since he had “always been overweight”. Other male students emphasized an ideal of being “big” and “muscular”, with three of the male student-participants striving to meet this ideal during college. Rick Ross, Fred, and Jean Valjean desired to be muscular and bigger than their bodies prior to college, but only Rick Ross was actively pursuing achieving this ideal. Rick Ross described his body as “big” and “wanting to be bigger”, and more comfortable with his current body than his high school body, “I was always skinny in high school. I was just really self-conscious about my size” (Rick Ross).

Weight is more than a number. The responses described current weight and shape, and a reflection of their weight and shape before college. Most students did not describe weight in terms of numbers in pounds or BMI, but instead weight was described as a measure of fitting in, socializing, popularity, and participating in college activities. The meanings of weight varied by gender and ethnicity with female students prescribing a meaning to weight as meeting a thin weight ideal to be a college student. The comparisons made by students of their own weight to a perceived ideal or to other students' weights describe the meaning of weight as more than a number and show the disconnections, or span between ideal weight/ body and the reality of their own weight/body. Weight was described as being noticed by others, and being an important part of an expected appearance ideal, "For most students, I think it's all about appearance.... It's pretty important, especially here, to look a certain way, or at least try to look a certain way" (Melissa).

Three of the male participants used the term "skinny" to describe their previous and/or current body, with all three desiring a "bigger" body. Rick Ross liked his current size and is happy with his body, "I'm about 186lbs at 6'3". He was the only student-participant to provide an actual number describing his weight. Five student-participants referred to BMI as a measure of weight and body size, with only George Cooper providing an actual BMI number. George Cooper described himself as overweight, "I'll be honest, I know I am. I did the BMI – I'm 31". He added that he has always been obese, "I'm definitely on the bad side". Rachel also referenced BMI, without an actual BMI number, but as a BMI-weight category, "I'm athletic, fit, but according to the BMI, I'm obese". Gail and Jane Smith also mentioned BMI, and described their own as

“average” or “good” while at the same time also using the terms “fat” and “big” in describing their weight and bodies.

Most of the student-participants stated that “weight means a lot” in college, especially for female students and weight is most important in the early college years, freshman to sophomore, with gradually diminishing impact on their college experiences during the later years, junior to senior years. Gail, who currently described herself as average, but was “never thin” and had been “bigger” since she was an athlete in high school but not in college, stated, “Well, it means a lot I think to all of us, especially at first. But if you’re already overweight, it means more” (Gail). This perception is supported by the statements of other student-participants indicating weight is more than a number and holds meaning regarding “fitting-in” to college. As a freshman, Dee added, “We’re all trying to fit into college life, and make friends, and then we’re also worried about gaining weight” (Dee). Fred, struggled to “fit-in” to college, and transferred from a small private college with an “athletic culture” to a large private college, and wanted to transfer again to a large public college, added, “Most freshmen, like when I was myself, are so uncomfortable in college at first” (Fred).

“Weight is a really complex thing to deal with in college” (Fred), for many students it may be that weight is more than a number, it is about fitting in, being comfortable, being acceptable, being noticed, and being popular. “Weight is something every student thinks about” (Janette) and its about “whether or not someone is found attractive” (Jean Valjean) as a judgment. “Its all about popularity, absolutely popularity” (Rachel) and since “weight is a big part of your physical appearance” (Janette), and it is “your looks” (GG), it is the first thing students see when they meet other students. The

student-participants were very aware of being seen by other students and how other students might judge their physical appearance and weight. This awareness of being seen, and being judged on your weight and size occurs throughout the college environments, including classrooms. Rachel described this awareness as,

It'll be easier for you to walk into a room (if you're thin). When you walk into a classroom people will look at you – in a good way. Being thin, you get noticed in good way, if you're thin. Being thin, you get noticed in a positive way, not in a negative; as opposed to being really overweight or obese, especially at a university like this.

The varied meanings assigned to weight, with weight having very different meanings between genders, “big” being a positive term among male student-participants but a negative term among female student-participants, also highlight how weight is used as a value of self-worth, and knowing that weight is being judged by others, placing emphasis on efforts to fit-in at college, and be accepted by peers.

There is also some evidence of ethnicity playing a role in the meanings of weight, with Asian females not only emphasizing the thin ideal, but also an ideal to be “small”. The two African American male student-participants, Bob and Dre, acknowledged that most students are aware of their weight, described themselves as “big” and expressed a desire to be “a little more muscular” but they were not concerned with changing their weight. These responses indicated weight is more than a number and instead is prescribed a meaning for looking like a college student, with students comparing perceived real weight to a perceived ideal weight as the measure of fitting-in as a college student. The meaning of weight for looking like a college students appeared to be a more common

theme among the female student-participants as compared to the male student-participants, whose responses described weight as it related to size and muscularity. The meaning male students prescribed to weight emphasized what it means to look like a man, and in comparison to other male students on campus.

The perception of one's own weight also seems to have played a role in designating roles, and social identities in the context of relationships. Weight awareness was described as assuming a primary role in the identity of Allegra, in the context of a relationship with a friend.

I became aware of my weight when my friend, who had been a big – well bigger than me – girl and she lost a lot of weight. Everyone was saying she looks great, even I did. But I was devastated when she gave me her old clothes, her fat clothes. And I thought – but I used to be the thin one. I can't be the fat friend. It's sad we aren't friends anymore.

Fred and Jean Valjean, described experiences with girlfriends and weight concerns. Fred described his confusion with his girlfriend's weight concerns but also commented that he feels that she's "out of his league". "My girlfriend (a junior) is really pretty, but she comments about her body and weight. She's so pretty, I think she's completely out of my league really, as far as looks. But she's self-conscious about her weight. It confuses me". Jean Valjean described his own concerns with weight in comparison to his girlfriend as,

When I started dating my girlfriend, for about two years now, and she's a little shorter than me, but she weighed more than me. I mean we're still together, so it wasn't that big of a deal. It did bother us a little, we were both aware of it, that she

weighed more and there's that expectation that the guy is supposed to be not just taller, but bigger than his female partner.

These statements describe not only the meaning of weight in defining roles in relationships, and the subsequent conflicts in expectations, in relationships, but putting these relationships in the context of the college environment.

Summary of Weight Awareness

As student-participants described weight awareness experiences during their college years, a process of varying degrees of weight awareness became apparent and the varying degrees were influenced by specific interactions within college. Weight awareness was described as being experienced during specific events/situations and interactions with others. Student-participants experienced weight awareness before entering college, preparing to enter college, during interactions meeting other students and room-mates when first entering college, and during various daily life college activities throughout college. Weight awareness was experienced when students described a comparison of their perception of their real weight to a perceived ideal weight before and during college, and the greater the span between the real and ideal the student described increasing weight awareness. The responses indicated the student-participants prescribed a meaning to weight and being a college student. For these student-participants weight was more than a number, but also indicated looking like a college student, fitting-in, and being accepted by peers as well as faculty and staff.

The following provides a discussion of the other major categories, identified through the selective coding process, describing how weight awareness was experienced: 1) Weight Concerns and Conflicts; 2) Weight Commitment; and 3) Weight Acceptance.

These three are presented with the sub-themes identified during the axial and selective coding process and informed the development of these major categories. The three categories are inter-connected by weight awareness, as the student-participants described how weight perceptions were experienced during specific interactions, and then influenced being a college student. Student-participants described experiencing weight concerns and conflicts surrounding their weight and being a college student, with lesser weight awareness as experiencing an increased commitment to their weight and less desire to meet an ideal weight for being a college student, to a more diminished level of weight awareness as experiencing weight acceptance and instead focus on being a college student, enjoying college life to the fullest.

Weight Concerns and Conflicts

Student-participants described being most aware of their own weight and a perceived ideal weight just before entering college and during the early years of college, freshman and sophomore years, although some students described increased weight awareness into junior and senior years as well. Student-participants described feeling concerned about their weight and described conflicts with disconnect between the perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight. The data, presented in Table 9 shows the span or disconnect between the student-participants' perceptions of an ideal weight for college students and the perceptions of their real weight. The table presenting the responses of the student-participants as they described their own physical appearance and weight can be compared to the responses of the table presenting weight ideals.

Comparing these responses described the existence of a span between the student-

participants' perceptions of ideal weight and real weight, with varying degrees of disconnect between the two before college and during college.

Table 9

Descriptions of Ideal Appearance Before and During College

| Participant | Ideal before college | Ideal during college |
|---------------|---|--|
| Dee | To look like other students, like my friends. I knew I'd be different, bigger than most students. | I don't think there really is a true ideal. It's ok not to be thin, but then its hard for me. So being too big is not – well there aren't many studen that look like me here. |
| Melissa | I was thinking I needed to be thin here. | Girls should be slender, not muscular looking. Guys should be muscular, toned, but not too big or defined. |
| Jane | Average size | Females should be more average, regular. Not too big, but not too thin either. I think of anything too skinny isn't ideal. |
| George Cooper | For me, just a healthy weight | Males should be muscular, but not too buff. Males, I think, well everyone talks about the V-shape. I'm not as into that image really, thinking that's the ideal. |
| Gail | Thin, I guess. But really average. | Girls should be thin, pretty. Guys tall, a little muscular. The ideal is not normal. It should be not too skinny, not too overweight, just a healthy weight. |
| Bob | Hadn't thought about it. | Girl's shouldn't be too fat, but not too thin too. |
| Dre | NA | Well its different for different people. I like girls with – well a body, not too much though. |
| Rick Ross | NA | You should be fit and toned not too big, but definitely not skinny, for men. Women, they should be fit. |
| JC | NA | I don't think there's an ideal. I don't think it really matters. |
| Maria | NA | I don't think there is an ideal. Some girls put too much stress on their weight, and their self-image. |
| GG | I was an athlete, that was my ideal | Tall and skinny for girls. Tall and strong for boys. For some people it means nothing, the ideal you know, and for others it means a lot. |
| Rachel | Proportioned well | Voluptuous, breasts and hips For guys, 6-pack abs and large muscles. |
| Steffie | Thin, of course | Definitely thin for women. Well put together, well dressed. A slight woman in heels and skirt. Guys, I don't think they really have an ideal appearance other than being fit, somewhat athletic. |

| | | |
|--------------|---|--|
| Fred | NA | I don't think there really is an ideal, or there shouldn't be. Girls shouldn't be too skinny or fat. A healthy shape. In a shape that is slim and healthy. Guys, a little muscle, strength, not like on the Jersey shore guys though. |
| Jean Valjean | I didn't think there was a certain way I had to look. | I think it's a question of height depending on how tall you are, your body weight and size will look different. I think its whatever you're comfortable. A healthy complexion as far as skin. But as far as weight and body shape and body type, I think its whatever you're comfortable in. |
| Janette | NA | I think girls, its being skinny. And being short is another thing. Skinny and short, and long straight hair. Being pretty. |
| Jane Smith | The movie star ideal, its perfect. Being thin. | College taught me its less about thin and overweight, but how you carry yourself and how you dress. You can be a larger person and still carry yourself in a beautiful manner. |
| Allegra | Thin | For girls, definitely very thin, and yet somehow still have boobs. She has to wear a certain style of clothes, be stylish, and a certain body size – thin, a mature thin. |
| Darcy | NA | It depends on the person and their body. It depends on them, how they feel good. |

The disconnect was often described with what it means to be in college and look like a college student. Students described being most aware of this disconnect during specific interactions within formal and informal learning environments, and employed several coping strategies to manage weight by either concealing weight or body or attempting to change weight. Jane, a sophomore, believed that most students are aware of and concerned about weight as freshmen.

I think when you're a freshman, that's when, since you're still worried about weight, that most of the teasing and criticizing about weight. But after freshman year, weight becomes less important, and other things become more important. Freshmen still have a narrow idea of what to look like (in college) (Jane).

Disconnect between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight. All student-participants acknowledged the existence of weight and appearance ideals for college students, and they were aware of these ideals before and during college. The student-participants description of this awareness of a disconnect, between a perceived ideal weight and a perceived real weight, formed the related sub-theme for the major category Weight Concerns and Conflicts. A disconnect between the perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, involved not only being aware of the span between ideal and real weights, but experiencing concern in how to resolve the disconnect between the two weight perceptions. This theme describes the conflict students experienced with weight awareness increasing as they compared their perceived real weights to a perceived ideal weight to be a college student, or the perceived real weights of other students. This conflict contributed to the students experiencing increased concern with weight and attempts to change or conceal weight.

The weight and appearance ideal for male college students was described by male and female student-participants as being “muscular” or “toned” but “not too buff,” “not like on the Jersey shore guys though” (Fred). The male student participants’ responses indicate that the emphasis on muscularity for male students was not experienced until coming to college. Rick Ross stated “I didn’t think about getting bigger until I got here” but had been self-conscious about his size before college, “I was always skinny in high school. I was really self-conscious about my size” (Rick Ross). While Rick Ross did achieve his muscular ideal, being bigger, Fred and Jean Valjean had attempted to get bigger during their first years in college but both continue to describe themselves as thin.

Responses from male and female student-participants also indicate an overall weight and appearance ideal of thinness for female college students, “tall and skinny for girls” (GG). The ideal for girls to be thin to look like a college student was repeated by most of the student-participants, with most females indicating attempts to meet this ideal. Gail, described her weight and body before college as, “I’ve always been, well big as a kid, and just never thin, even in high school” and although she did not attempt to change her weight before college, she came to college concerned about her weight, “I just wanted to be thinner”(Gail). Both Steffie and Melissa thought they needed to lose weight to “look like a college girl” while at the same time describing their own weight and bodies as “average”.

The student-participants related that being accepted by their peers in college was important, “if you’re not from around here, you’re different, and – well it’s just not that easy making friends or them being friendly” (Gail), and many actively tried to gain peer acceptance, “in my efforts to become her friend right away, counting calories, going to

the gym” (Steffie) and specifically with aspects of physical appearance, “Sometimes you see people on campus that make you feel bad about yourself, cuz you don’t look like them” (Jane).

Intentional weight changes were attempted in an effort to look like a college student. Allegra stated, “I tried to change my weight, so I would look like the Greek girl I imagined I should look like”. Steffie believed that if she was thinner, “I’d be a better person. I would be more liked, others would think I was a better person”. She added that she worried about her weight, “so I could be accepted” as a college student. Both male and female student-participants indicated that most students are “self-conscious about their weight” (Melissa). Students participated in body comparisons as a part of being accepted by peers, “when you first get to college, you are thinking about weight, and comparing your body and size to other students” (Jane). The perceived ideal for thinness among female college students, and the comparisons to others, is described by Melissa, a freshman, “Well, I was noticing, have noticed, the other girls around me, and the girls are perfectly thin. I just want to look like them”. Maria described her first day in college and meeting her roommates, “I was thinking about my weight, did I look like the other girls”, but she added it was exciting meeting her roommates. The weight comparisons to other female students is described by Jane, as

“Well, yesterday, for example, I saw this girl running, here on campus and she was just wearing shorts and a sports bra. And I thought – oh, I can’t do that. I’d like to but I know I wouldn’t look like her running. It just made me feel bad that I knew I couldn’t do that and not feel embarrassed”.

Several students used terms such as looking the same or being different when describing their own weight, or the importance of weight in college and looking like other college students. George was aware of his weight, not being the same as his roommates, and described being different in the dorm, but when on the street, “I didn’t feel like I was different. I could hardly tell sometimes”, referring to his weight. One male student, Fred, a senior, expressed his awareness of this need to look the same as he observed it among female students, “A lot of the girls here look exact- have the same look. All of the girls here try to have the same look; they have the same bodies and the same clothes”.

But the descriptions of trying to look the same in comparison to other students changed as the students progressed in their college years. Melissa, a freshman, during spring semester, expressed her increased investment in college.

I’m doing everything I want to do. So its not really the big deal (weight) that I thought it would be. I thought I had to be thin at first so I could enjoy college, be a college girl. But now I’m realizing that my weight really has nothing to do with all that.

Rachel, a senior, had described her awareness of being different, “I didn’t look like everyone else, and that sticks with you” and her efforts to change her weight, and comparisons to other female students. But she added, that “there’s not that much of a difference” between her own body and the other female students, other than they may look different.

The responses of several student-participants described the importance of fitting in and having a sense of belonging in college. Fred, had transferred from a smaller

private college to the larger private institution in this study, and his primary reason for transferring was fitting-in at college.

I had this great group of friends in high school and we were close, still close and we fit together. But when I got to (the smaller private college), there was no sense of belonging. I just didn't fit in. It was that, you know, you go to a place, and you don't know where you are there. You lose your sense of where you belong. And I know that's part of being a freshman, but it wasn't a good experience. And I just didn't fit in and wanted to find someplace that was more comforting so I wouldn't feel so stressed (Fred).

This concept of *fitting-in*, and having a sense of belonging was described by several student-participants and was most often experienced when first entering college and into freshman year. "As a freshman, it (weight) means a lot. We're all trying to fit into college life" (Dee).

Student-participants described being aware of the difficulties for other students being noticed and accepted by others. Rachel, herself a larger student, described empathy for the few very large students on campus.

There's probably, really, only a handful of severely obese students; being one of those kids must be horrifying to be here. Cuz its difficult to start recognizing students on campus unless you've been in class with them. But there are people I recognize on this campus that I never had a class with, and its because of, I hate to say, their weight (Rachel).

These themes were often described when student-participants discussed intentions to transfer or reasons for transferring from one institution to another. Gail described her

considering transferring by the “end of the first month” of freshman year, “I really wanted to transfer”. She felt as if she didn’t fit-in at college, described how difficult it was for her to socialize and make friends since she is not from the local area of the public institution, as are many other students. She decided to stay only because, “I just didn’t feel like putting the effort through, filling out forms”. Both Fred and Steffie transferred from different smaller private institutions to the larger private institution of this study, and both described the previous college as having an appearance emphasis and “you either went to the gym or you partied” (Steffie). Fred described his previous institution as having an athletic culture and also described himself as “not very athletic” and “didn’t go to the fitness center”.

The concept of fitting in and belonging was also expressed in terms of feeling comfortable, being in a comfort zone and feeling safe. The responses indicated that fitting-in and feeling comfortable was an important part of their learning experience. Rick Ross’s experience in one of his favorite courses because the students were able to speak openly, “It’s a very comfortable class. I learned more in that class than any other class”. Student-participants also described being prepared for college. Fred stated that he was not prepared for “not fitting in as a freshman” but added “I don’t know if I could have been more prepared for it”. Jean Valjean experienced nervousness the first day of classes, “I was a good student in high school, let’s see how well high school actually prepared me for this”. Gail’s comment about feeling uncomfortable with the unintentional weight gain during freshman year, “I felt uncomfortable, I didn’t feel like me anymore”, highlights the relationship between the meaning of weight and an individual’s identity. Allegra described an increasing level of comfort, being a senior, but still experiences occasional

weight concerns and conflicts, “I’m more comfortable than I was. I have trouble seeing the real body though. I am satisfied, but still trying to be better. But I don’t know what *better* is. I’m not sure at what point – that *This is good*, will be”. The emphasis the student-participants placed on fitting-in and feeling safe while in college and in specific college environments contributed to several adopting various coping strategies to manage their weights and/or bodies, in attempts to change their weight, or conceal their weight or body, or employ specific strategies to minimize any attention to their weight or body.

Coping strategies with managing weight and body. Once in college, during freshman year the student-participants became aware of their weight, and experienced weight concerns and conflicts with an expected weight ideal. Many student-participants made several varied attempts to cope with or manage their weight awareness either by attempting to change their weight, or conceal their bodies in specific clothing, or specific strategies to manage their weight awareness. Most of the students began to adopt specific strategies during their sophomore year in college, as they became increasingly aware of their weight during freshman and sophomore years. “I remember sophomore year specifically, I was very aware of my weight the whole year” (Darcy). During the times of increased weight awareness, the student-participants described weight change attempts as one strategy to cope with or manage weight. Student-participants also described other coping strategies involving concealing their bodies during heightened weight awareness. The related themes of weight change attempts and negotiating relationships and space will be discussed to understand this major category of coping strategies with managing weight and body.

The freshman 15 was a common concept of weight concern for the students prior to entering college and during the first two years of college, “everyone talks about it” (Melissa). Melissa, Gail, and George Cooper worried about gaining the freshman 15 before college, “Before coming to college, I worried about gaining the freshman 15” (Melissa). George was “bracing for the 15lbs” he heard freshmen always gain. Gail’s response described the concern many students experience before and at the beginning of college, “Everyone goes into college, and you’ve heard of the freshman 15, and you’re like worried about gaining weight”. Melissa provided a similar response, “I had heard before coming to college about the freshman 15” and knowing this she worried about gaining weight. But Jane Smith, stated, “I remember thinking the freshman 15 was something I wouldn’t have to worry about” since she was active in high school.

Concerns about the freshman 15 continued among several student-participants during college. Janette, a senior, reflected back about being worried about the freshman 15 and conversations with other female students, “We would talk about how much weight we gained (during freshman year) after sophomore year” (Janette). Allegra had gained weight during freshman year, “I didn’t even gain the freshman 15, it was maybe 10 pounds” but she described her awareness of this weight gain as feeling overweight, “even though I wasn’t that much overweight”(Allegra). She had described the ideal female college student as “definitely very thin” and added, “a mature thin” wearing stylish clothes. Steffie, described herself as average, “but I always say fat at first”, referred to a similar ideal, female college students should be “a slight woman in heels” and “well-dressed”.

Most student-participants had made attempts to change their weight, all females attempting weight loss, but most males attempting weight gain or increased muscularity. The one male, George Cooper, attempting weight loss described his motivations, or weight concerns, as having a health emphasis, whereas all other student-participants were motivated by desires to meet an expected physical appearance ideal, and admitted their efforts were not healthy.

I am currently trying to change my weight, lose weight. I go to the gym 3 times a week, and I know it's not the right way to think of it, but I go to lose weight, not to be healthy. I go to the gym to lose weight (Melissa).

But George Cooper, having entered college expecting weight gain, unintentionally lost weight during freshman year. Once he realized he had lost weight, he decided to continue his "different lifestyle" but he added, "Not like I'm going on a diet just to lose weight".

Most student-participants unintentionally gained weight during freshman year, with three males though, intentionally trying to gain weight. Jean Valjean, Fred, and Rick Ross stated that once they entered college they tried to gain weight, to be bigger, "I had no intentions to gain weight before coming to college or getting bigger. But once I got here I decided to get bigger. So I'm trying to gain weight, muscle really" (Rick Ross). Those student-participants that described unintentionally gaining weight freshman year, expressed discomfort, being discouraged or disappointed that they had gained weight, and attempted to intentionally lose weight. Melissa, a freshman, admitted that she was attempting to change her weight by working out, "but not at all for health reasons, just to lose weight". She did not use the fitness center at all during fall semester of freshman

year. As the student-participants moved into their sophomore year, many adopted weight change behaviors by going to the campus fitness centers. “My sophomore year is when I really started to go to they gym to change my weight. I had become very aware of my weight, and wanted to change it” (Steffie).

Most female student-participants attempted weight loss after unintentional weight gain during freshman year, “I did freshman year. I just didn’t feel my best, but my self-esteem wasn’t affected. No one else noticed I gained weight. I looked the same. I just weighed more, my clothes were tighter” (Darcy). “Yeah, I’m trying to lose some weight. I tried really hard the summer after freshman year to lose weight, which I did. I gained it back the next year, and had to lose it again over the next summer” (Janette).

The weight change attempts were motivated by specific weight concerns that varied by weight goals, to be thinner or bigger, or maintain. Most female student-participants were concerned with the freshman 15 they expected to gain during freshman year. “Everyone talks about it, the freshman 15. I thought I had to be thin at first so I could enjoy college, be a college girl” (Melissa). Most female student-participants acknowledged that they were average size, did not really need to lose weight, but still wanted to lose weight to meet the expected appearance ideal or to be accepted as *good*. “I think the biggest reason was because I thought if I was thinner, lost weight, I’d be a better person, I would be more liked, others would think I was a better person” (Steffie). But for Rachel, “My weight has been a concern for me because of the multiple occasions that I’ve been rejected, when I think it was attributed to my weight” (Rachel).

The male student-participants striving to be bigger described their weight coping and management strategies involving weight lifting, and attempts to increase muscularity.

“I was always skinny in high school. So I just wanted to be big” (Rick Ross). If their schedule did not allow for working out they would experience increased concern. One male that was unable to maintain the workout schedule for increasing his muscularity, stated, “I was worried that I was getting too thin” (Jean Valjean). Jane also described how her weight awareness and weight concerns influenced her college activities. “Weight does play a role in activity choices, that’s why I played soccer last year – cuz I was trying to lose weight, and then flag football this year, so I can lose weight”. Allegra, a senior, provided a similar statement, “My weight influenced my decisions, as far as social life, but only during my freshman and into sophomore year”.

The student-participants described various aspects involving being concerned about their own perceived real weight as compared to a perceived ideal weight, as compared to a previous (high school) weight, and compared this to other students’ weights throughout various informal and formal environments in college. The student-participants described feeling a conflict based on these comparison and adopted various coping strategies to manage weight either by concealing their bodies, or attempting to change weights. The interviews also described a conflict between their attempts to meet an ideal weight and participating in college life, with several students making a decision to resolve this conflict by abandoning the desire to meet the weight ideal and instead be a college student by participating more fully in college.

The weight concerns and conflicts the college students described in their experiences as they interacted with others and specific spaces in the college environment, may delay positive development. The inner turmoil of self-criticism and being self-conscious about weight may inhibit the students ability to embrace their identity as a

college student, inhibit their ability to fully participate in college life, and delay their overall development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The student-participants describing weight concerns and conflicts during college were less likely to participate fully in college daily life activities, being more concerned with looking like a college student. The concerns and conflicts of looking like a college student, meeting a perceived ideal weight may have contributed to a delay in their development as college students. But several students were able to abandon meeting a perceived weight ideal while becoming more committed to their own weight, choosing to be college students and participate in college life activities. These students described weight commitment, the next major category for research question one.

Weight Commitment

Student-participants that made active choices to be less concerned about weight, were able to be more committed to their current weight, experiencing less conflict with the disconnect with a perceived ideal weight, and were also more likely to fully embrace their identity as a college student, and participate in college life. Allegra described her evolving abandonment of a perceived weight ideal.

I'm more comfortable than I was. But I have trouble seeing the real body though.

I am satisfied, but still trying to be better. But I don't know what better is. I'm not sure at what point – that *this is good* will be.

Several students acknowledged the lessening importance of meeting a perceived weight ideal as part of their development into mature adults.

When you go to a party, there's other guys there. It makes me aware of my weight. Four or five years ago, as a freshman or sophomore it made me feel more

aware. I would feel disappointed that I didn't look like that I wasn't that size (Jean Valjean).

But Jean Valjean described this had become less of a concern, and he experienced less conflict about his size and weight not meeting a perceived ideal, "people mature and weight doesn't become nearly as important" (Jean Valjean).

As student-participants chose to be less concerned with weight they instead chose to participate in college life, "But at the same time, I'm not going to waste my time trying to look like that if I've got school work I need to do. It's not a priority" (JC), with decreased attempts to change weight, "I'd be happy if I lost a few pounds. But I'm not going to go on a diet or anything to lose weight" (GG).

The weight commitment described by the student-participants involved an active decision to be less concerned with weight, experiencing less weight conflict with meeting a weight ideal, a decrease in attempts to change or conceal weight, and an active decision to participate in college life and be a college student. The responses indicate that several student-participants were in the process of consolidating their identities as college students, and chose to participate in college life. The responses also indicate the student-participants' acknowledgement that although weight matters in college it should not be a priority. Those student-participants experiencing weight commitment described it in terms of fewer interactions involving weight/body awareness, and during these interactions the student experienced less concern or conflict with being different/having a different body or weight than other students. Student-participants were less concerned with looking like a college student and invested in being a college student, consolidating their identity.

Identity consolidation. As many student-participants described a diminishing emphasis on changing weight to meet an ideal, they also described becoming more involved as college students, and or became more active in college activities. Responses described understanding the changes about themselves as individuals, and in attitudes and beliefs about weight, occurring during their college years. Several student-participants described the transition leaving behind their past attitudes and beliefs about looking like a college student, like other college students, and moving towards self-acceptance, personal stability and an identity consolidation of being a college student and an individual.

And I think as you grow, you learn that you can't be that ideal. Like compared to last year, I've grown a lot. I stand up for my beliefs more, and generally everything. So I don't really care if you say bad things about me, what I might look like; as long as I feel good about myself that's all that matters (JC).

Coping strategies changed over time and became less about changing weight to meet an ideal as students described being more comfortable with their bodies. As the students became more invested in being college students they described different attitudes about weight and beliefs of an ideal physical appearance for college students "You can be a larger person and still carry yourself in a beautiful manner" (Jane Smith).

As students became more involved in college life, being a college student, and interacting with peers, weight awareness and concerns begin to diminish, as described by Jane, "The social group is more important than what we look like". Rachel also continued to broaden her experiences in college to activities that other obese students may be less likely to participate, such as the campus running group. She decided she was going to train to run a 10K.

I wanted to run a 10K and decided I'm going to do this. So I show up (for the first practice meeting) and he (the trainer) goes, *I don't know if you're going to make it. You don't have a runner's body.* He says, *You're not built like a runner.* I was shocked. I said, *Oh don't worry, I'll be fine. I can take care of myself.* My good friend was doing it with me. And she'd never run before either. But she has a different body; she's skinny. And he said to her, *Oh you must run all the time, you look like such a great runner.* I was definitely the heaviest runner in the group. I had to prove him wrong. I don't care if I don't have a runner's body, I can still run. I want to run. I want to be a runner (Rachel).

This description of Rachel being committed to her body and identity as a runner are valuable in understanding the hurdles an individual would encounter in not only an athletic realm but in any endeavor where the individual may not look similar to the others in the desired activity or group. In her desire to be a runner, Rachel described the intensity of her efforts to be one of the runners, and gain acceptance.

I ran with the fast group. I pushed myself harder than I'd ever pushed myself. I ran every day. I trained so hard for this. I finished the 10K in under 50 minutes. I just died of happiness. And he hugged me at the end, he said, *I'm sorry I ever doubted you.* And I go, That's right (Rachel).

Rachel and George Cooper, both described themselves as obese, and aware of their size, actively decided to not let their weight or size deter their participation in certain activities or be in specific campus environments, specifically the fitness center. Rachel had decided to be a runner, while being aware that she did not look like the other runners in the group.

I was definitely the heaviest runner in the group. Everyone else in the group was very thin. I recognized that everyone was looking to me as the short, plump, heavier girl in the group (Rachel).

George Cooper described a similar experience in his decision to participate in physical activity at the fitness center with his thinner roommate being more self-conscious about not fitting in with the more athletic males,

My roommate was saying, well we should go to the gym later, when there are less people around so we can lift less weight, not be pressured by the guys lifting heavy weights.

George added that he laughed, since he just wanted to work out, and added about his friend/roommate, “He doesn’t like to be seen lifting weights next to guys lifting really heavy”.

Steffie added that study abroad seemed to put things into “perspective” and this may have had a similar impact for several students, with weight becoming less important, and “enjoying the experiences” (Jean Valjean) of not only study abroad, but college as well. The student-participants made a decision to no longer worry about their weight, and live college life to the fullest. The responses indicated that specific events during college may contribute to the diminishing emphasis on weight as an ideal for physical appearance. Several student-participants described their study abroad experiences, and the transitional influence this experience had on their weight awareness and college life.

When I went abroad, to Barcelona, it was the best experience, but also it was a different environment for having a routine of healthy behaviors. It was 4 months, and it was a fantasy world, going to clubs. It was great (Fred).

Another student described a similar experience during study abroad, and deciding to fully participate in the experience.

I mean last year, last spring, I did study abroad in Australia and I did gain weight. But it was worth it. I wanted to enjoy the whole culture. We went out every night drinking, eating really good food, trying to get the best food, and experience all the different foods, and fully get into the culture. I knew going that I wasn't going to worry about my weight. I didn't hold myself back. I just wanted to get the full culture (Darcy).

These are just two statements from the interview responses describing an active decision to focus on being a college student, and less emphasis on what it means to look like a college student. These responses describe the student-participants identity development during their college years, as proposed by the fifth of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of identity development. These responses describe the beginnings of the identity establishment of these student-participants; the development of a more accepting attitude towards their bodies, a developing sense of comfort with their bodies and other students' bodies, as well as beginning to clarify their self-concept through the various roles they adopted as college students. The responses also describe the development of a sense of self in response to feedback from others, and being less likely to be concerned with negative comments about their weights or bodies. The student-participants experiencing this level of weight awareness, being more committed to their weight, described being in the process of developing a more stable and integrated identity, with a broader view of who they were and wanted to be, with weight having less influence on their choices.

The student-participants described a state of weight awareness that placed less emphasis on meeting an ideal weight to look like a college student, and instead became more committed to their own weight, and made active decisions to participate fully in college life and be a college student. Student-participants describing this level of weight awareness also described themselves more fully as college students indicating an identity consolidation, which facilitated their ability to make active decisions about college life and what it means to be a college student. Several students reaching weight commitment and identity consolidation described an even more diminished state of weight awareness. The next major category or state of weight awareness, weight acceptance, is described below.

Weight Acceptance

Several of the student-participants described becoming more accepting of their weight and size, no longer needing to meet a perceived ideal weight, to look like a college student. Students began to acknowledge that weight was not as important in being a college student, and no longer were limited by their weight perceptions, weight awareness, or weight concerns and conflicts. Learning to accept one's body and weight, having a positive attitude towards one's body and weight, and have the ability to take care of it, may be an important factor in positive identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Student-participants actively chose to no longer worry about their weight, and participate in college, and described their weight and bodies as a part of their future life. This decision-making process involved reflections on specific interactions the students experienced while in college. The student-participants described an evolving meaning prescribed to weight as they reflected back on these experiences; being satisfied

with weight, feeling comfortable within their body, and considering weight as a living weight.

Living weight. Once student-participants became less focused on weight as a priority, their descriptions about how they think and feel about weight changed as well. “I like the size I’m at right now. I’m happy with my weight and size. But I definitely don’t want to get smaller, and be skinny again” (Rick Ross). “So I have tried in the past. I don’t think I am now so much. I’m not really trying to lose weight right now” (Rachel). “I’m satisfied. I don’t really worry about it. I mean I gained weight freshman year, and I was disappointed. But now I’m happy with my size” (Darcy).

As student-participants continued to develop as maturing individuals while in college they were better able to put weight into a healthier perspective, as Fred described, But its part of getting older, maturing while in college. As we get older, like I’m a senior, I’m more aware of how to eat healthier, now making exercise a priority, and fitting it into my schedule. I know I’ll have to think about my weight when I get older, like when I’m working and don’t have time to play sports. I know I’m going to get a pot belly, but I’m not going to worry about it now. I don’t think you should be living in the gym (Fred).

The transition from being concerned about weight and meeting an expected ideal to focusing more on health was expressed by several of the student-participants. “This year now, I’m focusing more on my health, because I know now that when I’m active I can study more, I have more energy to do things” (JC). George Cooper, who came to college concerned with his weight as an obese student, described his weight awareness as being more health-focused, “Health is the biggest concern about my weight”. He also, as

a sophomore, is already planning for his future in college to attend medical school and his future after college in being a doctor, “You don’t want a doctor who’s unhealthy, so I need to be healthy”. Gail expressed, “Of course, I have tried (to lose weight), after I gained all that weight freshman year. After freshman year, I decided to be more active, and lost weight. But I’m not really trying to change my weight now, just be healthy”. Allegra described her changing emphasis on body weight, “I’ve tried to change my weight several times in the past two years of college, but now this fall, not so much. I’m not trying to change my weight so much as I’m trying to change my body composition”.

Jean Valjean, described an experience in social setting on campus that would have increased awareness of his body size in the past, but he now is able to accept his weight and size.

”But as time has gone on, its just been – oh, he looks like that – I look like this; accepting my weight and size” (Jean Valjean).

As the student-participants progressed through their academic years they also became increasingly invested in their college experience, the student-participants expressed they were no longer actively trying to change their weight. “I’m starting to do new things. I want to live my college life to the fullest. So I’m still studying, but finding time to do other stuff also” (JC). The awareness of becoming an adult, and weight being less important, was described in several responses. “And another big factor is that people mature and weight doesn’t become nearly as important in college” (Jean Valjean).

“College taught me that it’s less about thin or overweight, but how you carry yourself and how you dress. You can be a larger person and still carry yourself in a beautiful manner” (Jane Smith). This statement by Jane Smith is supported by a response by another

student-participant in the discussion of the terms students have used in describing other students. “Portly, I think – well it doesn’t matter how big you are, as long as you carry yourself well. Well-dressed, well maintained, and carry themselves with dignity and confidence” (Jean Valjean). These responses described a change in how the students placed value or prescribed meaning to weight and appearance; meanings that indicate an awareness of becoming or being an adult, not just a college student. The student-participants may be accepting a broader view of weight and appearance.

Several student-participants desired to get the most out of college, not just in completing college, but also experiencing all that college life had to offer. The responses indicated that as students progress through their academic years, weight awareness peaks during spring semester of freshman year into sophomore year as students attempt to meet an ideal in physical appearance and weight, But the responses also indicated that student-participants made a choice to focus on living a college life, that coincided with a diminishing emphasis on weight and body size. Jean Valjean had earlier described his weight/size awareness when among other male students, who were larger in size, added that his awareness has slowly diminished, “But now, not really dissatisfied, so much as disappointed that that’s not how things worked out for me” (Jean Valjean). He also stated, “I’ve had a great college experience”.

JC made a decision to no longer be concerned with her weight or body, “I’ve been living my college life to the fullest. Getting the most out of it. I’m starting to do new things. I don’t want to regret not doing something. I’m trying to make the most of every moment I have in college.” She added, that although she does workout at the gym, “Its

not a priority. I think college should be for finding out what you want to do with your life.”

As the student-participants became more involved in their experiences during college, they describe becoming more comfortable with their weight and bodies. Allegra, had been concerned about her weight when first entering college, and desired to achieve the thin ideal, described her change in weight awareness.

“I feel strong now. I’m satisfied. I was heavier, and felt overweight, but I really wasn’t. I didn’t even gain the freshman 15. Today, though, I would describe my body as strong. I’m so much stronger now than before. So I feel strong. I’m more comfortable than I was” (Allegra).

But the responses indicated that as the students invest in college, weight becomes less important in being accepted by peers. Jane and GG believed that weight is “a bigger deal in high school than in college” (GG). College students are “thinking about college, not so much about weight” (GG). But the responses also indicated this weight awareness and peer acceptance may not diminish until after freshman year.

“But college is more diverse, so I don’t think weight is as important as it is in high school. We are growing up, and we are starting to realize that, there are bigger things. We’re focusing on our careers. We don’t have time to think about our weight” (Jane).

Not surprisingly, most of the student-participants reaching a state of weight acceptance, a decreased emphasis on meeting a physical appearance ideal and acknowledging a living weight, were seniors in college. These student-participants were

able to articulate clearly, without hesitation and less discomfort, and reflect back on their earlier years in college.

The student-participants describing weight acceptance, and actively making a decision to live college life to the fullest, by embracing a living weight, also were found to be further along in their psychosocial development according to Medalie's mini-life cycle (1981) and Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors (1993). The student-participants that were able to reflect back on their daily-life experiences were able to describe the various and complex meanings of weight during these experiences. Student-participants in this phase of weight acceptance provided responses indicating a transition into a more stable and integrated identity. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe this component of identity development as a time when college students are able to clarify their personal values, are able to resolve conflicts in various areas of their lives, as well as experiencing lower levels of concern for issues that are no longer considered important. Student-participants with a more stable and integrated identity were also better able to describe themselves and their experiences; the rich and deep descriptions may have been possible due to their level of overall development.

Summary of the Answers to Research Question One

The four major categories presented inform research question one, by describing how, and in what ways, perception of weight may influence identity development before and during college, and the meanings students prescribe to weight. The responses indicate weight is more than a number for college students and is used as measure of looking like a college student, being able to fit in with peer college students, feeling a sense of belonging and these then form the basis of how students experience their weight

perceptions through weight awareness. Before entering college and continuing during college the students described weight awareness and the desire to look like a college student, with weight being more than a number. The student-participants described weight conflicts between their efforts to look like a college student and being a college student participating in daily life college activities, adopting coping strategies to manage this conflict, with weight change attempts or concealing their bodies and weights.

The emerging grounded theory model of weight awareness among college students portrays the evolving process of weight awareness as it is experienced by college students in the college environment. Student-participants experienced weight concerns and conflicts with some students resolving the conflict between looking like a college student and being a college student with an active decision to participate in daily life college activities. As student-participants were able to consolidate their identity as college students and fully participate in college life, they also described being more accepting of their own weight. Weight Acceptance was described by those students no longer comparing themselves to a perceived ideal weight to look like a college student, becoming committed to overall well-being, and a living weight as they prepared for their future as adults. The student-participants may have been undergoing a process of consolidating their identities during the interview process as they reflected on their experiences, weight awareness during these experiences, and the realizing that weight was no longer a priority.

Identity development, as proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993) includes the development of a sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, as well as a clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyle, and sense of self in response to

feedback from valued others. The responses of the student-participants in this study describe each of these occurring as the students progressed through college, with specific situations acting as transitional events, either moving the student forward or even backward in varying phases of weight acceptance. These transitional events are discussed below, as these events involved the actual daily-lived experiences of the college students in the college environment, the interactions with various individuals and environments.

Research Question Two

The related themes that informed the major categories that answered the first research question also informed research question two, by describing the ways the student-participants' weight perceptions were integrated into their daily-life experiences within the informal and formal learning environments. These involved interactions between the student and specific elements of the environment, such as the desk in the classroom, as well as interactions between the student and other students, faculty, staff, or family in the college environment. These interactions, as described by the student-participants, acted as transitional events, in changing weight awareness and weight perceptions. The specific settings or environments of the interactions that acted as transitional events for moving the student through the phases of weight awareness, as depicted in Figure 4.1, provide the context for answering the second research question. The consideration of interactions in various settings uses a symbolic-interactionist approach. The social and structural locations of various interactions in classrooms other learning environments, and how the specific interactions were experienced, are described by the student-participants. Weight awareness was experienced during interactions with

others, with comparisons to other students' bodies, or during interactions involving weight –based conversation, including dieting, calories.

The student-participants described weight awareness as part of fitting in, being seen, feeling safe or comfortable in the classroom or library as well as in the dorms, fitness centers, and other campus areas during their daily-life experiences. These interactions acted as transitional events by either heightening, transitioning the student into weight concerns and conflicts, or diminishing weight awareness, transitioning the student into weight commitment, and as weight awareness continued to diminish, with less emphasis on weight perceptions and increased appreciation for overall self, the students described transitioning into weight acceptance.

Research Question Two, asked in what ways are weight perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within the a) informal and b) formal learning environments. The responses provided by the student participants described specific interactions within several environments on the college campus, as well as specific interactions with formal and informal contacts. The major categories identified in the data analysis informing research question two are: a) Interactions within formal learning environments, such as classrooms and library spaces; b) Interactions within informal learning environments, such as the dorms, fitness centers, and other campus spaces; and c) Negotiating space and relationships within each of these environments.

Interactions within formal learning environments. Formal learning environments play a role in how students experience being in college, and being a college student as well as a sense of belonging and fitting-in as a college student. Social

interactions can shape the identity development of students in various learning environments, such as classrooms, libraries, and areas where students are involved in learning activities. The student-participants participated in various student organizations on campus and often in an effort to belong, to be a college student. Melissa joined a sorority, and overall enjoyed the experience, but the activity of rushing increased her weight awareness, “being with all these other girls, and comparing bodies”. Steffie described her struggles with trying to fit in at college, and joining the women’s student association, “made me feel like I belong here.” The experiences in formal learning environments that influenced weight awareness and what it means to be a college student are supported by the experiences of students in other areas of the college campus that are considered informal learning environments and include dorms, open campus areas, and the overall campus as it is experienced while among peers. Two student-participants described observing other larger students interact with specific structural elements of formal learning environments. George Cooper described an experience, observing a larger female student negotiate the space of the classroom, which made him consider his own negotiating the space of the desk in the classroom and is supported by Dee’s observation of a female student negotiating a space in the library and Dee described a similar experience, observing a female student negotiating with a study space in the library, and expressing her own concern in how she manages this space.

I saw this student in the library the other day and she was trying to use one of the study desks. I think it was on the third floor, and they’re pretty small – even for me. But she – um – struggled to get in, and then once she sat down, she just looked uncomfortable. I felt bad for her. I was sitting at one of the tables, and I

wondered why she was trying to sit in there. But maybe so – I guess – so no-one would see her. And I mean, I know how hard it is to sit in those little stalls. I have trouble (Dee).

The responses describe that as the students moved through various college environments, they were not only interacting with the environment, the structural elements of the environment such as a desk, but also interacting with individuals in these environments. These interactions, as described by the student-participants, influenced their self-concept.

Interactions within informal learning environments. Learning and development occurs not only in formal environments such as classrooms but also occurs within informal environments such as residence halls, and other public areas on campus. Male and female students-participants described experiences of body comparisons occurring in residence halls, other campus areas and fitness centers. The student-participants described experiences in these informal learning environments and their need to be accepted by their peers, acknowledging that they were aware of being seen and judged on their physical appearance.

Steffie attempted to use a specific item of clothing to hide her body as she became increasingly aware of her weight. She described her experience in a campus-based dance company, her weight didn't matter at first, but when other dancers joined, "they were better" and "most were thin" she became increasingly aware of her weight. She continued to experience awareness, "and then that discomfort with my body continued even outside the dance group". In her efforts to cope with this discomfort, she began wearing green sweat pants, "I would try to hide in my green sweat pants". The wearing of the green

sweat pants demonstrates one strategy Steffie used to negotiate relationships with the other dancers, and became known among the older dancers as the “girl wearing the green sweat pants”. This also describes her efforts to negotiate the space of being in the dance company, “I enjoyed dancing, but I was really self-conscious in front of the mirrors, seeing the other thinner dancers with me”. She eventually stopped participating in the dance company.

The residence halls and campus fitness centers were the two most common informal learning environments described by students when describing weight awareness, weight concerns and conflicts with the span between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight. The residence halls and rooms are common environments or spaces where weight awareness is experienced. Usually this weight awareness is experienced as an interaction not only with the environment of the residence hall space, but an interaction with roommates as well. Student-participants living in dorm rooms described becoming aware of their weight or size moving into their residence halls the first day of freshman year. Meeting roommates in the residence halls increased weight awareness for several of the students in this study. George Cooper noted that he was aware of being the “heaviest one in my dorm room,” in comparing his body/weight to the other male students in his room. Another male student-participant, Rick Ross, described a similar situation, but instead of realizing he is bigger, he became more aware of not being big, “Meeting my roommate, the first day, he’s a big dude. Seeing him inspired me to get big. I hadn’t really thought about getting bigger before” (Rick Ross). Steffie described the interaction with her new roommate, who was counting calories, “but I hadn’t really thought of counting calories before or even thought about the relationship between

calories and weight”. Allegra, a senior, described an experience with her past roommate which made her aware of her weight and her roommates attempts to meet an ideal in weight and physical appearance.

“Those that have influenced me in college about weight concerns, my old roommate. She would put pictures of Victoria’s Secret models on the fridge as motivation. *Don’t open this door if you want to look like these women*” (Allegra).

Jane Smith also had a friend during freshman year and described a specific interaction with this female student that heightened her weight awareness, but also increased her awareness of the impact of this on her other friends.

“One of my friends was on Weight Watchers, freshman year, and another friend got tofu. The one who had started Weight Watchers criticized her food. She thought it was a wonderful thing doing Weight Watchers; she wanted everyone else to know it. I clearly remember my friend being so upset, she thought she’d made a good choice in eating tofu and brocolli, and then the other friend criticizing her” (Jane Smith).

The campus fitness center was mentioned by all of the student-participants, with some describing their routines of going to the fitness center to work-out, lift weights, play basketball, or attend fitness classes. Other students described a desire to use the fitness center but found the environment too intimidating, too competitive and discomforting, and so participate in other physical activities on campus. Jane played flag football, and did not go to the gym because “I feel like I don’t belong there, and I don’t want someone to wonder why I’m there if I don’t look in shape”. Gail only used the campus fitness center for swimming, and now also runs using the treadmills, but added, “I go to the

treadmills that are away from all the others. I hate being in that line of treadmills. I just can't be there." George Cooper though says, "It doesn't bother me. Though I know its hard for some overweight students, that would like to go to the gym, but don't want to be seen at the gym". JC, as a female junior, did not use the campus fitness center during her first two years in college, but now she lifts weights instead of focusing on weight loss activities, like many of her female peers. Both Steffie and Fred described using the fitness centers at their previous colleges, before transferring, as being overwhelming with all the other students. Steffie changed her workout times to the early mornings by her sophomore year, "so I wouldn't be there when most of the other students were" in her efforts to avoid "everyone comparing themselves". When Steffie and Fred transferred to the private university in this study, both had adopted different activity routines. Fred played basketball with his friends, but doesn't go alone to "the pit" since "its too crowded and crazy". Steffie avoids the fitness center saying, "it makes me uncomfortable" and instead uses the small fitness center in her apartment building.

The researcher chose to specifically observe students in the campus environment based on the observations of these student-participants. At both the public and private institutions, the researcher observed the majority of students were average sized. The number of very thin female students was about the same at each campus, as was the number of slightly above average weight students, male and female. But far fewer large, obese students were observed at the public institution than at the private institution. The larger obese students at each institution were more likely to be African American females and Asian males. The researcher's observations confirmed Dee's statement; European-American females who were obese were typically alone, walking or seated in common

areas, food courts and library-study areas. In contrast to obese female African American students who were typically within a group of other African American students of various sizes/weights. The researcher did not see obese Asian females, only overweight Asian females, and they were observed to be within a group of other Asian females, again of various sizes. Overweight European American females were sometimes alone, and otherwise with other female students of similar size to average size. But thin European American females were typically observed within a group of female students of similar thinness. Male students, regardless of size/weight, on the other hand were observed with other male students of various sizes/weights. As the researcher observed students in various areas of each campus: food courts, cafeterias, common areas, it must be noted; the small number of obese students observed in these areas may be due to these students simply avoiding these campus environments. As expressed by some of the student-participants, “it can feel like a fishbowl” (Dee). Everyone is moving through the same confined space, “the students become familiar with each other, by sight, fairly quickly and anyone new on campus is readily noticed” (Gail).

The responses also described efforts to cope with the span between ideal and real weight with specific strategies to manage weight or the size of their “body” in a specific space or environment. The responses indicated that most female student-participants experienced unintentional weight changes (weight gain) during freshman and sophomore year, and these students responded by adopting specific weight change attempts. These weight change attempts were often described in the context of striving to meet the perceived ideal of being a college girl. Fred, Jean Valjean, and Rick Ross described

desires and attempts to change weight to be “big”, and compared their weights and bodies to other male students in dorm-rooms and social settings.

Negotiating space and relationships within formal and informal learning environments. As student-participants described their weight concerns and conflicts with the disconnect between the perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, they also described specific experiences during interactions requiring them to negotiate specific spaces and relationships. George Cooper described his experience the first day in college, meeting his roommates, knowing he was “the heaviest one in my dorm room”. But he added that meeting his room-mates was a “great experience, we were all from different backgrounds, and different experiences”. Other students described more complex interactions with negotiating relationships, Steffie and Darcy both described negotiating relationships with roommates who emphasized weight and thinness, “My roommate was counting calories, which made me aware of calories, and maybe I should too” (Steffie). Gail described avoiding a certain roommate that increased her weight awareness “one of my roommates this year is on weight watchers, and she’s not even fat, she’s not even as big as me”. The responses described how students negotiated relationships and space in various activities in college, within informal and formal learning environments.

George Cooper described his experience while observing another student, a large female, try to navigate through the classroom space and was forced to sit on the stairs in the lecture hall.

So those seats are like as close as possible so they can squeeze in as many students as possible. Like I’m sitting there and people walk by, and I’m contorting myself to move through the seats. And I remember one, very awkward situation. I

remember it was a Thursday or Tuesday, one overweight girl walked in. She was a little overweight, she had thick legs, she could not have passed through the seats very easily. And so I think every seat in the classroom, except for maybe 4 on the end of the back row were filled. She walked in, looked around, nothing was open and she sat on the middle stairs. I was sitting in the next to last row in the end seat. The girl behind me goes – to her – you know you can go through. She said – no I can't fit through. So she sat on the middle stairs for the next hour and a half. And that made me notice my own weight.

George Cooper stated that he worried about having a similar experience, but his strategy is to arrive at the classroom early, and be able to sit before most students arrive for class. He also stated that had he been in that row of seats, he would have moved for her, “it would have been so simple” to move and allow the student to sit in a seat. He was very aware that this situation may have made the female student feel uncomfortable, as well as unsafe. George Cooper explained that he had adopted the strategy of “arriving early to avoid feeling uncomfortable, as well as avoid being seen trying to fit into the seat”.

Rachel earlier described her interactions with a coach/trainer when she decided to be a runner, and provided insight into how a self-identified obese student might cope with weight awareness and specifically negotiating relationships. Rachel, also described her daily life experiences going to the campus fitness center regularly, and how these experiences changed as she became more committed to her own weight, and committed to being a college student.

“I've been working out regular since spring of freshman year. During sophomore year I was still going to the gym and trying to look like some other girl. And in

junior year, I went to the gym and it switched that I thought of myself as a role model. I thought people might want to look like me. I realized I don't need to look like the other girls there. That was a huge change over for me" (Rachel).

Face-to-face interactions within formal and informal learning environments, as well as interactions with the environments had some influence on the student-participants sense of self as a student and an individual. Students described various experiences involving social comparisons with other students that often increased weight awareness, with students describing experiencing weight concerns, conflicts regarding their weight or bodies not being the same weights or looking like the other students' bodies. But several student-participants were able to resolve these conflicts, becoming less concerned and described being more committed to their weight even in the midst of an interaction involving social comparison. As the student participants described their interactions in formal and informal learning environments in college, they also described the varying degrees of weight awareness experienced during each and these varying degrees as phases that may play a role in identity development.

Summary of the Answers to Research Question Two

Interactions within the college environment, with individuals or elements of the specific environment itself influenced how weight was experienced by the student-participants. Interactions within formal learning environments typically involved elements of the environment such as the desk as well as being seen by other students. Interactions within informal environments usually involved comparisons of weight and body to those of other students. In an effort to fit in or reduce any attention that might be paid to weight or body size, the student-participants described negotiating space and

relationship. These interactions contributed to how weight was experienced by the college students in the college environment. Some of these interactions acted as transitional events changing how the student experienced weight awareness. Some of these events increased weight awareness, with students describing weight concerns and conflicts, and yet other events decreased weight awareness with students becoming more committed to their weight and choosing to participate in college life more fully regardless of weight.

Weight Awareness in College

Several student-participants provided detailed descriptions of their weight awareness during college allowing the process of transitioning through specific phases that emerged during the interviews and became further developed during the data analysis. The narratives of Jane, George Cooper, and Rachel are presented here as they describe their experiences as well as their development during college. The narratives of these student-participants describe not only their weight awareness during interactions within various environments in college, but also how they experienced weight awareness as college students. Using the model for the emerging grounded theory (Figure 4.1) it is possible to visualize the evolving process these student-participants experienced in the college environment, from having weight concerns and conflicts, to becoming more committed to their own weight and integrating or consolidating their identity as college students, and then to adopting weight acceptance as other areas of their lives became more involved in other areas of their lives in college. The experiences of Jane, George Cooper, and Rachel provide the details in understanding the potential applicability of this grounded theory model in understanding weight awareness among college students.

Jane, was a sophomore at the public institution and described herself as average, but had weight concerns and experienced conflicts with meeting a weight ideal to look like a college student. George Cooper, a sophomore at the private institution, self-described as obese, knowing his BMI, but was not trying to meet an ideal weight. Rachel was a senior at the private institution, described herself as obese, but also athletic, and provided the most detailed and in-depth descriptions of her experiences and weight awareness, which are supported by the responses of the other student-participants.

Jane

Jane was a sophomore at the public institution at the time she was interviewed, October 21, 2010. She seemed eager to participate in the study and commented before the interview began that weight definitely matters in college, but that it probably shouldn't matter, "at least not as much as we think it does". She described being very homesick, especially her first day coming to college as a freshman, but that she was here with her sister, so that made it easier. "I didn't think I was going to miss home as much as I did. It's just different being here, even if we're together." She was aware of her weight before entering college and lost weight before entering freshman year, "I was excited to have lost weight". She stated that she was aware of her weight during some of her first day experiences, in meeting other students, and comparing her weight and body to other students' weights and bodies. "I have an average body. Some days I feel better about my weight than others," and described her body as "generally thick' thick and proportioned". She described the ideal for female college students to be "average, not too skinny" and for male college students, "muscular, but not too buff," and added that "students do talk about other students and its usually only to say something about how fat they are. They

don't say anything really about the girls that are thin; usually just talk about other fat students".

Jane's responses indicate that she was aware of the span between a perceived ideal weight and a perceived real weight for looking like a college student, or what she thought she should look like as a college student, and weight represents what it meant for her to be able to go to college. Jane described being disappointed when she gained weight the first semester of freshman year, "It made me feel bad, disappointed in myself. I couldn't believe I'd gained that much weight." She described two experiences that contributed to increased awareness of her weight during the fall of freshman year. The first being when she went to the gym, and stepped on the scale, "I was shocked, and glad no one else was around to see". The second experience she described, like several other student-participants of this study, also became increasingly aware of her weight when family came to visit the campus. Her father asked, "Do you think you gained weight? And I knew he was saying – that I had gained weight, and that's his way of saying something without really saying it. That doesn't help at all."

Another, more recent, experience Jane described involved the comparing of her weight and body to another female student's weight and body. "Well, yesterday, for example, I saw this girl running, here on campus, and she was just wearing shorts and a sports bra. And I thought – oh, I can't do that. I'd like to, but I know I wouldn't look like her running. It just made me feel bad that I knew I couldn't do that and not feel embarrassed. Sometimes you see people on campus that make you feel bad about yourself, because you don't look like them." Jane's responses described her being concerned about her weight, experiencing weight conflicts with her weight in comparison

to an ideal or to other students, and as a result then attempted to manage her weight and body by adopting specific coping strategies.

“I was thinking I needed to do something”. Jane described her coping strategies to manage her weight concerns as attempting to change her weight, “I felt like I needed to lose the weight, it upset me, and so I wanted to change my diet, be more active”. She has made several attempts to change her weight, and tried an on-line diet, “but it was hard to follow”, and “I felt like when I was on the diet, I was more hungry, and would eat more, and I would overeat sometimes. So it didn’t work out well.” She has lost weight and then regained weight, adding that it is difficult in college, “I think a lot of students are worried about gaining weight, there’s so much to eat, so many choices for food, and for most of us, especially at first you don’t have the self-control yet. So you overindulge and then feel guilty”. Jane and her sister are roommates again this year, and “we talk about losing weight, since we both gained weight. We want to lose weight.” She and her sister have made plans to “get up to exercise and eat healthy. But its just to difficult with our class schedules and studying.” She added that “we talk about weight, and its usually bad, we never say anything good”.

Jane’s responses describe a fluctuating between being very concerned about her weight, and needing to lose weight to look like a perceived ideal weight, and then periods of being more satisfied with her weight, and being more invested in being in college. She described her motivations to lose weight as, “I just wanted to lose weight, because I was slimmer than this in high school. I look at old pictures from high school. I would see my old clothes and I can’t wear them, like my favorite skirt.” But then also acknowledges

that her weight is not as important as she once thought, “So just – well now – its more so to feel better about myself – but I don’t feel too bad if I don’t lose weight.”

As Jane is in her sophomore year she described experiences that may be bringing her into weight commitment, “I’m sort of trying to change my weight, but its not really something I’m trying hard at. I’m always studying, so its hard. I don’t really go to the gym. I play flag football instead, its fun and I get exercise at the same time. I just do more activities than last year.” During the interview, as Jane reflected back on her weight awareness as a freshman she commented, “I think when you’re a freshman that’s when, since you’re still worried about weight, that most of the teasing and criticizing about weight is then. But after freshman year, weight becomes less important, and other things become more important.”

As Jane became increasingly aware of her identity as a college student, she also became more active on campus as a sophomore as compared to her activities freshman year, and no longer lets her weight awareness stop her from participating in these activities, “I’d still do these activities. My weight wouldn’t stop me, I might be more embarrassed being heavier. But I’d still participate, if its fun.” She may be in the process of further identity development in being a college student and participating in college life, “We are growing up, and we are starting to realize that, there are bigger things. We’re focusing on our careers. We don’t have time to think about weight.”

Jane acknowledged that weight does matter to college students, but that it changes as other college activities take priority. She is aware of this gradual transition from being concerned about weight to being more accepting of weight, weight is important in college, and it is important to college students, but admits that the weight awareness,

concerns and conflicts students experience may change while in college. “Like when you first get to college, you are thinking about your weight, and comparing body and size to the other students, girls, but then you don’t get time to think about it too much because you’re so busy going to classes, studying and stuff.” Jane compared her present state of weight awareness to her high school experience and the importance of trying to fit in. “In high school, weight was more important. In high school we are trying to fit in to a social group and we’re trying to fit into a group here too. But we’re more mature and we can find a group we fit into. It doesn’t matter we’re just trying to focus on our work and future. Its not that big of a deal.”

George Cooper

George Cooper was a sophomore at the private institution at the time he was interviewed, October 7, 2010. He described himself as obese according to the BMI, “I did the BMI and I’m 31. I knew what to expect. I’ve known for a long time. I’m definitely on the bad side”. He has been aware of his weight before coming to college, “I always saw myself, still see myself as having to lose weight, so my perception of my weight hasn’t really changed much. When asked about his first day in college he also described how his weight awareness in college began that first day, “In the beginning I was aware of my weight.” He, like several other students described their first day in college with meeting roommates as a central theme, as an interaction with dorm-mates and within the dorm that heightened weight awareness involving comparisons of weights and bodies. “I’m the heaviest one in my room, and I was aware of that the first day”. His weight awareness began to diminish as time passed, “but then it sort of just wore away, and I’m not so aware now,” with very little time or effort invested in weight concerns or conflicts, and

became committed to his weight to be healthier and participate in college activities. In comparison to the weight awareness he described in meeting his roommate, he also described his weight awareness diminishing when in the main campus, “But on the street everyone was intermixed, I didn’t feel like I was different. I could hardly tell sometimes”. He described a perceived ideal weight for other male students in comparison to his own, “Males, I think, well everyone talks about the V-shape. I’m not as into that image, not really thinking that’s the ideal”.

George attempted to change his weight before entering college, “In high school, I would try to lose weight, and its still the same now. Its hard just to get started.” He acknowledged that prior to college although he had attempted to lose weight in high school, he really didn’t know how to “go about doing it”. He entered college “bracing for the 15 lbs I heard freshman always gain.” He unintentionally lost weight after entering college, “I went home like two months into the semester, and since I lost the weight so gradually, I didn’t really notice. I never weighed myself here, but when I got home, I realized that I had lost weight, a lot, 20lbs. He attributed this unintentional weight loss to the change in behaviors and access to certain foods in college that differed from his home life, “I at almost half my meals at the food court, and I’m a vegetarian, so I’m eating pretty much only salads there.” He also “stopped drinking coke. At home I drank a lot of coke”. He also described that his physical activity level was more in college, “At home, I have a car and I drive everywhere. Here, I’m walking everywhere, non-stop”. But George was still concerned with his weight during these first weeks of freshman year, since he was unaware of his weight loss.

George Cooper was not only aware of his own weight, but described his own coping strategies in negotiating a classroom space as well as empathy for other students who may be overweight or have weight concerns. He described one classroom experience that first highlights awareness of his own weight and his negotiating a formal learning environment, “in one classroom, the seats are like as close as possible so they can squeeze as many students in as possible. Like I’m sitting there and people walk by, and I’m contorting myself to move through the seats”, and then describes his observations of another large student trying to fit-in to the classroom space. He described a classroom experience where he arrives early,

I remember one very awkward experience. The other kids walk in late, and they’ll grab the seats by the door, the aisles, you know, the front seats. I remember it was Thursday or last Tuesday, one overweight girl walked in. She was a little overweight, she had thick legs, she could not have passed through the seats very easily. And so I think every seat in the classroom, except for maybe 4 on the end of the back row were filled. She walked in, looked around, nothing was open and she sat on the middle stairs. I was sitting in the next to last row in the end seat. The girl behind me goes – to her – you know you can go through. She said – no, I can’t fit through. So she sat on the middle stairs for the next hour and a half. And that made me notice my own weight.

George added that he “happens to be early for that class all the time so I can have a seat”. He reflected on his decision to do so as, “I think subconsciously, there’s a fear of that happening to me, and so I get to class as early as possible. It’s just awkward to move past 10 students in their seats. If you’re there early, you can get settled into a seat without

anyone watching you. The classes that I go late to I don't worry about, because they have tables and chairs, so its very open, very easy to get into the classroom and sit in a seat".

Once he realized he had lost weight "without trying" he decided to continue his new behaviors and enjoy being in college, and became committed to a healthy weight, "Health is the biggest concern about my weight. The meaning of weight for George is less about looking cool, "I know for me, its being active, being able to go 5 miles to go see the monuments. I can do it, but I know students who cannot". His commitment to his weight and health is further highlighted as he reflected back to his childhood, "I remember being a little kid and (Dad) dropped his keys, and he asked me to pick them up for him. At the time I just thought, I'm little so they're closer for me. But now when I think back I think it was more about his not being able to get them. And so now he's in the basement jogging on the treadmill. Before he used to come home and lay on the couch".

George has further invested in his commitment to weight by participating in activities he would not have participated in as a freshman when he was experiencing heightened weight awareness and weight concerns. He made a decision to be healthy and participate in activities other "thinner" students may not for fear of "being seen" and judged. "I use the gym. This year my dorm is one block away from the gym, so that's part of my plan. So I go to the gym three times a week. My overall experience at the gym is good. My weight concerns aren't enough to keep me out of the gym. I go to the gym anyway. It doesn't bother me. Though I know its hard for some overweight students, that would like to go to the gym, but don't want to be seen at the gym". George's comment that his overall experience in the gym is good, differs from most of the other student's

descriptions of their gym experiences, which were mostly negative, describing the experience as uncomfortable, feelings of not fitting-in, heightened weight awareness and weight concerns, and the other students described avoiding the gym. “My roommate was saying, well we should go to they gym later, when there are less people around so we can lift less weight, not be pressured by the guys lifting the heavy weights. It made me laugh, I just want to workout. He doesn’t like to be seen lifting less weight next to the guys lifting really heavy.”

George may have been just beginning to further consolidate his identity, not just as a college student, but preparing himself for the future, “I want to be a doctor, and I know the adverse effects of weight on health. I know there are other factors, not just the activity or weight but being able to be more active is better, for a longer life. You don’t want a doctor who’s unhealthy, so I need to be healthy”. After the initial unintentional weight loss he experienced during the fall of freshman year, he did regain some weight during breaks at home. “But then I’ll regain some weight, and tell myself I need to slow it down, slow it down.” His responses indicate that he is focusing on his health more than his weight, “Not like I’m going on a diet just to lose weight; I just life a different lifestyle now; I take the stairs more often; I walk more; I find myself finding reasons to be more active now.”

Rachel

Rachel, was 21 and a senior attending the private institution, at the time of the interview, February 2011. She stated on the biographical sketch before the interview, that what she liked least about the college, “I don’t feel like I fit in with most of the student body” although she stated that she likes “living in the city and exploring different areas”

the best about attending this college. Rachel described herself as obese, “according to the BMI” but added that she is also athletic, and considers herself fit. She described that most female college students look to celebrities “to see what we should look like, the really thin celebrities especially, but that male college students would “probably want a 6-pack and large muscles”. But she added that she now prefers a more voluptuous body shape for herself, “the right amount of curvy.” She believed that weight matters in college because it’s about “popularity, absolutely popularity. I think that being the perfect weight, guys will like you, you’ll make more friends; it’ll be easier for you when you walk into a room. When you walk into a classroom people will look at you, in a good way. Being thin you get noticed in a positive way, not in a negative.”

Rachel was most aware of her weight before entering college and provided details for two specific experiences, where she experienced rejection, “attributed to my weight”.

I was rejected as a camp counselor. They said that I didn’t have the right personality they were looking for, for the campers. Which is pretty laughable, since I’d been going to that same camp since I was 7. When I was 16, I wanted to be counselor there and they said I didn’t know enough about camp. I thought it had to be my size, because I was bigger than what they thought a counselor should be.

She added that, even though she was rejected, “the rejection made me stronger” and “even if that (my weight) wasn’t the reason.” She may have believed weight was the reason for the rejection since she had just been rejected from her skating team because of her size/ weight.

I was rejected from my ice-skating team, that I had been working on since I was 6. It was all I ever wanted, I was loyal to the team. I was very close with the coach, and the assistant coach. I knew them both really well, and they told me I had plateaued as a skater and they basically didn't want to be there for my decline. I felt that it was because I was one of the larger girls on the team. That's inevitable when you're an athletic ice skater. I had big thighs. I was probably the biggest girl in that group. So I accepted that especially for this group. But then, (after being rejected) I went to another skating team, a random array of girls, totally different sizes. And I went on to skate; I kept skating. I was fine. And I think that helped me accept myself a little more.

These descriptions of her weight awareness both occurred during her high school years, requiring her to develop resilience in overcoming future rejections that may be weight related.

I was a junior in high school, a very important time in my life. So it all started when I was 15-16 years old. Both happened the same year. That was a lot to handle. Two of the most important things in my life, ice-skating and camp, and being rejected from both; double rejection. It was pretty horrible. So I feel like whatever happened to me before college was more so a past life, and I've become more accepting of myself, my weight. With two hard blows to you personally, emotionally, you grow from that.

Rachel's account of these experiences is further detailed in her reflections with her ice-skating team, describing a photograph of the team.

We look all the same from zoomed out. But zoom in just a little and you can tell the width difference between my hips and the girls next to me. That was so hard to see and say I see how much bigger my legs and hips are than the rest of them next to me. That was terrifying, because we're not supposed to be that different. We are supposed to be synchronized; we're supposed to be exactly the same. I was the power house of the team, they needed my strength, but still I was different. I didn't look like everyone else, and that sticks with you.

Rachel, like George Cooper, described her weight awareness while negotiating the desk in the formal learning environment of the classroom, after describing being aware of the space around her in the ice-skating team photo, she added, "I think of the desk here, the classroom situation. The desk bothers me." She compared being in the desk space to how she feels when she is running, "I don't think I'm aware of the space around me when I'm running, but the desk, is too small.

Rachel had made several attempts in the past to change her weight, "I've tried in the past. I'm not really trying right now." Most of her weight change attempts occurred before entering college, "In high school, so I was always trying to lose weight then. Always, always, always' obsessed with numbers, and I think that had to do with the ice-skating also, the other girls on my team were 80lbs wet. But I don't think they thought I was that different. But my sizes were different. Everything else, physically was different." Her weight concerns revolved on these body comparisons to the other skaters on the team, as well as high school classmates, and celebrity images.

During college she was most concerned with her weight during freshman year, "I was most concerned, at like a 10, my freshman year, 10 out of 10. Totally concerned and

thought that everyone was staring at my body. Rachel's weight concerns were a result of the comparisons she made to the weights of other female students, "I thought I was so fat, especially in comparison to some of my friends at the time." When she first arrived in college she admitted she was still very concerned with her weight, followed by several attempts to change her weight. "I wasn't very healthy. I didn't go to the gym at all."

During her sophomore year she started to go to the gym, but her motivations were to "look like the other girls". She would compare her body to the other females, "I want to look like her". She, like the other student-participants in this study acknowledged that students are comparing themselves during college, "You can't help it comparing your body to others."

She admitted that she didn't go to the gym or participate in campus activities at first during freshman year because she felt uncomfortable and was acutely aware that her weight and appearance might be judged. "I always say that I'm confident, but I guess not, that I wasn't so much during freshman year, and still sophomore year."

A specific experience Rachel provided with an interaction with a faculty member, increased her weight awareness at the time, and reflecting back on it she realized that if she were the faculty she would have managed the situation differently.

I set up a meeting with one of my professors and we had this conversation. I remember I said I wished I had a body like hers. I was desperate for anything to do, to come to terms with my body. And she said I could have a body like hers and she set up a workout routine for me. And now I think back, I'll never look like her, like that really isn't right. No matter how hard I try I'm never going to look like her. Our genetics are different. I just think her saying that was a little

detrimental in any attempts. It would have been better if she said *No you should want to look like you*. That's what I would have said if someone said that to me.

This interaction and her ability to reflect on it may have provided an opportunity for Rachel to re-evaluate her weight concerns and conflicts, and weight awareness and slowly disentangle her meaning of weight from meeting an ideal weight for what she should have as a college student.

Rachel experienced a transition in her weight awareness when she decided to participate in a campus activity during her sophomore year, “ After I joined TRAILS and became so accepted by the group, it changed.” In this new group of students she found a role model in someone with a very different body and weight as her own body and weight.

I found a role model in college; this girl, who was a junior, when I was a sophomore, and she was just my role model. She was like 5'10", blonde-blonde, and fun, fun, but no chest really and yet still had hips, but no breasts and she seemed so sure of herself. I just loved her. I thought she was awesome. I recognized that it was more important to have a role model, who didn't necessarily have the body type I wanted.

After this experience being in TRAILS and having a role model of a very different body size and weight, Rachel described another transition for herself in becoming a role model herself, “then in junior year, I went to the gym and it switched for me.” She realized that not only did she not have to compare herself to a perceived ideal but also that she might be a role model for other female students, “I thought of myself as

a role model. I thought people might want to look like me. That was a huge change over for me.”

As she reflected back on her experiences of comparing bodies and her perspective now, “Going to spin class I would see others and compare bodies and weights. But now I realize our bodies look very similar. What’s the difference between our bodies really? There’s not much difference, maybe you’re a little smaller, but its really not that big of a difference.”

She admits that she’s still self-conscious at times, “I feel like people are staring at me, a lot.” Her coping strategy is to ignore it. “I try to ignore it. I’ve become significantly less concerned. I have so many other things to worry about.”

Rachel described a specific interaction that occurred in college with a staff member, a coach for a running group for students.

I had never run before in my life. I was not a runner. I was an ice-skater, we never had to run more than a mile at any point in time. So I decided to be a runner. I want to run a 10K. I’m going to do this. I show up, and he (the coach) goes, *I don’t know if you’re going to make it. You don’t have a runner’s body.* He says, *you’re not built like a runner.* I was shocked. I said, oh don’t worry I’ll be fine. I can take care of myself. I ran with the fast group. I pushed myself harder than I’d ever pushed myself. I ran every day. I trained so hard for this. I finished that 10K in under 50 minutes. I just died of happiness. And he (the coach) hugged me at the end. He said, *Sorry I ever doubted you.* And I go, That’s right. My very good friend was doing it with me, and she’d never run before either. But she has a different body, she’s skinny. She’s a tennis player. And he (the coach) said to her,

oh you must run all the time, you look like such a great runner. I was aware of my weight during this whole experience. Everyone else in the group was very thin. I recognized that everyone was looking at me as the heavier girl in the group that was running with them. And I'm sure I pushed myself too hard sometimes. And even some of the people in the fast group would be like lets slow the pace down. We're going too fast. Like it was too fast for them, but I wouldn't give up. I would never complain. I was so aware of the fact that if I complained – then I was the fat girl who couldn't make it. I knew since I was the fat girl that I couldn't complain. It would be expected that I would be the fat girl who couldn't do this. I had the least reason to quit. I couldn't be the fat girl that quit. I was definitely the heaviest runner in the group. I had to prove him (the coach) wrong. I don't care if I don't have a runner's body, I can still run. I want to run, I want to be a runner.

Rachel's use of the phrase *fat girl* when recounting this experience depicts her weight awareness in this specific interaction with the coach and the other runners in the group. But she is able to successfully negotiate these relationships, and continued to participate in the running group, knowing that the others might be judging her. These interactions occurring in the informal learning environment of the college campus, were challenges to identity, but she further consolidates her identity in being a college student by participating in this college life activity with her decision "to be a runner".

Rachel described not only being committed to her body and weight, and being a college student, she also provided details about her present state of weight awareness, and accepting her weight and body, "I know that my body is something that is stable, that I have to take care of it, that I love it, I feed it, I nourish it." She described her weight as a

living weight, that doesn't need to be an ideal weight, "I've become so comfortable with my weight, and comfortable with my body."

She described an experience that also seemed to act as a catalyst for transition into weight acceptance when she participated in study abroad in Italy, during her junior year in college. "I didn't even try to lose weight in Italy. I just threw caution to the wind. I ate whatever I wanted. I wanted to get as much out of Italy as I could." When she returned she no longer placed as much importance on weight, "I'm over it. I don't need to look like that, anymore." She made a decision to further "get out there" and do things she wants to do, while in college and after college.

As she reflected back on her college experiences overall she stated, "I really think that I can look back and say that I didn't miss out on anything." She was able to make decisions to fully participate in college life, to live college life to the fullest, "I did everything I want to do."

Rachel also realized that as she has progressed through college, she matured, "I grew a lot" and with her maturity, while she prepares for the future, she was better able to reflect on her experiences and articulate these experiences with detail.

In her reflections back to freshman year she described why weight is so important when first coming to college and meeting roommates, "When you first meet someone you make a judgment about them" and this judgment is based on physical appearance and what someone might weigh. But this changes as time passes, "and then the more you are around them you realize what you first thought wasn't really correct." She also provided an explanation for the difficulties in talking about weight, "You're talking about your weight and weighing yourself; and so you're talking about your body and then they'll

look at your body. And it's a direct line for them to look at your body. Its overwhelming to do that. Its easier to just not talk about it; to not bring any extra attention to my body.”

Rachel also demonstrated empathy for other students, who may have weight concerns, “I'm very supportive of others and their body concerns” and she does not tolerate negative body or fat talk from her friends, “they know not to do that around me”. She understands that being at a large university “like this” it may be difficult to be seen on campus.

There's probably, really only a handful of severely obese students; being one of those kids must be horrifying to be here; Its difficult enough. You don't start recognizing students on campus usually, unless you've been in a class with them. But there are people I recognize on this campus that I have never had a class with, and its because of, I hate to say, their weight and size. I feel terrible that there are things you recognize about people, certain attributes, and my heart goes out to these people when I seem them.”

Another experience Rachel described her empathy for a very thin student while she worked at the tutoring center, helping students develop writing skills.

She was painfully skinny, and she walks in and my first thought is – OMG, you are so thin, you are so skinny. But my experience tells me, don't say anything. You don't stare at people, and that's not what I'm here for. I'm there to tutor her, not give her any other advice. I'm sure she gets it enough. That's not my job. So she sits there, she brought coffee, and she holds up this Dunkin Donuts bag and says, I brought you a muffin. I say, You brought e a muffin? She says, yea, I have my coffee and I didn't want to be rude, so I brought you a muffin. I was like,

Thank you, thank you so much. But I wanted to say, Do you have a muffin? Do you want it? I mean, I didn't say anything about it. I put it off to the side. So we got down to studying, and she ends up being one of the sweetest girls and she is so smart. By the end of the session, I no longer thought of her as being so skinny. I no longer thought that it was weird how thin she was, and I also thought, its entirely possible that she looks at me and thinks, Wow look at this girl, she has mass to her. Maybe she likes the size of my body.

She admitted that her thoughts, feelings and reactions to this interaction and the empathy for larger students she recognized on campus have “a lot to do with my experiences”. Rachel is able to empathize with other students who may be overweight or underweight or have weight concerns and perhaps because she has progressed in her psychosocial development she is better able to make sense of her experiences.

In her descriptions of weight awareness and being able to manage her weight concerns and conflicts, and be committed to her weight she was able to achieve weight acceptance, and added as one last comment, “I've decided to not to live between meals, but to eat between my life.” “Don't live between meals, I have done that. It sucks. It is not where I want to be.” Rachel has decided to live college life to the fullest.

Summary of Results

The data analysis results presented in this chapter address the two major research questions and the sub-questions: How and in what ways, does perception of weight influence identity development among college students, before and during college? In what ways do students prescribe meaning to weight? And In what ways are weight

perceptions integrated into college students' descriptions of their daily-life experiences within the informal and formal learning environments in college?

The model for the emerging grounded theory is based on the four major categories emerged in the data analysis: 1) weight awareness; 2) weight concerns and conflicts; 3) weight commitment; and 4) weight acceptance. The movement through these phases or states of weight awareness is driven by specific interactions within formal and informal learning environments. Student-participants described the movement from one state or phase of weight awareness to the next by several related themes: a) weight awareness before college and during college and weight having complex and varied meanings relative to being a college student; b) a disconnect between a perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, and coping strategies employed by the students in managing the disconnect and their own weight and body; and c) during student interactions within informal and formal learning environments.

Among this specific group of student-participants recruited to participate in the study, the data revealed that the perception of weight, specifically weight awareness, does influence their college experiences, but with all respondents recognizing that weight “shouldn’t be important”. The responses also reveal that their weight perceptions, ideal and real weights, influenced weight awareness, which had an impact on their college experiences and interact with their identity development in being a college student. Specific situations in the college environment are not only transitional events in each student’s development (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), but also may be transitional catalysts in the level of awareness of weight/weight perceptions and coping with or managing their weight concerns or perceptions, or actively deciding to be

committed to their current weight and instead participate in college life. Several students described transitional events that contributed to their becoming more accepting of their weight, and were better able to reflect on and articulate their experiences in college.

All student-participants acknowledged that weight is “something we all worry about” and that these weight concerns are not health related. Their responses also described the importance of fitting in, feeling comfortable, and a sense of belonging in college. College students do “make judgments about other students based on weight” and these judgments not only make them aware of their weight, more importantly create an internal conflict with the perception of their real weight in comparison to an ideal weight for being a college student. Several responses acknowledge that this judging “isn’t right” but it does happen. The student-participants were highly aware of the constant comparisons that occurred between students, and made meaning of these experiences; and these experiences may have prevented the student from participating in certain activities or entering certain spaces in the college environment. Students employed other coping strategies to manage the conflict between their weight reality and the weight ideal by disguising their bodies in certain clothes, altering their lifestyles to avoid situations that might increase their weight awareness, or taking on more positive efforts defying weight-based stereotypes. Some of the student-participants chose to leave old friends behind as they themselves became less weight-concerned. The two self-identified obese students participated in exercise activities, knowing they were being judged, not “looking like the others” but had also described being committed to their own weight and not striving to meet an ideal weight. But other students, who had described themselves as “average” and still wanted to change their weight to meet the ideal, limited their

participation, knowing they were being judged, and feared “looking different” and not “fitting in”.

Responses for classroom events described experiences in lecture halls, from “being overwhelmed” and “feeling lost”, “disappointed”, to “being excited”, great admiration for a teacher, and deciding on a major. Several students described significant experiences of weight awareness of their own weight and the weights of other students in the classroom, specifically in being seen and judged by others, “being thin you get noticed in a good way” (Rachel). The daily-life experiences of students described weight perceptions as negotiating spaces in classrooms and on campus in an effort to manage or cope with any weight-related discomfort by detracting attention away from weight/body size.

The thematic categories presented depict the weight awareness experienced by college students as they compare their own weight to an ideal weight, attempt to manage or cope with their weight or weight awareness, and the influence of interactions with the college environment and interactions with others while they are in college, and specifically how these experiences have meaning in what it means to be a college student. The responses of the student-participants in each of these categories also demonstrates the progression of their weight awareness away from a perceived ideal weight for being in college towards a commitment to being a college student, and living college life to the fullest, as well as preparing for their futures after college. These categories describe a fluid movement between varying degrees of weight awareness and inform the development of an emerging grounded theory to be discussed in Chapter Five.

This chapter presented the qualitative data gathered through the interviews and observations, provides a foundation for an emerging grounded theory. This emerging grounded theory, being informed by Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors for college students' social and cultural identity development, as well as being informed by Medalie's college as a mini-life cycle theoretical model of student development, describes how and in what ways weight has meaning in the college environment, and these meanings are experienced in daily-life activities as varying degrees of weight awareness. As weight awareness is experienced in specific situations, from heightened awareness to diminishing awareness, the students described how the weight awareness experiences contribute to their identity development as college students.

This emerging theory is anchored in the proposition that weight perceptions contribute to the experiences of weight awareness, and weight awareness then contributes either positively or negatively to students' development in the college environment. More specifically, this emerging theory describes three phases students may experience with weight awareness in the college environment, from heightened weight awareness to diminishing weight awareness: 1) Weight concerns and conflicts; 2) Weight commitment; and 3) Weight Acceptance.

I do not assume, with proposing this theory, that the psychosocial aspects of weight is the only aspect that may play a role in identity development among college students in the college environment. Numerous studies have explored various attributes influencing identity development of students. I also do not claim the psychosocial aspects of weight identified in this study will hold true at all types of college institutions or all college students. The goal of this research is to propose a theory, for further consideration

by student development professionals, educators, and other professionals interacting with college students, as a model for developing appropriate strategies promoting positive identity development of students.

The following section, Chapter Five will provide a more in-depth interpretation of the data findings as well as recommendations for future research and application of the proposed theoretical model of the role of psychosocial aspects of weight in identity development. This emerging grounded theory will be discussed within the context of current psychosocial theories regarding identity development among college students, Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Medalie (1981) as well as other relevant psychosocial research will be discussed as support for this proposed theoretical model. The limitations of this research, regarding the number of participants and the grounded theory, will be addressed as well in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF DATA AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research set out to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment using interviews to collect data describing daily life experiences and in what ways perception of weight were described during these experiences. This study, using a modified grounded theory approach, sought to describe how, and in what ways, weight perceptions influence identity development among college students before and during college by understanding how students prescribe meaning to weight, as well as how, and in what ways weight perceptions are integrated into the descriptions of the college students' daily life experiences in formal and informal learning environments. The interviews with 19 college students provided honest and open responses with deep and rich details about weight awareness, college experiences, and the complex meanings of weight in the college environment, which contributed to the emergence of a grounded theory describing the psychosocial aspects of weight and identity development.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the current social context of weight and obesity discourse in overall society and college, followed by a discussion of identity among college students and what it means to be a college student. A review of the results described in Chapter Four, a discussion of the emerging grounded theory, its place among current psychosocial theories. The discussion of the emerging grounded theory and contributions to psychosocial research will be followed by the significance of this research and recommendations for further research, applications of this proposed theoretical model, and the limitations of this study.

The Social Context of Weight

Weight, and specifically obesity, is a current national concern, with efforts at the local, state, and federal levels to promote a healthy weight among the population. Several new organizations were created to address the obesity epidemic, such as the STOP Obesity Alliance, and state governments developed prevention campaigns, such as the Atlanta-based Strong4Life campaign. The US Surgeon General released its Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity in 2001 (USDHHS, 2001), warning of the negative effects of excess weight, primarily an increased risk for heart disease and diabetes. In January 2010, a more recent report was released, The Surgeon General's Vision for a Health and Fit Nation (USDHHS, 2010). The more recent report presents the most recent obesity statistics, but also notes the disparities in overweight and obesity and emphasizes behavior change, and recognizes that BMI and weight are not the only measures of health. The report also emphasizes that a new approach is needed, with an emphasis on health and well-being, and calls for "committed, compassionate citizens" to promote health and well-being. This change in perspective may be a response to the increase in anti-fat attitudes among the general population that has inadvertently risen out of the obesity rhetoric.

As the attention to the obesity epidemic has increased, there has also been an increase in weight-related discrimination, anti-fat rhetoric, and bullying and harassment of obese individuals including children and teens (Puhl & Latner, 2007). The Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity has been investigating weight-based discrimination in various environments, including schools and higher education, and from this research the Center has been the first to develop specific policies to address weight-based bullying

and discrimination (Puhl, & Latner, 2007). In a 2007 study, surveys of approximately 1,500 high school students, 41% identified being overweight as the primary reason for being bullied, 84% of the respondents had observed weight-based bullying and teasing, and approximately 60% had observed overweight students being ignored, avoided or excluded from school and social activities. The study also found that even those students, who were not victims of weight-based bullying, but observed the behavior, were negatively impacted by the experiences. It would not be difficult to assume that many college students have observed some form of weight-based bullying in high school, being negatively impacted by the experience, and then continue to be affected by the experience in college.

In response to the increased weight-based discrimination, bullying, harassment and teasing of various groups of individuals from employees to students, of all ages, several efforts are being made to raise awareness and address these social issues. In January 2011, Canada held the first summit to address weight bias and discrimination, and the summit was sold out, filled to capacity. During Fall 2011, the researcher of this present study presented in a weight-bias awareness session at the American Public Health Association conference, and this session was standing room only, filled beyond capacity. The researcher presented on the need to promote a weight safe environment in colleges as part of college health promotion efforts. The response from the attendees was positive and exemplifies the need to reduce the negative weight and obesity discourse that is prevalent in our society today and the need to develop more appropriate health promotion strategies for populations already experiencing high levels of weight awareness, and weight concerns and conflicts.

Weight in College

The most recent data from the American College Health Association estimates 57% of male college students and 64.7% of female college students fall within the healthy weight range, with 26.9% of college males and 17.8% of college females being overweight (ACHA, 2011). This statistic is telling, and supports the current study, and the previous research, that overweight students, especially females, are less likely to attend college. Nearly half of male college students are overweight to obese, but less than one third of female college students are overweight to obese. The percentage of students who fall into the three classes of obesity shows a similar trend with more obese males attending college than obese females. But for both males and females the numbers of obese students attending college drops significantly, with less than 10% of college students being obese. The responses of this study support this trend, and the fewer number of obese students attending college may be due to societal and cultural attitudes about weight.

Students in high school, and higher education are aware of weight-based stigmatization, anti-fat attitudes, and teasing, bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Research has documented the effects of this on college attendance (Crandall, 1991; Crosnoe, 2007), and the potential influence on psychosocial development (Clabaugh, 2008; Carr & Friedman, 2005). Students who are experiencing increased weight awareness, as well as weight concerns are less likely to go to college, or stay in college, as a result of actual or perceived weight-based discrimination. The perceived threat of weight-based discrimination is experienced by high school students with weight concerns, regardless of their actual weight, and contributes to an increased level of

weight awareness. This weight awareness is often experienced with desires to change weight to prevent being negatively judged, be accepted by peers, and is indicative of body (weight) dissatisfaction (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn; 1999). Chapter Four presented findings describing two concepts that were common among the respondents, that of looking like a college student and what it means to be a college student. The following section presents a brief discussion on what it means to be a college student.

College Identity

What does it mean to be a college student? Individuals enter college with a preconception of what it means to be a college student (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). This knowledge is typically based on information received prior to entering college, from parents, older siblings, friends, high school advisors and teachers. Potential students are also informed about being a college student during the application process, through the materials the individual is exposed to from various institutions, in making their college decisions. Students develop a sense of what it means to be a college student, the activities they will participate in while at college, and a sense of how they will fit in at a specific campus. Much of this information centers on academic programs, student life, campus activities, and the structural organization of the institution. Some of the information is received as images depicting the campus and depictions of current students in various campus settings (Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009). These images, from this researcher's observation, rarely include students of size, meaning overweight or obese. The images included various ethnicities and genders, in various campus settings, participating in various activities, but most, if not all of the students, (shown smiling) are average weight

to thin. So what does this mean for the potential college student who is overweight or obese? Are they able to imagine themselves in these settings, participating in these activities? Are students, regardless of size, looking at these images and perceiving an ideal weight to look like a college student, participating in these activities?

The identity development of being a college student is comprised of two processes: the identification of (the social learning of the meanings of the role of being a college student and the expectations associated with the role of the group) and identification with (the investment of self into the role of being a college student and becoming part of the group). The meanings of roles as a college student influence identity and there is a general consensus among college students on what it means to be a college student (Burke & Reitzes, 1980). There may be differences in how college students make meaning of their roles as college students and the self-concept of college students and being a college student may be based on how the students formulate other identities (gender, ethnicity) within the college environment (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009). Being a college student means being academically challenged, preparing for an occupation, but also participating in a social life, living with other students in a residence hall, making one's own decisions and being of parental constraints (Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009).

What does it mean to look like a college student? Students not only develop a preconception of what it means to be a college student but also what a college student looks like, and what a college student should look like at a specific institution. The visual images in college materials, college students may be exposed to during the college decision-making may inform the students as to what types of students attend the college. Students are more likely to attend institutions where they see others they can identify

with (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Potential and currently-enrolled college students are also influenced by images in the media, that present an overall societal ideal, but also present an image of what it means to be a college student, and look like a college student. The concept of being a college student, and looking like a college student continues to evolve as students enter and progress through college, as the students interact with other students, faculty, and the organizational structure and environment (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009).

Most of the college identity research has used a psychological perspective, focusing on the influence of the college experiences on students' identity development, and changes in social status with changes in self esteem and social worth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). A sociological perspective considers the role of the college on self-concept or felt identities, focusing on the social interactions and social environments as factors that influence identity development. Each of these perspectives is valuable in understanding the development of college students, since college is an environment of various social interactions with a variety of individuals within a variety of settings. An individual attending college experiences changes in a sense of self in these various interactions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This study supports this claim with the findings describing the importance of interactions not only with other students but faculty and staff in how weight awareness was experienced and related to an evolving sense of self, with positive interactions contributing to an improved sense of self as part of identity consolidation.

This study began with the assumption that weight interacts with psychosocial development, and this interaction involves the attitudes and beliefs (meanings), as well as

perceptions, thoughts and emotions about weight the individual students held, and then may have experienced through various interactions with individuals or specific environments. Weight is a personal topic, and experienced internally by an individual, and may have a specific meaning or sense of value in one's sense of self. The experiences and meaning of weight of the individual are informed by the social and cultural meanings and values. As presented in Chapter Four, the results described experiencing weight awareness which then contributed to experiencing weight concerns and conflicts, and described weight as having meaning in looking like a college student and being a college student. Specific transitional events involving interactions with certain individuals and specific formal and informal learning environments contributed to movement towards weight commitment, which facilitated identity consolidation, an increased investment in being a college student. The emerging theoretical model proposes that as identity consolidation continues, redefining a sense of self, there is also a movement towards weight acceptance, with living college life to the fullest and preparing for the future.

Major Categories of the Emerging Grounded Theory

Chapter Four presented the major categories and related themes relevant the emerging grounded theory of weight awareness among college students. The four major categories and several related themes identified in the data analysis answered these questions, and describe the basis for an emerging grounded theory. The four major categories the students described were:

- 1) Weight Awareness
- 2) Weight Concerns and Conflicts
- 3) Weight Commitment and Identity Consolidation

4) Weight Acceptance

The major categories were strongly linked to each other through various concepts which included weight awareness before college and during college, weight as more than an number, a disconnect between a perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, coping strategies, and participating in college life. The related themes, and concepts, reveal the complex meanings of weight, and how the perceptions of weight contribute to the lived experiences and development of college students.

The results described the importance of daily life experiences in both the formal and informal learning environments of college and their overall development as college students occurring in various formal and informal learning environments and what it means to be a college student, belonging and fitting-in as a college student, being accepted by peers, and living college life to the fullest. The specific experiences described how weight perceptions are integrated into these college environments with wanting to fit-in in, being able to fit-in, be noticed in a positive manner, adopt specific strategies in an effort to fit in and coping with any negative weight-related interactions. The results described weight awareness among college students, how this awareness is experienced in various college environments, and how these experiences influenced participation in college life and may have influenced identity development.

The purpose of this research was to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight and the daily-lived experiences of college students within the college environment with the objective of providing a foundation for future theoretical research in understanding this phenomenon and to contribute to the practice of student development. This chapter

presents the interpretation and recommendations in meeting these objectives, by synthesizing the categories into a cohesive format as an emerging grounded theory.

Overview of the Emerging Grounded Theory

The focus of this research was the exploration of the psychosocial aspects of weight and any influence on identity development. The responses of the first four to five interviews indicated a possible emerging grounded theory involving the interplay of weight awareness during daily life experiences in the college environment and psychosocial development. These early responses described a process of an evolving, changing state of weight awareness from heightened awareness towards a diminished awareness of weight, and weight awareness was influenced by the context of their meanings of weight and interactions within the college environment.

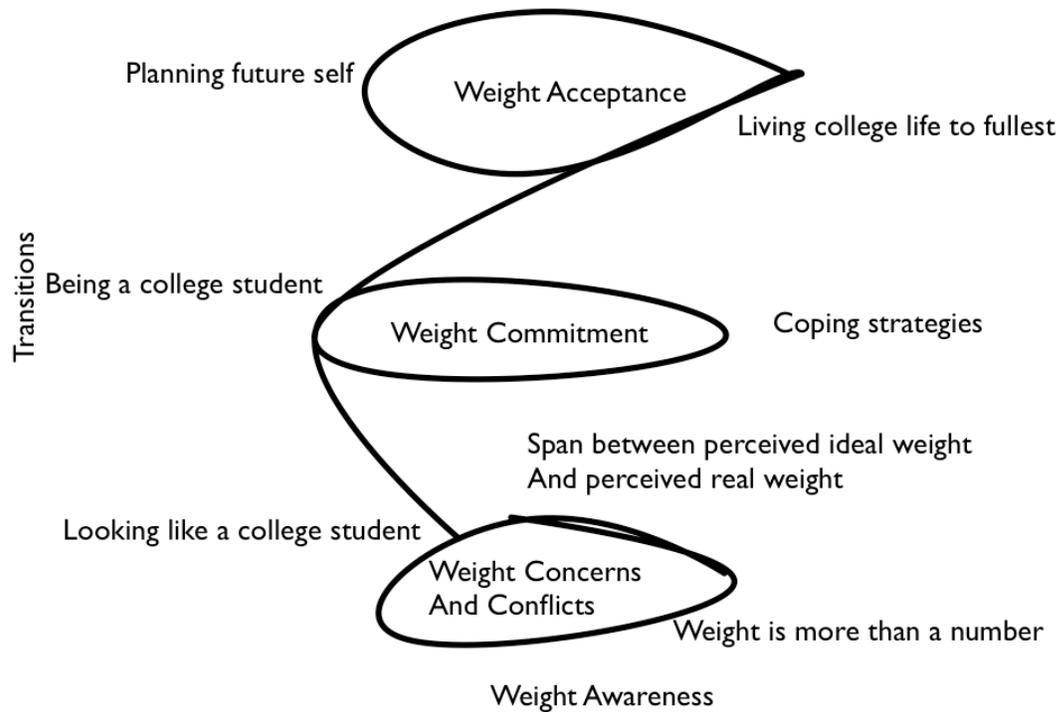
The major categories and related themes identified in the data analysis and discussed in Chapter Four formed the foundation of the emerging grounded theory. The psychosocial aspects of weight affecting college students is not a new discussion, but this emerging grounded theory may facilitate a greater understanding of how weight awareness is experienced and then influences identity development as college students. The discussion of this emerging grounded theory presents a description of weight awareness, as a construct of psychosocial development, and the three phases of weight awareness informed by the major categories and related themes identified in the data analysis. The headings of these phases are taken from the responses, and supported by the existing literature using similar concepts of weight awareness and how it is experienced:

- 1) Weight concern and conflict;
- 2) Weight commitment with identity consolidation; and
- 3) Weight acceptance.

Weight Awareness

Weight awareness has been defined in the literature as the attention paid to weight by individuals that is triggered by an event or interaction of other stimuli (Reid, 1997; Cash & Green, 1986). Weight awareness, like body awareness, involves how the individual feels and senses weight and can be influenced by self-esteem, and can in turn influence self-esteem (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Various factors in this study were identified as triggers, or stimuli for experiencing weight awareness, the context of the college environment as well as a variety of formal and informal learning environments, interactions with others, comparisons to others, perceived ideals, or previous weights. The degree of weight awareness experienced was found to be highly linked with the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction the individual experienced with perceived real weight. The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction contributed to coping strategies to manage weight or conceal weight, and minimize any vulnerability to weight-based criticism. Figure 5.1 shows the model of weight awareness and how it is experienced while being a college student. The results describe weight awareness being shaped by a perception of an ideal weight, a desire to look like a college student, the students' perception of their real weight, and weight being more than a number. These themes, and then weight awareness, were influenced by, or triggered by a specific interaction or event such as going to college, interacting with dorm-mates, interacting with peers in formal and informal learning environments in college, and interacting with formal contacts, such as faculty or staff.

Figure 5.1. Model of Weight Awareness Among College Students



This emerging theoretical model proposes that as individuals become less aware of weight and invested in other aspects of their lives as college students, they also become less concerned with meeting an ideal weight, becoming more committed to their own real weight. As students become more invested in being a college student, and consolidating their identities, not only as college students, but as whole individuals, they reach a state of weight acceptance. Weight acceptance involves satisfaction with current weight, as well as accepting that weight need not meet an ideal, and weight concerns are replaced with embracing a healthy body image, and appreciating the health of the body (Cash & Prusinsky, 2002; Orbach, 2009).

During the data analysis it became evident that specific phases of weight awareness were being experienced while in college, and these varied phases of weight awareness described increasing weight awareness and diminishing weight awareness as experienced within a specific situation or interaction. These specific interactions may have acted as transitional events motivating students to experience increased weight awareness, with increasing weight concerns and conflicts, or decreased weight awareness, a resolution of weight conflicts and an increased commitment to one's own weight that coincided with an increased investment in being a college students.

Increased weight awareness was often described as experiencing increased weight concern and conflict with respect to the span between perceptions of ideal weight and perceptions of real weight and what it means to look like a college student, or in comparison to peers. Decreasing weight awareness facilitated a movement towards being more committed to own real weights, with less concern and conflict in not meeting an ideal weight, and experiencing an increased emphasis on being a college student. The last phase of weight awareness, weight acceptance, describes a more diminished state of weight awareness, with students taking a broader perspective of their weight, an increasing commitment to well-being, and living college life to the fullest. The model depicts the development of the relationships between weight awareness and weight concerns and conflicts, weight commitment and identity consolidation, and weight acceptance. The model also describes movement through these categories as phases. A continuous, almost cyclical movement seemed to occur through phases of weight awareness and this movement was influenced by specific events or interactions. Certain events or interactions contributed to a state of increased weight concerns and conflicts,

typically during the early college years. Other events or interactions contributed to being less concerned with weight, and feeling less conflict with meeting a weight ideal, being increasingly committed to their own weight and body and increased investment in being a college student. The model also describes a state of weight acceptance that coincided with an awareness of leaving college, being an adult, and enjoying college life to the fullest.

Weight Concerns and Conflicts. In the descriptions of weight awareness during the phase or state of weight concerns and conflicts, the results described experiences with increased levels of dissatisfaction or distress with weight not meeting a perceived ideal weight, describes the individual being in a state of weight concern and conflict. These concerns often resulted in attempts to cope with weight concerns and conflicts, with weight change attempts or strategies to conceal weight. The experiences of increased weight awareness most often involved comparisons of weights and bodies during interactions with others and while observing other students of differing weights and sizes, or comparisons to previous weights or sizes or comparisons to a perceived ideal of looking like a college student. The weight concerns also involved experiencing a conflict between the perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, and the greater the conflict, as perceived by the student, the greater the weight dissatisfaction.

The results of this study are supported by current research in body image, with 80% of female college students experiencing weight concerns, with a desire to lose weight, but less than 2% being overweight or obese (Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004). Although male college students experience weight concerns, the emphasis seems to be more on muscularity, with attempts to gain weight or mass, and this muscularity

seems to be related to achieving a masculine ideal. Weight satisfaction/dissatisfaction is described as how the individual measures the discrepancy between current (real) weight and a desired (ideal) weight (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Increased weight awareness is often experienced by individuals with greater weight dissatisfaction, or experiencing concern with the span between the perceptions of ideal weight and perceptions of real weight (Monteath & McCabe, 1997).

Experiencing weight concerns may lead to various attempts to change weight or conceal weight to address the conflict with the span between perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight (Cash & Green, 1986). Efforts to cope with the conflict or disconnect between perceived real weight and perceived ideal weight, to look like a college student, may involve attempts to change weight and/or conceal weight. Weight concerns with meeting a perceived weight ideal to look like a college student may present a conflict between looking like a college student versus being a college student. The span, or disconnect between a perceived ideal weight and perceived real weight, may contribute to experiencing weight concerns and conflicts. The degree of the disconnect in failing to meet the perceived ideal weight contributed to the degree of weight dissatisfaction and attempts to change weight (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

During this level or state of weight awareness, weight may be more than a number and may also mean fitting-in with peers in college and being a college student. Weight may be used as a measure of self-worth within the college environment and specific coping strategies may be employed to address the conflict experienced with not *measuring up*, either to change or conceal weight in various college environments

including classrooms, library spaces, the dorms, campus fitness centers, and other campus spaces. Interactions with specific individuals at this phase may increase weight awareness as students engage with friends and dorm-mates, family members, and faculty and staff. Weight comparisons with other students, made by other students, family members, faculty and staff, as well as weight comparisons to a previous weight or the perceived weight ideal, hold more meaning as to fitting in as a college student.

Interactions with others and within specific environments in college may contribute to some students feeling vulnerable to weight-based criticism. Vulnerability is a concept that links the relationship of individuals, in this case college students, with their environment and to social forces, especially within institutions with specific cultural values such as the college, which include values about weight and physical appearance. These values may contribute to what it means to look like a college student. Vulnerability is the susceptibility, as experienced by the individual student, to physical or emotional harm. But as students become aware of their desire to be a college student and participate in college life, they may experience a shift away from desires and attempts to meet perceived weight ideal to look like a college student and instead increase their investment in college experiences, and knowingly expose themselves to the potential for weight-based criticism without feeling vulnerable. The abandoning of or divestment from a perceived weight ideal to look like a college student as well as the adoption of more appropriate coping strategies, decision-making may allow students to transition towards weight commitment and identity consolidation.

Weight Commitment. As the proposed model describes specific interactions may contribute to becoming less concerned with weight and meeting an ideal, and becoming

increasingly invested in being a college student, consolidating their identity as a college student. This phase of weight awareness describes students may still be employing some coping strategies to manage weight, but also an increasing investment in their overall well-being replacing the emphasis on an ideal weight. This phase describes greater weight satisfaction with decreased attempts to change weight to meet a perceived ideal weight. Comparisons of weight and body begin to take a different meaning as well, with a shift from being concerned about meeting a weight ideal in comparison to other students towards role models of different sizes and weights. This phase of weight awareness describes students may be more likely to have had several significant college experiences to reflect on, allowing them to acknowledge their own weight concerns and conflicts, and develop an increased understanding of how weight awareness was influencing their college experiences. During this phase students may be experiencing weight awareness, but less conflict with looking like a college student and chose to participate in daily life college activities that may have made them feel susceptible to weight-based criticism. In this phase of weight commitment and identity consolidation, the concept of vulnerability presents itself but as a different concept, describing the students intentionally exposing themselves to a situation in which they may be open to weight-based criticism.

Weight Acceptance. The last phase of weight awareness in this proposed emerging grounded theory model describes students who may be aware of their futures in college and beyond college, and may be better able to reflect back on their past experiences in college. The model proposes that students may make a conscious decision to no longer worry about their weight and instead chose to enjoy college the college

experience. Weight acceptance may allow students to negotiate relationships and spaces differently than they had in an increased weight awareness phases. Interactions with specific environments within college, and specific individuals may be experienced differently, with students actively choosing to participate in activities that had increased their weight awareness previously, and acknowledging their own changes in how they prescribed meaning to weight. The model describes this phase of weight acceptance and a living weight as an ability to express empathy for other students' weights, bodies, and what weight means while in college. Weight acceptance occurs as students become aware of and prepare for their futures and coincides with identity development; as individuals become more comfortable with their bodies they also become more established in their identity (Reid, 1997).

Psychosocial Theoretical Models

The significance of this proposed theoretical model in understanding the influence of the psychosocial aspects of weight, weight awareness, on identity development can only be fully appreciated when placed within the context of current psychosocial theoretical models applied to college students. One of the first identity questions posited in understanding identity development among college students, "How comfortable am I with my physical being and my appearance" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p.182)? This is a discussion of three major psychosocial theoretical models, 1) Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of student development; 2) Medalie's mini-life cycle phases during college; and 3) Piaget's cognitive identity model. Each of these will be presented to place the currently proposed emerging grounded theory in an appropriate context. A discussion of other models of psychosocial development will also be presented in the discussion of the

importance of considering various factors that may influence identity development, and the relativity of this currently proposed emerging theoretical model.

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors

The seven vectors proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993) provides a model of student development on a broad spectrum with the goal of fostering policies and practices within higher education that would facilitate student development. The model was developed as a result of data collected from students regarding their own perceptions of their experiences in college, and resulted in the seven vectors: 1) Developing competence; 2) Managing emotions; 3) Moving through autonomy toward interdependence; 4) Developing mature interpersonal relationships; 5) Establishing identity; 6) Developing purpose; and 7) Developing integrity.

Vector 5 of this model, establishing identity, involves several key factors, the first of which is “comfort with body and appearance” as well as “sense of self in response to feedback from valued others”, and “self-acceptance and self-esteem” (p.49). The authors note, “college student concern with appearance is obvious” and though appearance ideals or standards have changed, students take on “emblems of student culture”, and strive to meet the appearance ideal, “especially the younger ones”. But as students clarify or consolidate their identities the emphasis on the ideal diminishes (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 49). Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) discussion may not apply specifically to weight, but it is a consideration in their discussion, students who feel they do not meet the appearance ideal may attempt to change their weight to meet the appearance ideal or “accept a less-than perfected body” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 183).

“Appearance also becomes a matter for conscious concerns and decision” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 183) and students will make attempts to change, conceal or compensate for physical attributes, such as weight, that do not meet the appearance ideal. The concerns and conflicts, dissatisfaction and distress, students may experience in regards to their appearance, including weight, “blocks development” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 183). “An important component of a positive identity is a friendly attitude toward one’s body and an ability to take care of it” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 183).

This study supports the proposition of Chickering and Reisser (1993) in that presentation of self is a primary concern among students still forming a consolidated identity. Those students who have a more defined sense of self, clear and established, become less concerned with their presentation of self, and meeting an expected appearance ideal. “Development comes with increasing awareness of one’s body as a vehicle for expression and enjoyment, and the realization that despite its limitations, the physical body in which one resides is the only one available as a vehicle for living and must be accepted and nurtured” (p. 184).

The emerging grounded theory of this study addresses the gap in research and understanding in how weight as a specific physical attribute plays a role in identity development. A gap described by Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors of student development. This proposed theoretical model may increase our understanding of how important weight is to students and how the meanings of weight, and the weight awareness experiences are integral factors in overall psychosocial development. Another

theory describing development of college students that informed this research is Medalie's mini-life cycle of the college years, is presented in the following section.

Medalie's Mini-Life Cycle Phases

Medalie (1981) developed a theoretical model describing the college years of students as a mini –life cycle consisting of developmental tasks as specific phases. The developmental tasks, or specific phases occurring during each academic year as the student progresses through college, provide a framework for understanding the conflict or stress that may underlie a problem the student is experiencing. Medalie developed this model as a tool for student affairs professionals addressing the developmental needs of students, specifically for academic success and completing college. The college mini-life cycle consists of four phases: 1) Divestment and Investment; 2) Consolidation and Choice; 3) Mastery and Commitment; and 4) Anticipating the World Beyond.

Each phase corresponds to each succeeding academic year, with freshman year being a year of firsts filled with transitions, divesting from the past and investing in being in college. Sophomore year is described as a year of becoming and experiencing more firsts, with greater independence, some commitment to future goals, deciding on a major. But at the same time students may also experience alienation, and unable to feel as if they belong if separation issues were not resolved during freshman year. During Junior year, Medalie describes the students' continued development in the mini-life cycle as having mastered the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their studies, having a realistic assessment of their own abilities, develop occupational interests, and explore the world through travel. Senior year is then the time of anticipating the transition to the world

beyond, and preparing for the future, with a sense of time running out in college, and are able to look back over their college years.

The results of this study exploring the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment, described the transitions into college as freshman, making choices during sophomore year, becoming a master of one's identity and choices as juniors and enjoying college to its fullest as seniors. The experiences of weight awareness similarly aligned with these four phases, but were not as clearly delineated for each academic year, as Medalie's model presents. Medalie's model was helpful in developing the proposed theoretical model by providing a loose framework to work with and compare the findings of this study, as well as informing the design of the three phases.

The emerging theoretical model demonstrates an investment in being a college student by investing in an appearance ideal to look like a college student, but at the same time having difficulty divesting from a high school appearance, which may contribute to the weight concerns and conflicts experienced by college students. It must be noted, that this appears to be especially so for female college students, whereas male college students invest in being masculine, and divest from their high school appearance. There also seems to be a conflict between the investment in looking like a college student and being a college student, requiring an active decision or choice in abandoning a weight ideal or to look like a college student, a decision that would then influence the rest of their college years. According to Medalie's mini-life cycle this phase of Consolidation and choice typically occurs during sophomore year, but for identity consolidation to

occur, conflicts experienced during freshman year need to be resolved for further development.

Weight Commitment, and identity consolidation, in the proposed emerging theoretical model of this study, agrees with this concept of Medalie's mini-life cycle phase, Consolidation and Choice, but also with Mastery and Commitment. Medalie's description of Mastery and Commitment includes mastering knowledge and skill, with more serious efforts in studies. Weight Commitment, may not involve academic knowledge, it does consider knowledge of health behaviors. During this phase, there is an increasing awareness of health, and body weight related to health not an ideal appearance. Skills are mastered in adopting health behaviors, increased participation in physical activities that may have exacerbated weight awareness in the past.

The last phase of Medalie's mini-life cycle of the college years, Anticipating the world beyond, supports this proposed emerging theory's last state or phase, Weight Acceptance. Anticipating the world beyond describes preparing for the future outside of college, as well as getting the most out of college. This study's concept of Weight Acceptance describes a similar concept, an awareness of weight as a living weight, and living college life to the fullest regardless of weight. At this state or phase, there is also intentional exposure to situations that may have contributed to a sense of vulnerability in the past. But being able to resolve the conflicts earlier, mastering skills, and consolidating identity may facilitate movement towards weight acceptance.

Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory

Piaget's model describes development as occurring through four specific stages, through two processes: Assimilation and Accommodation, as well as occurring through

two dimensions: concrete egocentric and more abstract, reflective thinking (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As individuals progress through development new information is either categorized into existing schemas (knowledge structures) or new ones are created. New schemas are typically created in an effort to resolve conflicts between the new information and the knowledge of the existing schemas. Piaget's theory also considers the influence of the environment on development, with specific environmental cues being essential for development to occur. The model also proposes that life inherently presents challenges and conflicts, and development occurs when the individual is able to make sense of lived experiences, new information by instead of assimilating the information into current knowledge schemas, but creating a new schema to accommodate the new information.

In the current study, and proposed emerging grounded theory, development occurs as a result of specific interactions within an environment, either with the environment or with others in the environment. The findings describe the students entering college with an existing knowledge schema of what it means to look like a college student, and what it means to be a college student, but as the students interacted within the environment of college they were exposed to, or experienced new concepts that did not fit into the current knowledge schema. The conflict required the students to develop a new schema or meaning of weight as a college student, and eventually a meaning of weight as an adult. Movement from Weight Conflicts and Concerns towards Weight Commitment occurred once the students were able to replace the existing meaning of weight with a new or modified meaning of weight. Movement from Weight Commitment towards Weight Acceptance occurred similarly, and facilitated by the

students' ability to consolidate their identity as a college student, and progress towards a mature adult.

This developmental task then acts as the foundation for Chickering and Reisser's model of development for college students, which presents weight and the influence of *weight phenomena* as a developmental challenge that college students would encounter. Weight is an issue influencing development, but as phenomena not yet understood.

The theoretical models of Chickering and Reisser (1993), Medalie (1981) and Piaget (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) provide a background for this current emerging grounded theory, placing it within an area that is briefly mentioned in previous work, but not yet given greater attention in understanding the dynamic relationship between weight and psychosocial development. This study like several studies and theoretical models exploring other aspects of the self that may contribute to overall development continues the work of increasing our understanding of development among college students.

Models of Psychosocial Development among College Students

Several models of psychosocial development have evolved out of the research exploring college students. Much of the research focuses on a specific type of college student, such as men in college, or exploring the influence of the environment on development of college students, as well as studies exploring the importance of group membership (fitting-in) in identity development in college. Edwards (2007) explored and developed a grounded theory for the process of gender identity among college men. The theory, being grounded in the experiences of the male participants, describes a constant interaction with society's expectations of them as men. The expectations led the male college students to experience insecurities (conflicts), which they responded to by

attempting to *put my man face on*, so they would be accepted as men. The male students also described specific experiences within specific interactions allowing them to *remove the mask* and move towards being their own man. This study supports the currently proposed emerging grounded theory, by describing the importance of fitting in for male college students. Male college students, seeking to fit-in, described a desire to be bigger, made attempts to change weight, to increase muscularity and even transferring from a college with an athletic ideal to another with less emphasis on an athletic appearance.

A grounded theory work exploring the attributes of the college classroom (Stubrud, 2007) is important to note as well. This study identified key attributes of the classroom, using interviews and observations, that contribute to identity development. Five clusters of attributes, totaling 16 attributes, were identified as contributing to identity development of college students. One of these clusters of attributes, the college classroom, helps to place the emerging grounded theory of the psychosocial aspects of weight and identity development, in the appropriate context. The college classroom is considered to be the primary location of college learning, and Stubrud's work found classroom space and design to be critical in learning and development. Students experience greater gains in learning and development in classrooms that are "intentionally designed, with sufficient physical and psychological space" and students are able to "sit comfortably, move about freely" (Stubrud, 2007, p. 70). The data findings of this current study describe several events where not only interactions with individuals influenced psychosocial development, but interactions with the classroom, specific elements (desks) in the classroom, observing other students navigate through the space of the classroom or desk, did as well.

Group membership also plays a role in identity development and students being unable to fit-in, or be accepted into a group, may experience delays in overall development. The transition of entering college can be detrimental for students not able to fit-in readily, but identifying as a college student improves well-being (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). The perceived compatibility between old and new identities and having multiple group memberships increased the likelihood of identification with the new group. Transitions can have both positive and negative outcomes, the meaning of the transition is often dependent upon how prepared the student is for the new environment and necessary change in identity, and how the student is able to cope with the transitions.

Another important consideration in placing the proposed emerging grounded theory in the appropriate context of psychosocial development of college students, is in understanding self-categorization as a part of identity development. As students transition into college, group memberships must change, and this often disrupts a student's identity (Tajel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wertherell, 1987). The previous high school identity can be difficult to leave behind if it was important to the individual's self definition, but for identity development to continue it is necessary for the student to move away from the old identity and establish a new identity. Students holding on to old identities evaluate the new identity by comparing it to the old identity, limiting development and connection to the new group in college.

Contributions to Current Psychosocial Models for College Student Development

This emerging grounded theoretical model of Undergraduate Weight Awareness, falls within the realm of psychosocial theory in that it emphasizes the perspective that

personality in intrinsically social and is influenced by how individuals interact with others. This perspective considers that weight concerns and conflicts arise from external, or social, feedback from others or the environment. The proposed Model of Weight Awareness among College Students describes weight awareness across degrees or states, moving from weight concerns and conflicts to commitment to one's own weight by abandoning a weight ideal, and moving towards weight acceptance. This proposed emerging theoretical model may be useful in developing strategies making the college as a weight-safe environment in an effort to reduce weight based stigmatization and discrimination. The model may also be useful in developing appropriate strategies to guide students through the process of resolving weight concerns and conflicts, fostering an improved sense of self-worth, and promoting their development as whole individuals.

The concept of weight acceptance and embracing a living weight, has been described by Chickering and Reisser (1993), in their model of psychosocial development among college students. Identity development, among college students, is linked to self-esteem and self-esteem is linked to comfort with one's body and appearance. Students who may not feel as if they fit the appearance ideal while in college, "may find themselves in a downward spiral of diminishing self-esteem" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p.183). This diminishing self-esteem has the potential to limit the student's ability to progress further in their identity development. The authors add, "an important component of positive identity is a friendly attitude towards one's body and an ability to take care of it" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 183). This proposed emerging grounded theory model describes the progression of identity development into adulthood is influenced by how the students experience weight awareness, and the ability to move

beyond weight concerns and conflicts, and not only be committed to their weight and identity as college students, but to also accept their weight, be comfortable with their bodies, and having the ability to take care of their body and to be healthy.

Psychosocial development is one important part of student development, typically occurring in phases associated with growth along a specific dimension. This growth involves change, and development occurs when changes are successive and provide an opportunity to adapt, resolving conflicts and progress as an individual (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Psychosocial theories suggest students are able to successfully progress in development when phases or developmental tasks are resolved, and successfully achieving one phase contributes to success in the next phase. This is an on-going process, and is a part of normal maturation, as changes occur in daily-life experiences. This emerging grounded theory proposes three phases, or developmental tasks, of weight awareness. These three phases represent a specific element of development, changes in weight awareness that can be, and has been, identified and observed among college students in the college environment. But as the researcher continued to delve deeper into the data analysis, the mapping of the phases, the model of sequential phases does not appropriately describe the evolving process of weight awareness.

The results of this study indicate that the students were actively engaged in a process of identity development that centered on the complex interactions of weight awareness, the college environment, formal and informal contacts and the expectations of being a college student. Most students, like most individuals today, have been socialized into and have internalized the dominant societal beliefs about weight, weight ideals and obesity. These expectations of meeting a weight ideal and the assumptions about weight

add to the complexity of how students experience weight awareness in the college environment.

The interactions with specific individuals and environments within college and the students' experiences could be considered transitional events or catalysts of change in that they marked not only a change in weight awareness but also contributed to experiencing changes in the meanings prescribed to weight, changes in coping strategies in managing weight and body, and changes in how students defined their identity as college students. A transition is an event, or non-event, that may result in changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles; and the transition occurs only when the event or non-event has meaning to the individual experiencing it (Schlossberg, 1995).

The results of this study also revealed weight as a part of contingencies of self-worth, and the body weight contingency of self-worth (Clabaugh, 2008). The results describe students avoiding certain tasks or situations, or employing specific strategies to conceal weight, if they felt they would be judged on their appearance (weight). Students avoided the fitness center, fitness activities, certain campus group activities while they were at a heightened weight awareness state, experiencing weight concern and conflict. But the results revealed also when weight awareness began to diminish, and self-worth was less contingent on weight, the students experienced greater commitment to current real weight, less concern and conflict with meeting an ideal weight. These students no longer avoided tasks and situations, and actively decided to defy any criticism about weight or assumptions about body weight. As weight awareness continued to diminish, self-worth became less defined by weight, and students became more accepting of not only their own weights, but other students' weights as well. Students reaching a state of

weight acceptance may have been more successful in separating their weight from their self-worth.

The goodness of fit model (Lerner, 1984) describes the dynamic relationship between the student and the context that determines the quality of fit, and the student perceives their own fitness by comparing themselves to others in a specific environment. Any student who may experience a span between a perceived ideal weight (to be a college student) and perceived real weight, may have difficulty feeling as if they belong, or fit in. Since thinness is highly valued in current society, any student in conflict with weight may have a poor quality of goodness of fit (Silverman, 2004). Goodness of fit, sense of belonging, is important in a student's psychosocial development, with research finding that identity formation is grounded in fitting in, a desire to fit in, as well as to look, act, feel and be like others in the school environment (Bandura, 1986; Cairns & Cairns, 1994). As presented in Chapter 4, the results described a perception of real weight and perceptions of an ideal weight to look like a college student. The descriptions indicated a self-categorization taking place. The results indicate students may have been experiencing difficulty in leaving earlier identities behind, based on their self-categorization of weight. Several students, primarily female participants, reminisced for previous weights of high school. The results also described reminiscing for sense of belonging to a group like they had in high school, as they tried to fit in at college.

Weight is often used as a measure of social distinction, of fitting in, and like much of society today, college students are very much aware of the value judgments associated with weight, being overweight or obese (Orbach, 2009; Klesges, Mizes. & Klesges, 1987; Sira & White, 2010). The main findings of this study found college students experience

weight awareness during specific interactions with environments or individuals in college, and how the students experience weight awareness changes during transitional experiences, such as entering college with weight concerns and conflicts striving to meet a weight ideal, and increased concern with unintentional weight changes during college. Students' transition into another phase, weight commitment with identity consolidation, as the emphasis on meeting the ideal is replaced with being in college and being a college student. The third phase, weight acceptance and a living weight, was described by those students actively deciding to enjoy college to the fullest and prepare for their futures in and beyond college. These three phases, as an emerging grounded theory, contribute to the understanding of psychosocial development and compliment the psychosocial theoretical models used in student development. The following presents the significance of this research and recommendations for future research, followed by a discussion of the limitations.

Significance and Recommendations

The contributions of this research are at first its use of an exploratory methodology of a grounded theory approach. "Exploratory research is a means to inductively create grounded theory or theory that emerges from an empirical level of observations and data" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 6; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The emerging grounded theory describing three phases of weight awareness experienced by college students in their psychosocial development is significant in three areas: 1) increases our understanding of the specific psychosocial aspects of weight college students experience while in college; 2) deepens our understanding of how these aspects contribute to identity

development; and 3) this theoretical model builds upon how the experiences of college students in the college environment affects students and their identity development.

This research endeavor contributes to the understanding of weight, not as a health construct, but as a social construct, based on the concept of self-perception of weight, and the complex meanings students prescribe to weight in the college environment. Self-perception of weight and weight ideals vary across cultural, social, gender and individual contexts. The college campus, having a specific culture and acting as a social environment, plays a role in how students perceive themselves. The use of self-perception in the interview questions was vital to the exploration of this topic, since weight is not just a physical attribute, but more importantly, weight is an attribute that has become increasingly experienced, as weight awareness, in specific situations.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the topic of weight, and body image, but little research has been undertaken to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight, and attempt to uncover any relationship with identity development. An earlier study exploring the impact of weight, specifically body image, on the psychosocial development of women (Reid, 1997) interviewed 30 women, and found a relationship between weight phenomena and psychosocial development, but was unable to ascertain the role it plays in this development. The findings, of Reid's study, help to inform this study as well as provide support for the findings. But Reid's study was limited in that it only used women, and did not focus on college students in the college environment. The currently proposed emerging grounded theory may provide us with a greater understanding of the role of weight, what it means and how it is experienced, in identity development specifically among college students.

Growth along the identity vector involves developing self-acceptance, requiring a shift from criticizing self to a more self-affirming perspective. But comfort with and acceptance of weight begins before students arrive at college and may continue after college. Chickering and Reisser place appearance, and weight, in the establishing identity vector, but it may be more appropriate for weight phenomena to be interwoven through various vectors. Medalie's mini-life cycle being sequenced by academic year may be too restrictive in its time-line as many students moved back and forth between the weight awareness phases, progressing at different rates. Movement through the phases was determined more so by specific events not academic year. Piaget's theory of cognitive development, provides a broad description of the processes of acquiring knowledge as individuals mature, but this has not yet been applied to weight or body knowledge. These three theoretical models, as well as others help to inform this proposed emerging theoretical model, but do not take into consideration that movement through the phases may not necessarily occur sequentially, and movement between phases may be an on-going evolving process. Further investigation would be needed to determine the true nature of the transitioning between the phases.

The findings provide early evidence that weight awareness influences identity development of college students, and contributes to the knowledge base of student development. It is important to note as well, the use of the specific terms such as weight awareness, weight ideals, weight perceptions, weight concerns, conflicts with weight, and weight acceptance by the researcher and the student-participants were essential in uncovering the relationship between weight awareness, college experiences, and identity development. This model will facilitate the development of appropriate programs

addressing weight awareness among college students in college, so that all students may continue to progress in their identity development.

Actual weights, or BMIs, were not collected from participants to verify weight descriptions, as this was not considered to be a necessary validity measure. The topic of this study was to explore the perceptions of weight, for each student, and the meaning of these weight perceptions in the college environment. This decision allowed the research to explore the topics of importance described by the student-participants during interviews until the research reached a degree of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The findings of this research reflect the key themes of the interviews into major categories and related themes, which contributed to understanding the complexities of weight awareness before and during college, and the three phases of the psychosocial aspects of weight and identity development.

In the consideration of weight identities, the responses indicated these college students experienced fluctuating, changing weight identities that were constructed by the specific environment they were in during a specific experience. The terms the student-participants provided in describing themselves, and when describing comparisons to others, indicated the weight identity they may have possessed during these various experiences in college. Two of the students described themselves as obese and both seemed to be moving forward in their overall development, where as several of the students, females desiring to be thin and males desiring to be bigger, seemed to either regress or experience delays in their development. It is important to remember that an individual's weight identity can change in relation to cues in the social environment relating to weight ideals or weight expectations (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). The students in

this study that had accepted their weight, were more likely to not only acknowledge real weight, but also seemed to continue progressing in overall psychosocial development.

This theoretical model may provide a framework for future research in understanding the influence of weight awareness on identity development, as well as developing practices for student development. Recommendations for future research and practice will be discussed in this section, as well as limitations that will need to be considered for continued research and any application of the theoretical model.

Recommendations

This research has been conducted in an effort to contribute to exploratory research and the building of a research area endeavoring to understand the psychosocial aspects of weight and identity development. Further exploration should be done to further examine the influence of the college environment on weight awareness, and the influence of weight awareness on identity development. Future research in this area should consider various factors that emerged in this research. The following recommendations for future research may validate and expand the current research findings.

First, this study should be replicated with other more diverse samples of students and at various institutions, as well as a larger population sample. Future research should explore any differences among students from different institution types, as well as students from diverse backgrounds. Future research may need to examine more specifically the growing phenomena of weight, size and muscularity ideals among males in college. Additional research should explore the role of sexual orientation, as well as gender, and weight awareness, and meanings prescribed to weight and identity development. Further investigation of attitudes and values concerning weight, weight

ideals for college students, should be explored as well, and in consideration of the various environments of the college institution. Chickering and Reisser (1991) dedicated an entire chapter to attitudes and values and specific areas within the college that may shape identity development. The authors note that the residence, or college dorms make a difference by exposing students to “aesthetic, cultural and intellectual attitudes and values” (Chickering & Reisser, 1991, p. 307). The findings of this present study support this statement, describing weight awareness, weight concerns and conflicts when comparing perceived real weight with the weights/sizes of others in the dorm-room environment.

It would be equally valuable to investigate the affects of the formal learning environments of college and the shaping of weight-based attitudes and values, and more specifically the influence of interactions with faculty and peers. Chickering and Reisser (1991) also note the interactions between students and faculty may have the potential to change students’ attitudes and values. Although Chickering and Reisser (1991) refer more specifically to education values, this current study, with proposed emerging grounded theory, indicates the interactions with faculty may shape the students’ weight-based attitudes and values. Peer-students can have significant influence on the shaping of weight-based attitudes and values of other students and would require further investigation to further understand the complexities of these interactions.

Various different methodology types should be considered in further researching this topic. Weight is a very personal topic, it may be useful to use methodologies that are not face-to-face interviews, but still allow for deep and rich descriptive responses. The use of surveys may be advantageous but may have limitations in gathering deep

descriptions of experiences. It may be possible to develop a survey, modifying some of the interview prompts, to evaluate weight awareness among college students, considering specific formal and informal learning environments, and measure the extent of the weight awareness. Another type of data collection that could be considered for future research in this evolving age of technology is the weblog. A weblog may provide a safe venue for participants to more fully disclose their weight awareness experiences, and provide a greater level of confidentiality and anonymity.

It would be necessary to further explore the interplay of various college environments, interactions with these spaces as well as interactions with others in these spaces, and weight awareness. Any role-identities students described in the context of weight awareness, and the activities they participated in, could also be explored from a sociological perspective. The concept of vulnerability students may experience with weight-based criticism, as they experience weight awareness during interactions deserves further investigation. Social vulnerability is a growing area of research, as the need for understanding the problems that may arise during interactions with others, and the vulnerability of specific groups of individuals who may be at greater risk for criticism and harm. Research could also explore the role-identities the students adopted and embodied during different phases of weight awareness. Future research could also consider the following:

- Continued exploration of the transitional events college students may experience that mediate weight awareness, which may be helpful in identifying specific strategies to facilitate the progression towards weight acceptance, and thus overall identity development.

- Explore the influence of the college infrastructure and organizational structure and climate.
- Research in developing strategies for colleges to implement to promote health behaviors, that de-emphasize weight and emphasize overall health.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study describe the complex relationship between weight perceptions, and how weight is experienced, and psychosocial development. This relationship not only demands continued research in an effort to more fully understand the complexities, but also demands some attention be paid in the development of policy on college campuses promoting healthy psychosocial development for all students. Colleges might consider developing policies promoting weight acceptance, promoting healthy behaviors while minimizing attention paid to weight so that all students, regardless of weight or size, may be more likely to participate in healthy behaviors.

This proposed theoretical model provides a foundation for greater understanding of the identity roles students take on while in college, with respect to weight, and in developing strategies in student development for promoting healthy and holistic development in the college environment.

- Develop and implement strategies that promote weight acceptance, making college campuses weight-safe environments.
- Develop and implement strategies for colleges to promote health behaviors, that de-emphasize weight and emphasize overall health.

- Develop and implement strategies that not only promote weight acceptance, but also address issues that may exacerbate weight awareness, and delay identity development.

Limitations

There are several limitations with this research that must be considered to place its significance in the proper perspective. As an exploratory study, this work has been limited in its ability to describe fully the relationship between the psychosocial aspects of weight and identity development. The research focused simply on the descriptions of weight awareness, during specific experiences, of a specific group of college students in the college environment. From these descriptions, the researcher could develop more encompassing findings requiring deeper analysis of the interview data, re-interviewing participants in an effort to validate the data. But the objective of this research was simply to explore this topic and uncover any significant themes that may be important in future research investigating the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment. This study did find significant categories of themes that describe the psychosocial aspects of weight for this population. The researcher confirmed the categories of themes through external materials and recently published research.

The second limitation of importance lies in that study used a grounded theory approach, but was unable to be executed as a pure grounded theory study. Grounded theory research typically does not have research questions or a background literature review before the research begins. But this study as a dissertation work, was required to have research questions and a literature review. It would not have been possible to gain IRB/HSRB approval from each of the respective institutions without research questions

or a literature review. The data collection and data analysis followed the grounded theory approach and although the number of participants, $n=19$, was small, the interview data collected provided deep and rich descriptions, that allowed the researcher to thoroughly analyze and become familiar with the narratives, and identify the emerging themes, map out the categories, and develop the emerging grounded theory. A greater number of participants may have detracted from this process, by not allowing the researcher enough time to be immersed within the data, and develop a relationship with the narratives.

Several other limitations must also be addressed. The research design required participants to reflect on their college experiences, specifically their first day in college, a classroom experience, and a campus experience. This technique of self-reflection may be considered a limitation, as a limited memory of the experience, or the experience having a different meaning based on the participants' perspectives in the present. But this limitation has been addressed by the responses themselves, in the similarity of the students' descriptions of these experiences.

Another limitation that must be considered is the lack of information presented discussing the infrastructure of each institution. Details describing the infrastructure or organization structure of each institution was not presented since it was not present in the interview responses. Future research should include questions that would elicit descriptions from the students and how they experience or make meaning of the institution itself. This could prove to be valuable, as the researcher was at first concerned about conducting the research at one of the institutions based on the interaction with a higher administration individual, who openly voiced his disdain for obese individuals,

and remarked that he didn't like seeing obese students walking through campus, as he looked out the window.

Future research might also include a discussion about health promotion based courses in college. Only one student in this current study mentioned a health promotion course, other students did address the topic of health, but usually in the context of going to the fitness center, but not to be healthy, just to change weight. At each of the two institutions in this study, health promotion courses are not required for the general student population, only for students in specific degree programs. Health promotion courses are available to all students as electives, and interviewing students specifically from these courses might have contributed to further limitations in generalizability.

The researcher was aware that her own appearance, weight, may influence recruitment of participants as well as the responses while students were being interviewed. It may have been difficult to recruit obese students if they perceived any level of discomfort or possible negative judgment by the researcher. But this may have also influenced the recruitment of average weight participants if the student was experiencing heightened weight awareness, weight concerns or conflicts. As the findings demonstrate, most of the participants described their weight awareness, weight concerns and coping strategies, but they were currently at a phase of either weight commitment or weight acceptance. These students discussed at length and with great detail their weight awareness. Those students less concerned with weight may have been more willing to participate, less threatened by the research, and therefore more open in their responses, and better able to articulate their experiences. Students actively in the phase of weight concern and conflict, experiencing heightened weight awareness may not be comfortable

discussing weight, and so would not have volunteered to participate in the study. Overall it should be noted that discussing such a personal issue as weight with a stranger can be intimidating and discomfoting.

The scope of this study was limited to college students, of traditional age 18-25 years, attending one of two higher education institutions in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., one private and one public of comparable student population. These two sites were chosen primarily because of their location, being easily accessible to the researcher. All of the students were interviewed at their respective colleges, on the college campuses to maintain the purpose of the research as a naturalistic inquiry. The location of the two institutions may have led to regionally-based conceptions about ideal weight, and an increased emphasis on appearance may have been expected at the urban private institution, but the current data shows no real difference in perceived weight ideals, or meanings prescribed to weight between the students from each institution. Although this cannot be determined due to the small number of students recruited from the public institution. The purpose of this study was not to show a comparison, but to collect data from a diverse group of students.

Only five students were recruited and interviewed from the public institution, and so it remains unclear, without further research, whether these findings are representative of the student population at this institution. The same could be said for the findings of the private institution, although 15 students participated at this site. Only two African American males were recruited and interviewed for this study, both from the public institution, and again it would be necessary to further investigate this topic among a larger group of African American males, from both the public and private institutions.

Two African American females participated in the study, both attended the public institution, and although their responses reflected similar responses as the other female students, it would be necessary to continue research with a larger sample of African American women at both the public and private institutions.

This study did include a number of Asian Americans, including one male, but there were not other ethnicities represented in the participant population. One female student, from the private institution, identified herself as lesbian, and her responses were similar to those of other females in the study. Future research should include a greater population of students from diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, gender and sexuality.

Future research should also be conducted at various types of higher education institutions, public and private of various sizes, including community colleges, and in various geographical regions of the United States. The type of institution a student chooses to attend and continues to attend contributes to overall identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This study included two large higher education institutions in the same region of the Mid-Atlantic, and the student populations at both may not be representative of students in other regions of the country or from smaller colleges.

Using a convenience sample could be considered a limitation from the position that the findings of this study cannot be applied beyond the students participating in the interviews. But this limitation has been addressed by having the participants describe themselves in the past, and currently, to confirm any weight awareness. Participants also provided descriptions of appearance and weight ideals.

The methodology of this study included interviews, investigating a personal issue, which could have contributed to the student-participants experiencing vulnerability during this process, or during specific questions and responses. The researcher-interviewer was aware of the potential for students experiencing any vulnerability or discomfort during the interviews, and kept the interviews conversational, with consistent positive reinforcement, and limited feedback comments so as not to project any personal values onto the student-participant or into the interview itself. The researcher believes this concept of vulnerability may be the reason many students chose not to participate, and why so few freshmen or sophomores participated in the interviews.

Conclusion

This research has been beneficial not only to the researcher's endeavor to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight, but the student-participants as well. The student-participants may have gained some benefit in understanding the complex meanings of weight in the college environment and their evolving identity as college students. The responses also indicated during the process of the interviews, the student-participants were better to make sense of their weight awareness and their college experiences. Their narratives were beneficial in advancing our understanding of weight awareness, and what it means for college students, as a factor many students contend with during their development within the college environment.

This research provided the basis for the development of an emerging grounded theory, Weight Awareness among College students. The proposed theoretical model includes the four major categories identified during the data analysis: 1) Weight Awareness; 2) Weight Concerns and Conflicts; 3) Weight Commitment and Identity

Consolidation; and 4) Weight Acceptance. Weight and body size are often used as measure of social status, belonging with a certain group (college students) or within a certain environment (college), as well as fitting-in, looking similar to or different from others or a perceived ideal. Being aware of weight and a span between a perceived ideal weight and a real weight contributed to levels of comfort or discomfort, being concerned with weight and experiencing a conflict with this discrepancy between ideal and real weights. Weight has much greater meaning for these college students than being a number; weight indicates value within the context of college, in the classrooms, dorms, and other campus spaces.

The results of this study provide the foundation in the proposed theoretical model that may reveal how college students experience weight awareness during specific situations in the college environment, and how weight is experienced is relative to the meanings the students' prescribed to weight. These experiences acted as stimuli for increasing or decreasing weight awareness, contributing to weight concerns and conflicts with the span between perceived ideal and real weights. Students responded to their weight concerns and conflicts by adopting coping strategies to manage weight. Some of the transitional experiences seemed to facilitate students' becoming more comfortable with their weights, accepting their weights with decreased emphasis on meeting the ideal, and being more invested in being a college student.

This research endeavor has been able to identify specific concepts regarding weight that previous research has only been able to discuss broadly in the context of body image and self-esteem, as well as a broad understanding of how comfort levels with one's body is an important factor in identity development. The findings of this study may help

to bridge the gap between understanding how weight is experienced and how these experiences play a role in identity development.

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Appendix A

The George Washington University

Human Subject Consent Form

Title of Research: An Exploratory Study of the Lived Experiences of Students and the Meaning of Weight While Attending College: What is the meaning of weight?

IRB Protocol#

Principal Investigator: Jacqueline Johnson, jacquegjohnson@gmail.com, 703-585-2596

Department: Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Higher Education Administration

You are invited to participate in a research study. You can refuse to participate at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with your current institution or participating sites. Ending your participation can be done easily by telling the research you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of students with weight concerns who are attending college.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following:

- Sign and return this consent form
- Complete the biographical sketch
- Schedule an interview with the researcher within one week
- Participate in a one hour interview

Total estimated time to participate in the study is approximately 60 minutes for the interview.

Risks of being in the study

- Participating in this study poses no risks that are not ordinarily encountered in daily life.
- In order to protect you from any foreseeable risk or discomfort, as a participant in this study, you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. At no time during this study will your real identity be revealed. Any person or place that you mention by name during this study will also be protected by confidentiality in this study. The institution you are attending will also remain confidential and will be referred to generically with a fictitious geographic location throughout the study (e.g., “she is attending a college located in the mid-west”). Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any point during the study with no questions asked.

Benefits of being in the study

- Participants will be provided an opportunity to contribute their personal experiences that may be valuable in this study.
- Your participation in this study will enhance the body of knowledge in higher education as there is no research about the lived experiences of students with weight concerns while attending college. Additionally, sharing your experiences may educate as well as increase understanding in institutions of higher learning, as well as contribute to the need for policies to reduce the discrimination of weight in college. You may also feel more empowered and encouraged after participation in this study.

Compensation: There is no compensation

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

- All records and personal information about each participant will be stored in a secure location in my home office.
- Only I, as the primary researcher, will have access to your records.
- All interviews will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Following the transcription, the audio recordings will be destroyed within one month following the transcription of interviews.
- All records and the identity of each participant of this study will be confidential.
- As mentioned above, you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to protect your identity throughout this study. At no time will your real name appear during the research or in the final report.
- Any person or place that you mention during your interviews will be held in confidence throughout the study and also assigned pseudonyms. The college you are attending will be referred to generically with a fictitious geographic location (e.g., she is attending a college located in the mid-west).

Contact Information:

If you have any questions at any time about this study, you may contact the primary researcher, Jacqueline Johnson, 12143 Derriford Court, Woodbridge VA 22192. You may also reach the researcher via email: jacqjohnson@mac.com ,or by phone: 703-585-2596.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact, Nicole Novak, Executive Coordinator, Office of Human Research, The George Washington University, Washington DC 20037, Phone: 202-994-0247.

Statement of Consent:

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described.

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____

Signature of Investigator:

_____ Date _____

The George Mason University
Human Subject Consent Form

Title of Project: An exploration of the psychosocial aspects of weight among college students in the college environment: What is the meaning of weight?

Principal Investigator: Jacqueline G. Johnson, MPH

Department: Higher Education Administration, Graduate School of Education and Human Development

Supervised by Dr. Rick Jakeman, Amanda Viseck, and Karen McDonald

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of the informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The Internal Review Board of The George Washington University has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning and daily-lived experiences of weight, through interviews and weblogs, among college students attending a large private research university and a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic, and using these narratives to explore the psychosocial aspects of weight that may shape their development with an emphasis on the construction of social identities.

What will I be Asked To Do?

As a participant, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will last from 1 hour, and then participate in a weblog as a follow-up to the interview over the next several weeks. The interview will be one-on-one and will be formatted to resemble an extended conversation between the researcher and yourself. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and the sensitivity of the topics discussed will be taken into consideration. The participant has the right to end participation at any time during the interview or weblog discussions. The participant should recognize that the study is intended to allow individuals with weight concerns an opportunity to present and discuss the topics on their own terms, without any fear of being openly criticized or intentionally offended. The researcher will make every effort to ensure that all individuals, who choose to participate and interviewed, be treated with the highest respect, consideration, and empathy.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate you will be asked to only provide your gender, age, academic major, undergraduate status, race/ethnicity, and athletic status. However, all of your information and the content from your biographical sketch, interview and weblog

will be kept confidential and your identity will remain anonymous (via a self-chosen pseudonym) from all other participants in the study. Please consider the options below:

1. I grant permission to be audio-taped: Yes _____ No _____
2. The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____
3. I would like to be given a summary of the themes that emerge from this work
Yes _____ No _____
4. I will participate in the weblog

My email/gmail address is:

Risks or Benefits

As mentioned above, some of the questions asked during the interview may be uncomfortable or distressing for you to answer. With that in mind, it is your right to withdraw from this study at any point in time. However, every effort will be made to ensure that you are treated with the highest respect for all the insight that you have to offer as part of your participation in this study. You will not be paid as part of your participation in this study.

Confidentiality and Records

No one except the researcher and her dissertation committee will have access to audio recordings of the interview, the transcribed text of the interviews and biographical sketch forms, and the informed consent forms. All of the research materials, including recordings, and text saved as computer files will be securely stored, accessible only to the researcher. Materials will be destroyed after two years.

Because participation in this study is voluntary, you as a participant have the right to withdraw from the study before, after, or even during the interview. If this right is exercised at any point during the interview, it will be stopped and you will be given the option to have any of your information collected by the researcher to this point.

Signatures (written consent)

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Name (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Jacqueline Johnson

jacqjohnson@mac.com or jacquejohnson@gmail.com

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact, Office of Human Research, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20037. Phone: 202-994-0247.

Appendix B

Biographical Information

Please provide a response to each section below. Although listed on this form, at no time during this study will your real name be disclosed. The information from this form will aid in creating a biographical sketch of you for this study.

Name (Pseudonym):

Age:

Gender:

Sexuality:

Race:

Email:

Student Status: (full/part time, freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)

At which higher education institution are you attending college?

Why did you choose to attend this college?

What do you like best about attending college at this institution?

What do you like the least about attending college at this institution?

Have you attended any other higher education institution prior to this college?

If so, which college(s) did you attend, and why did you leave that college?

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Script: Thank you for meeting with me today for this interview. This interview is part of a research project exploring weight perceptions, experiences in college, and identity development among college students. If for any reason you would like to end the interview or not respond to a question please let me know. During the course of our conversation together, I'll be asking questions with a style of wording that may be difficult to follow, so if you're confused at any time, by a particular question, the question can be re-worded or we can move on to the next question. I would like this to be a comfortable and pleasant experience for you, so if you have any questions please feel free to ask at any time. Would you allow this interview to be audio-recorded for future analysis?

Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

I'd like to review your biographical sketch:

Tell me about your first day in college.

Tell me about your overall experiences in college.

A specific experience in a classroom

A specific experience on campus, outside of the classroom

I'd like to explore your attitudes and perceptions of weight.

Were you aware of your weight during any of these experiences? If so, could you describe your awareness?

How did you feel about your weight?

What were you thinking about your weight?

Describe any awareness of time passing.

Describe your thoughts about the space around you.

I'd like to move on to more specific questions about weight.

How would you describe yourself physically?

What terms do you use to describe your own weight and body?

How do you feel about your weight/size/shape?

What do you think is the ideal in physical appearance for college students?

What terms do you use to describe other students' weights or bodies?

What do you think weight means to college students?

Have you tried, or are you currently trying, to change your weight?

What are the primary reasons for changing your weight?

Tell me about any concerns you have about your weight while in college?

Describe a specific event or situation that occurred while in college that may have made you aware of your weight or size.

Describe your awareness of your weight or size at this time.

What were you feeling at this time?

Tell me what you may have been thinking?

How did you feel about yourself overall?

How did you feel or think about your body and the space around you?

Were you aware of or sensitive to time passing?

Tell me about any specific interactions with others.

Describe your awareness of your weight or size at this time.

I'd like to return to discussing your experiences in college.

Do you use any of the students services or programs? Could you tell me why or why not you use these services?

Does your weight have any influence on your decisions to use or not use these services?

What has been your experience with using student services? Tell me about a specific experience you have had with one of the student services or programs.

Earlier in the interview, I asked you about specific experiences you had in the classroom and on campus in college, is there another specific experience, interacting with others, you would like to share that may have made you aware of your weight?

Do you have any comments or questions that you believe would be helpful in understanding this topic that I have not asked or discussed?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me for this research.

APPENDIX D

LETTER TO POTENTIAL RECRUITMENT SITES

Dear [Name of Supervisor, Head Administrator, etc]:

My name is Jacqueline Johnson and I am currently a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD) at The George Washington University.

I have written to you because I am conducting an exploratory interview, with a follow-up weblog, research study about the meaning and experiences of weight among college students. I would like to request your assistance in the process of recruiting students, by allowing me to advertise and recruit students in person.

The participants who I hope to interview for this study will be those currently enrolled undergraduate college students who personally express having weight concerns, and acknowledge the current emphasis on weight in our current society. I am contacting various Schools and Departments at The George Washington University with undergraduate program as the first step in recruiting students for this study.

Some of the research issues that I am interested in exploring include:

1. What is the meaning of weight for the college students?
2. How do college students describe daily-life experiences while in college in relationship to their meaning of weight?

If you are willing to advertise my study with your students, I will provide you with the flyers to be posted in areas accessible to undergraduate students. The flyers will include a summary of the study, the research objectives, as well as my contact information. Anyone who chooses to voluntarily respond to the flyers and wants to participate in the study will need to email me. I will then provide them with further details, and make them aware that their participation will be completely confidential and anonymous, in accordance with the approval granted me from the Internal Review Board at The George Washington University.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. If you have any concerns regarding my study, please feel free to contact me at (703) 585-2596 or at jacqjohnson@mac.com or jacquejohnson@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Johnson, MPH, Doctoral Candidate – HEA

The George Washington University

Appendix E

Format to Guide the Data Analysis

| Interview Topic | Research Question | Example Themes |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Body image, cognitive | Meaning of Weight | Didn't think I was thin |
| Body image, emotional | Meaning of Weight | Self-conscious |
| Body image, perceptual | Meaning of Weight | Saw self as different than other students |
| Body image, behavioral | Meaning of Weight | Diet to lose weight |
| Changing weight | Meaning of Weight | |
| Weight concern | Meaning of Weight | |
| Lived experience | Experiences in College | Self-conscious in Wellness center |
| Lived human interactions | Experiences in College | My friends |
| Lived body | Experiences in College | |
| Lived space | Experiences in College | Negotiating the desk |
| Lived time | Experiences in College | I wanted to leave quickly |
| Lived human interactions | Experiences in College | |
| Student services | Experiences in College | Don't need it |
| Campus | Experiences in College: | |
| Classroom | Experiences in College: | Sit in the back |

APPENDIX F
RECRUITMENT NOTICE VERSION A

**An Exploration of The Psychosocial Aspects of
Weight Among College Students in the College
Environment**

An Exploration of the Psychosocial Aspects of Weight Among College Students in the College Environment is a study being conducted at The George Washington University that deals with the issues that may be important to college students who are concerned with their weight. Specific topics that will be addressed include: the meaning of weight to the individual student, the experiences of daily life in college with respect to meaning of weight, how college students interact within the social and academic environment in college, and the influence weight may have on identity.

As a study participant you will also be a contributor, and you will be asked to take part in a single face-to-face confidential interview that will last anywhere from one to two hours, and a follow-up weblog. To participate you must be over 18 years of age, and a currently enrolled undergraduate college student at The George Washington University. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements of a Doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration.

If you are interested, or have more questions, please contact Jacqueline by email: jacqjohnson@mac.com or jacquejohnson@gmail.com.

APPENDIX G

RECRUITMENT NOTICE VERSION B

STUDY PARTICIPANTS ARE NEEDED CAN YOU HELP?

Does Weight Matter in College?

An Exploration of the Psychosocial Aspects of Weight Among College Students in the College Environment is a study being conducted at The George Washington University and George Mason University that deals with the issues that may be important to college students who are concerned with their weight. Specific topics that will be addressed include: the meaning of weight to the individual student, the experiences of daily life in college with respect to meaning of weight, how college students interact within the social and academic environment in college, and the influence weight may have on identity.

As a study participant you will also be a contributor, and you will be asked to take part in a single face-to-face confidential interview that will last anywhere from one to two hours, and a follow-up weblog. To participate you must be over 18 years of age, and a currently enrolled undergraduate college student at The George Washington University. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements of a Doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration.

If you are interested, or have more questions, please contact Jacqueline by email: jacqjohnson@mac.com or jacquejohnson@gmail.com.

APPENDIX H

BODY LABELS FREQUENCY

| Label | Freshman | | Sophomore | | Junior | | Senior | |
|--|----------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Self | Others | Self | Others | Self | Others | Self | Others |
| Skinny Super skinny Twig/stick Stick thin | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Anorexic, girls Needs to eat | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Thin | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Slim | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Slender, slight Svelte | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Healthy/unhealthy | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Normal/Average | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Overweight/Obese | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Heavy. Large, Big, Hefty, Huge | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Chubby, Chunky, Portly | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Fat, Fat-ass | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Thick | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Big butt/hips | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Double Chin | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Ugly Relatively Attractive | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Muscular Jacked | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Athletic/strong | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Small Small hands/feet | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Short/Tall | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Beautiful | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Disproportionate Proportionate Voluptuous/curves | 0 | | 1 | 1 | 0 | | 1 | 1 |

Frequency identified by HyperResearch software, for qualitative research.