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"There's Something Wrong About the Way You Look, There's Something Wrong with You": Memorable Messages Concerning Identity and Body Weight

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“THERE’S SOMETHING WRONG ABOUT THE WAY YOU LOOK, THERE’S
SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOU”: MEMORABLE MESSAGES
CONCERNING IDENTITY AND BODY WEIGHT

by

Scott A. Richmond

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
School of Communication
Advisor: Autumn Edwards, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
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From a foundational standpoint, this thesis would not have been possible without key works from G. H. Mead, Erving Goffman, and Mark L. Knapp. Their works on identity and communication formed the foundation upon which this thesis was constructed.

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As always, for Grandma.

Scott A. Richmond

**“THERE’S SOMETHING WRONG ABOUT THE WAY YOU LOOK, THERE’S
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CONCERNING IDENTITY AND BODY WEIGHT**

Scott A. Richmond, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2011

This thesis examined the body weight discourse through interviews concerning memorable messages received prior to and after a period of weight loss, along with messages’ effects on individuals’ identities. As the communication of messages concerning body weight and identity had yet to be thoroughly examined, this study worked to illuminate how the discourse is communicated.

Emergent themes were discussed, such as pre-weight loss messages communicating a separate social identity, less social desirability, and advice about body weight. Post-weight messages themes of acknowledging a change in appearance, positive valuation of the change, and questions on the weight change were also examined. Finally, identity effects including diminished self worth, desired acceptance pre-weight loss, and identity reaffirmation, motivation, and reflection upon the body weight discourse were detailed.

Implications for these themes were discussed, including expanding upon existing research involving memorable messages, and the results’ impacts for studying the body weight discourse.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of individuals qualifying as overweight or obese in North America continues to be a widely discussed and studied phenomenon (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden & Curtin, 2010, Ogden et al., 2010, Ogden et al., 2006; Pi-Sunyer, 1991). Being medically overweight has been defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 25.0 to 29.9, while a BMI of 30.0 or higher qualifies as medically obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden & Curtin, 2010). Being of above-average body weight continues to be a serious issue, as the results of a recent study of obesity prevalence in the United States showed that during 2007-2008 a reported 33.8% of adults qualified as obese, 32.2% of men and 35.5% of women, with a combined prevalence of overweight and obesity among men and women at 68% (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden & Curtin, 2010). Even more alarming, 31.7% and 12.6% of children ages 2-19 qualified as overweight, and obese, respectively (Ogden, et al., 2010).

As an increasing number of adults and children in North America fall under the medical classifications of overweight or obese, which carry with them a degree of social stigma (Degher & Hughes, 1999; DeJong, 1980; Strauss & Pollack, 2003), it becomes important that research works toward understanding the human experience of being of above-average weight. A gap exists in current research as to what messages are sent to those who have struggled with body weight, how these messages

change once body weight has been successfully reduced, and what effects these messages may have on individuals' communicative behaviors and senses of identity.

It is through the memorable messages framework that the connection between communicative events concerning body weight and identity can be examined. This study utilizes the memorable messages framework (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981) in order to understand the key messages overweight or obese individuals have received throughout their lives concerning their body weight. Chapter II will present a review of extant literature concerning the memorable messages framework, and key aspects of the body weight discourse. Obesity will be defined and discussed, particularly how it pertains to the construction of a separate social identity for those who are classified as overweight or obese. Identity as communication will be discussed, including the concept of the weight-related "fat" identity. How the "fat" identity is communicatively created and reinforced will be explained in detail, including how the identity is introduced and maintained, and the difficulties involved in letting go of such an identity. Particular attention will be paid to the way this role can continue to have a noticeable effect on an individual's life even after weight has been reduced.

Messages about weight and obesity act as key moments, and have an impact on an individual's socially constructed identity. Because of this, the memorable messages framework (Knapp, et al., 1981) will be utilized to understand the key communicative acts concerning an individual's body weight. The memorable messages framework has been utilized in a variety of ways, including investigating

messages regarding an individual's age (Holladay, 2002), and gender (Dallimore, 2003) but there has yet to be a comprehensive examination and application of the memorable message framework can be applied to messages concerning body weight.

As being of above-average body weight carries with it a degree of social stigma, Goffman's (1963) theoretical framing of stigma will be adopted, and existing literature on stigma in terms of the body weight discourse will be analyzed thoroughly. In doing so, a clear understanding of how the body weight discourse is carried out in terms of stigmatization of those of above-average body weight will be achieved, including how individuals are made to feel responsible for their stigmatized identity, and the effects of this stigmatization. Similarly, to account for as great an amount of the individuals' experiences as possible, supportive communication will be detailed, including how individuals evaluate instances of support, and how existing support literature lends itself to the memorable messages framework utilized for this study.

Chapter III of this thesis will detail the methodology of a qualitative study which was designed to illuminate patterns and similarities among the varied experiences of participants regarding memorable messages they have received concerning their body weight. The memorable messages framework provided the structure for the interview protocol. Knapp et al.'s (1981) key categories of a memorable message's structure and form were adapted in order to examine memorable messages pertaining to being of above-average body weight, having successfully lost weight, and the effect memorable messages such as these can have

upon identity. The study adopted a phenomenological (Husserl, 1931) approach, and consisted of interviews nine adult men and women, aimed at answering the questions concerning content of memorable messages received pre and post-weight loss, and the subsequent meaning-making process' effects on participants' identities.

Chapter IV will present the analysis of memorable messages pertaining to body weight pre and post-weight loss from a variety of interview participants, both in terms of message content and the recurring subsequent effects on identity. Themes concerning pre and post-weight loss messages and identity will be described to give insight into how the body weight discourse is carried out and how it ties into identity for these individuals. Within this chapter content and identity themes that are mirrored within pre and post-weight loss will be examined.

Chapter V will interpret the themes identified in participant interviews concerning pre and post-weight loss messages, and their effects on identity. Weight loss message themes' implications on individual and social levels will also be examined. The chapter will elaborate on how data collected for the study fits with the existing understandings of memorable messages, and how it branches off into new directions. The study's limitations will be explained and accounted for, and finally, future implications for research concerning memorable messages, body weight and identity will be discussed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Beyond the documented prevalence of obesity, the messages individuals receive concerning their body weights and physical appearances require further examination. Messages about being overweight or obese can lead to a distinct social identity which may be difficult to fully exit (Hoyt & Krogan, 2001). By examining memorable messages concerning weight, a greater understanding into these important messages is reached, particularly how, through said messages, the weight-related identity is created, maintained, or exited.

The memorable messages framework which served as the structure for this study will be explained in detail. The versatility and usefulness of memorable messages will be shown through a thorough review of its previous applications in a variety of communication-related contexts, including health communication, newcomer socialization, and memorable messages concerning the aging process.

Once the memorable messages framework has been established, the communication of both stigma and support will be detailed, with a focus on the existing literature that examines the obesity discourse through the effects of both stigma and support for those who possess the social identity inherent in being of above-average body weight. The concepts of support and stigma will also be explained through the lens of memorable messages, as both prove to be appropriate

avenues for its application. Before these concepts can be examined in detail, however, the concept of the identity must be explored, including the identity that is associated with being of above-average body weight.

Communication and Identity

Introduction

Identity as a concept has been studied and defined by numerous disciplines, including psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1990), and sociology (Schlenker, 1985; Stryker & Burke, 2000). While valuable, these conceptualizations of identity fail to account for the key role that communication serves in the construction and management of identity.

Identity

Mead's (1934) work concerning symbolic interactionism began to lay the groundwork for a communication-based conceptualization of identity. The formative works of Goffman (1959) emphasized the importance of communicated "performance" in identity enactment and negotiation, so the key role of communication for identity has long been established. For this study's purposes, Mokros' (2003) communication-focused definition of identity is most appropriate, as it detailed how identity is formed through an individual's self-reflection of discourse and interactions. Jung and Hecht (2004) elaborate upon this idea, describing identities as social relations and roles that are internalized by individuals, identities that are then acted out through communicative behaviors. An identity such as the one associated

with being of above-average body weight carries with it a discourse on how weight is viewed.

It is this weight-related identity, the “fat” identity, which must be examined. The body weight discourse and key interactions that individuals have concerning their body weights and physical appearances result in the construction and negotiation of a key identity. To begin, the symbolic interactionist approach must be elaborated upon, specifically in terms of its relation to the “fat” identity.

Identity as Social Construction

Mead’s (1934) concept of society shaping the self which then shapes behavior serves as a foundation for the individual identity as a socially created or influenced concept. This symbolic interactionist lens shows that society communicates messages to overweight or obese persons that create and maintain this weight-related aspect of their identities. These weight-related identities, once constructed, have a profound effect on the lives of individuals (Hoyt & Krogan, 2001; Wiederman & Hurst, 1997; Turner, Rose, & Cooper, 2005).

The symbolic interactionist perspective was utilized by Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) in order to distinguish that, although a person’s perception of self may agree substantially with how he or she believes others view him or her, there may not be a strong correlation between his or her sense of self and the views of peers and significant others. It could be assumed that children and adolescents who receive memorable messages concerning their body weights during their formative periods leads to greater salience of the “fat” identity throughout the rest of their lives. Existing

research has suggested that children would be significantly more susceptible to these messages than adults whose identities are already more fully formed (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Knapp et al.'s (1981) work concerning memorable messages supports this, because the vast majority of individuals were shown to have received memorable messages when they were younger than 21 years old. It is clear that the "fat" identity is a social construction, however it is important to analyze how individuals adopt this particular identity, and how, once adopted it is maintained, combated, or accounted for.

Identity Adoption and Maintenance

Examining how the "fat" identity is adopted and managed is very important. Degher and Hughes (1999) conceptualized the adoption of the "fat" identity through the career model, viewing the process through the external "public" level and the internal "private" level. The public level of the "fat" identity is communicated through active and passive status cues. The active status cues come from direct comments communicated by friends, peers, or spouses. It is these remarks upon the person's status as overweight or obese that act to create or reinforce the "fat" identity. Similarly, passive status cues act as a mechanism to reinforce this identity, such as mirror reflections, standing on a scale, or increasingly larger sizes of clothes needed to fit properly (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

Another important facet of Degher and Hughes' research on the "fat" identity was the cognitive process by which the overweight or obese individual becomes aware of his or her new identity. This is predicated upon the fact that all of the

participants in Degher and Hughes' study were under the impression that they were not always overweight or obese, even those who experienced childhood obesity (Degher and Hughes, 1999). This process, called recognizing, takes place when the subject realizes his or her old identity as a person of normal weight no longer applies. Once this change takes place, the individual begins to cope with the new, less socially desirable identity.

Coping with the "Fat" Identity

Degher and Hughes (1999) outlined several strategies for coping with the "fat" identity. The most common strategy is avoidance, which occurs when the individual avoids situations that call attention to his or her identity as overweight or obese, such as looking at mirrors or just not thinking about his or her weight. The strategy of reaction formation occurs through effectively reversing societal concepts of appropriate behaviors, in this case responding to critical messages about their weight by eating more. Compensation, in which individuals attempt to overachieve in other non-weight related areas such as humor, maturity, or excelling in their jobs in order to achieve a greater level of social acceptance. The final strategy, compliance, is exhibited by either embracing aspects of stereotypes inherent in the "fat" identity, or engaging in dieting or exercising behaviors solely to combat negative social effects rather than a genuine desire to increase their health. These findings begin to provide an important understanding in what behaviors the individual may participate in as he or she attempts to manage the socially constructed identity that comes with obesity.

Degher and Hughes' research showed examples of "accounts" as a way to combat the "fat" identity. Persons of above-average body weight showed a tendency to communicate stories designed to explain or rationalize the cause of their obesity. These narratives were designated as either "fat stories," in which the narrator explained that his or her obesity should be excused due to the existence of outside factors, or "eating stories," which are focused more on justifying eating behaviors based upon circumstances out of his or her control. The distinction between justification and excuse is an important one to make in regard to how those with the "fat" identity communicate these accounts to others. Beyond how individuals create and cope with this identity however, it is important to also examine the impacts that the "fat" identity can have.

Impacts of the "Fat" Identity

Introduction

The "fat" identity impacts the quality of life for those who have adopted it (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Turner, Rose & Cooper, 2005). Aside from the need to engage in excuses or justification for their physical appearance, the interpersonal relationships, and in the case of women, sexual self-schema of these individuals have been shown to be negatively affected (Wiederman & Hurst, 1997). By examining these effects it is possible to understand not only how the identity is created and maintained, but also what toll the "fat" identity may take on those who are overweight or obese.

Self-Perception

To begin illuminating the effects the fat identity may have on individuals, it is first necessary to examine the effects on quality of their self perceptions. In a study by Hoyt and Kogan (2001), college aged adults were polled on their satisfaction with a list of specific parts of their body, as well as information on their body mass index and their current relationship status. Although the results of the study showed that overall a substantial amount of both male and female participants reported being satisfied with their overall body appearance, both genders reported being less satisfied with their current weight. Tellingly, weight dissatisfaction was shown to be related to increased dissatisfaction with overall appearance in the female participants, and decreased satisfaction in relationships and sex lives for men. This study gives important evidence of the diverse, but equally important effects the “fat” identity has for men and women.

Relational Well-Being

The effect of the “fat” identity on interpersonal relationships was examined further in a study by Carr and Friedman (2006) aimed at shedding light on the impact obesity has on quality of relationships. The authors’ findings showed that weight had little effect on reported satisfaction with friendships, coworker relationships or spousal support (Carr & Friedman, 2006). This finding was attributed to the fact that these relationships are entered into and maintained voluntarily. However it also aligns with the concept of sympathetic “wise persons,” individuals who see past the effects

of the “fat” identity and embrace the overweight or obese person for who they are (Goffman, 1963).

Although this is encouraging information, it must be noted that the participants in this study were obese or overweight adults. It could be that upon reaching adulthood, an individual’s weight no longer affects such interpersonal relationships, but as will be elaborated upon later in this study, this is not the case for individuals who qualified as overweight or obese during their childhood or adolescence (DeJong, 1980). It may be the case that although obese or overweight adults no longer report any less satisfaction in terms of relationships with peers, the way that they perceive these relationships and their skills for interpersonal communication within the context of these relationships still may show effects of their “fat” identity’s construction during their more formative years.

Carr and Friedman’s (2006) study had notably different results for relational well-being in terms of obese or overweight persons’ families. Although obesity was shown to have a negative effect on familial relations by obese persons who had reported being obese or overweight since childhood or adolescence, participants who qualified as being of “normal” weight or “underweight” did not report these negative effects. As the participant entered adulthood, increased body mass index was shown to be negatively related with the level of emotional support received from family members. Literally, the larger the participant became, the less support he or she received from his or her own family.

Furthermore, in a study of obese adolescent girls, those who qualified as obese reported a negative correlation between maternal care and support and negative beliefs about themselves, such as fear of abandonment and lack of self-control (Turner, Rose, & Cooper, 2005). These participants also perceived their fathers as less caring and more overprotective than average-weight peers perceived their own fathers. This is particularly important because it has been shown that the stigmatized individual's connectedness with family and parental relationships acts to protect against the negative stereotyping and discrimination that accompanies obesity (Mellin, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002). The "fat" identity that is a part of the obesity discourse has been shown to have negative effects on key interpersonal relationships for those who qualify as above average weight. Because of this, it becomes even more important to understand how individuals work towards exiting this identity. Existing research has shown that exiting such an identity can be a complicated and difficult process.

Exiting an Identity

The "fat" identity, like any identity that exists within a person's conceptualization of the self, is not easily abandoned, even if a new set of circumstances arises where such an identity is no longer appropriate (Turner, 1990). A person typically has many identities, and multiple role relationships with multiple groups (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The more salient an identity is to the individual, the more that salience will be reflected in a variety of situations in different groups and contexts (Stryker & Burke, 2000). It stands to reason that because the "fat" identity

and its inherent roles can be a factor from childhood onward, it becomes a powerfully salient identity for obese persons, particularly if it was adopted during a formative period such as youth. Because of this, the identity may not be easy to let go of or change.

Even when an individual is in the process of exiting such a role, such as an obese person losing weight and improving their health, other members of society continue to expect certain role-related behaviors that were based on the person's previous identity (Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1988). Six major issues have presented themselves when it comes to exiting a previous socially constructed identity, including presentation of self after the exit, the cues a person emits to signal that a change has been made, and they should be placed differently in the social order. The social reactions, either positive or negative depending on if the change is generally considered to be a positive or negative one. Intimacies, or adjustments that are made in regard to sexual or intimate relationships. Exiting an identity can lead to shifting friendship networks, or changes to a person's social circle that may occur once a specific role has been exited. Relating to group members and other exes, the fact that previous interpersonal relationships may be a part of the role that has been exited. And finally role residual, a maintained identification with an old role (Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1988).

Jettisoning the "fat" identity could result in any or all of these issues associated with role exit, especially because exiting the role should mean the absence of the more negative aspects of the obesity discourse. This should have a noticeable

impact on the individual's social standing, as losing weight has shown to improve an individual's body image, self esteem, and lead to professional gains (Adami, Gandolfo, Campostano, Giambattista, & Scopinaro, 1997; Sarlio-Lahteenkorva, 2000). Most importantly for the purpose of this study, however, is the concept of role residual, or how the effects of the "fat" identity may remain for the post-obese, impacting their interpersonal relationships and overall quality of life.

The difficulty in making the transition from an above-average weight identity to a normal weight identity was investigated in a study by Sarlio-Lahteenkorva (2000). Within the study, nine reduced-obese women who had successfully maintained a substantial weight loss for a period of at least seven years were interviewed. Interestingly, these women identified themselves as possessing a separate identity apart from those who were obese or had always been of an average-weight: post-obese. If this is the case, further research is warranted into how individuals communicatively maintain the post-obese identity and how it impacts these individuals' interpersonal relationships. Evidence is shown that feelings associated with being overweight or obese may not disappear once body weight has been reduced (Sarlio-Lahteenkorva, 2000).

Similarly, Adami et al. (1997) noted variations within post-obese patients themselves based upon the point in their lives when individuals were first classified as overweight or obese. Reported body dissatisfaction of adult-onset obese persons was shown to be very similar to those who had never been obese. Early-onset obesity, despite having similar body weights as the adult-onset group, reported a higher level

of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Adami et al. (1997) hypothesized that those who created the “fat” identity early on in life continue to regard themselves as obese, even as their body weights and body shapes stabilize to “normal” levels.

Through studying the socially constructed “fat” identity, including how it is created, maintained, exited, and what effects it has upon individuals, we can better understand this key aspect of the obesity discourse. This study is an effort to do just that, by adopting a framework that will allow for analysis of the messages that act as a key part of the communicative creation and management of the weight-related identity.

Memorable Messages

Introduction

The memorable messages framework is one that easily lends itself to the study of key messages concerning body weight. In the foundational work concerning memorable messages, Knapp et al. (1981) defined memorable messages as those messages communicated to an individual that (a) one is able to remember for an extended period of time, or is able to recall with clarity when it becomes appropriate; and (b) that the individual perceives to have had an important influence on his or her life. Memorable messages tended to be of such great importance to the individual that he or she was able to recount with a high level of certainty the message word-for-word, even if they were received years in the past (Knapp et al., 1981).

Stohl (1986) further clarified the makeup of memorable messages, outlining five key characteristics. Memorable messages (a) tend to be brief, orally delivered

messages; (b) were of a personal nature, discussing important issues in the recipient's life, or were delivered at an important stage of the person's life; (c) outlined rules of conduct or advice on dealing with various events; (d) worked to reinforce current societal expectations; and (e) came from a source perceived to be of higher status (age, intelligence, etc) than the receiver.

Application of Memorable Messages

Just as the content of memorable messages can consist of any number of topics, the framework of memorable messages has been applied to a number of contexts, including socialization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986), health messages (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Smith, Nazione, Laplante, Kotowski, Atkin, Skubisz, & Stohl, 2009), dating (Holladay & Coombs, 1991), and self-assessment and behavior (Ellis & Smith, 2004; Smith & Ellis, 2001). The memorable messages framework was utilized in the context of organizational socialization early on, beginning with Stohl's (1986) work, and has been applied in this context on several occasions since (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Dallimore, 2003).

In order to understand the content, context, structure and form of memorable messages within an organizational setting, Stohl (1986) conducted a series of interviews with members of a small organization. Participants were able to recall a memorable message, most of which were, as Knapp et al. (1981) had theorized, heavily rule-based in structure, applicable to a variety of contexts, delivered by a source with a perceived level of credibility and occurred early in employment. This concept of memorable messages occurring shortly after subjects join an organization

was the focus of a later study by Barge and Schlueter (2004), who sought to investigate memorable messages within the socialization process of new organization members. Their study showed an emphasis on “fitting in” with the existing patterns and behaviors of the organization while simultaneously building a person’s own individual skills (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). The socialization discourse was also shown to be overwhelmingly positive within the results of the study, with the majority of memorable messages perceived as benevolent, rather than as a matter of office politics (Barge & Schlueter, 2004).

Memorable messages have proven to be appropriate for the study of organizational socialization, but the context of health communication is another rich area for their application. A study by Ford and Ellis (1998) effectively bridged the gap between organizational socialization and health communication. In their study of recalled messages of support and nonsupport nurses received, Ford and Ellis applied the memorable messages framework by analyzing (a) the structure and form of messages received, (b) the context and timing of the messages, (c) the existing relationship between the source and the receiver of the messages, and (d) the content of the message and its effects.

Through the twenty-six interviews with nurses at a Midwestern hospital, results showed that the memorable messages framework supplied a “useful analytical tool for identifying and understanding... memorable support and nonsupport messages” (Ford & Ellis, 1998, p. 59). Memorable messages were once again shown to have had a lasting influence on participants within the study. However, Ford and

Ellis noted that how this influence manifested itself was not clear. Beyond solidifying memorable messages' appropriateness in studying support and non-support messages, the study also reinforced Stohl's (1986) assertion that memorable messages are often sent by a figure of some perceived authority for the recipient, because the superior-subordinate relationship was shown to be a key factor in the giving and receiving of memorable supportive and non-supportive messages (Ford & Ellis, 1998).

Further work exists on memorable messages within the context of health communication. Specifically, Smith et al. (2009) examined memorable messages concerning breast cancer, including what the main sources of such messages were, what topics they discussed, and the relationship between these topics and sources and breast cancer detection and prevention behaviors.

Participants were recruited through various channels, including breast cancer awareness organizations and several universities, before completing a web-based survey asking them to recall a memorable message about breast cancer, and answer a series of questions concerning characteristics of that message. Four memorable message topics emerged from the results (from most common to least), (a) detection, (b) awareness, (c) treatment and (d) prevention. Most messages concerning breast cancer came from the media, followed by friends, family members and health care professionals. Messages originating from healthcare professionals were associated primarily with detection behaviors, while other sources were equally likely to be associated with prevention and detection (Smith, et al., 2009).

Memorable messages were investigated within the health communication context in yet another distinct manner, during Keeley's (2004) investigation of final conversations (FCs) between terminally ill individuals and their surviving family members. The study was an effort to understand the major themes concerning religiosity and spirituality during FCs, and, because memorable messages are rule-bound (Knapp et al., 1981), what rules of conduct may have governed messages of spirituality and religiosity during FCs.

A series of retrospective interviews on the topic of FCs with deceased family members were conducted provided participants have had an FC experience with a loved one, and that they could clearly recollect the conversation. Eighty-seven percent of participants reported memorable messages concerning faith and spirituality during these conversations, with the overarching themes of validation and rules of conduct being the most commonly reported. Validation of the terminally ill family member's religious beliefs included feelings of comforting and community, whereas rules of conduct centered on instructions for how to carry on once the loved one was gone, and to continue living a religious and spiritual life.

Holladay (2002) investigated the content, context and structure of memorable messages, utilizing the framework to examine messages individuals received concerning the aging process. With this purpose in mind, questionnaires were issued concerning memorable messages individuals may have received about various aspects of the aging process.

Whereas previous works concerning memorable messages indicated that they tended to be rule-structured (Knapp, et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986), memorable messages concerning aging were more likely to be more concerned with observations or insights (Holladay, 2002). Memorable messages about aging were also reported to be primarily conveyed in private settings, by senders who were likely to be female and older than the receivers. Senders were also commonly seen to have benevolent motives for the messages, in keeping with previous research on memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986).

Similarly to how memorable messages have proven to be a worthwhile frame for examining key messages in organizational and health contexts, they have also been used as a lens for the study of individuals' self-assessment and behavior. In their study, Smith and Ellis (2001) questioned university students regarding behaviors that participants had enacted that exceeded or violated their expectations for themselves, and then asked participants to articulate any memorable messages they may have received from a key person in their life regarding this unexpected behavior.

Results of the study showed that in almost every instance of behavioral self-assessment reported, there was a corresponding memorable message involved. Furthermore, a connection between type of recalled behavior, valence of the behavior and the categories of memorable messages was shown within the results (Smith & Ellis, 2001). Specifically, positive behaviors (kind, calm, helpful and considerate) were linked with a positive valence, and corresponded with memorable messages such as "be kind, loyal and patient" and "the golden rule" (Smith & Ellis, 2001, p.

166). Behaviors concerning substance abuse were assigned a negative valence, because they corresponded with memorable messages concerning responsibility and the importance of living a healthy lifestyle. Finally, behaviors involving personal choices such as signing a lease or studying for exams were coupled with memorable messages of hard work and responsibility, and the valence varied depending on whether the participant's behavior violated or complimented the memorable messages (Smith & Ellis, 2001).

This application of memorable messages was replicated and extended by Ellis and Smith (2004) in a second study, designed to collect data on a larger scale by utilizing a diary format to examine links between self-assessment of behavior and memorable messages. University students were asked to complete a journal reporting instances of their own behaviors that exceeded their expectations, positively or negatively, once per day. Results of this study showed similar memorable messages, sources, and positive and negative behaviors to that of the previous study (Ellis & Smith, 2004, Smith & Ellis, 2001). The results of the previous study were also expanded upon within the diary application, identifying additional memorable message sources such as bosses, customers at work, police and co-workers (Ellis & Smith, 2004).

The connection between memorable messages, facework and identity was explored by Heisler and Ellis (2008) in the context of the construction of the “mother identity.” The study examined the content and sources of memorable messages sent to women concerning motherhood, on the grounds that “a woman’s identity as mother is

shaped through experiences, interactions with, and messages from others” (Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p. 449).

Surveys were distributed to mothers of at least one child, asking them to detail a memorable message concerning motherhood, as well as measuring the types and sources of memorable messages they had received, and their desire to construct a “good mother” identity through facework. The four themes that emerged from the research were (a) placing the most priority on motherhood, (b) certain characteristics and behaviors being necessary for motherhood, (c) motherhood being unidimensional, and (d) motherhood being dialectic. Respondents’ family members were the primary source of these memorable messages about motherhood, reinforcing the importance of family in terms of identity and memorable messages (Heisler & Ellis, 2008).

Participants in the study did detail their facework behaviors concerning motherhood, most often in order to gain acceptance from other individuals, for personal reasons, or in order to help others (Heisler & Ellis, 2008).

Memorable messages present a framework that is easily adaptable to a variety of contexts within the study of communication. Because of this, it lends itself to the study of key messages individuals receive concerning their body weights throughout their lives. Furthermore, because memorable messages are relevant to identity (Heisman & Ellis, 2008), the memorable message framework is an appropriate means through which to explore issues of body and weight-related identity. With this in mind, it is important to examine two key aspects of messages that persons who have

experienced being overweight or obese may receive: messages of stigmatization and messages of support.

Stigma

Introduction

Numerous types of physical or psychological deviance from the norm have long been conceptualized as “stigma,” described by Goffman (1963) as any sort of attribute that is considered discrediting to the person for whom it applies. Although Goffman does not specifically single out being of above-average body weight as a form of physical deviance that leads to a social stigma, he does make reference to “physical deformities” or “abominations of the body” that may lead to stigma.

Cahnman (1968) points out that those stigmatized due to being overweight or obese often face severe instances of discrimination, ridicule and humiliation. Those who qualify as above-average body weight are subjected to messages and behaviors that qualify as stigmatization in our culture (Smith, 2007).

Smith (2007) described the communication of stigma in terms of messages that possess the following four attributes: cues that (a) distinguish people, (b) categorize the stigmatized as a separate social identity, (c) implicate responsibility for being placed within this group, and (d) link the group to physical or social peril. This conceptualization of stigmatizing communication will be utilized as a framework for how stigma communication plays out in terms of body weight, beginning with social marginalization.

Social Marginalization

Those faced with the stigma of obesity must contend with numerous and varied discriminatory events throughout their lives (Cahnman, 1968). Strauss and Pollack (2003) have shown that overweight children are socially marginalized among their peers. In their study consisting of seventh to twelfth graders, participants were asked to designate their five best male and five best female friends. Study results indicated that the children reported to be obese were less likely to be designated as “friend” or “best friend” by their peers. Overweight children also reported nominating a significantly higher amount of others for friendship than they themselves received from their normal-weight peers. This is a clear example of how stigmatizing messages communicate distinctions between the majority and the stigmatized group. A clear distinction concerning social desirability is communicated between average-weight children and their heavier classmates.

Strauss and Pollack (2003) noted that this social marginalization may serve to further aggravate the social and emotional consequences overweight children suffer, creating fewer opportunities for children who qualify as obese to become socially acclimated over time. The message of societal inferiority that is a part of the obesity discourse could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more children are stigmatized by messages that they are not as desired for friendship as their average-weight peers, the less opportunity these children will have to develop socially at a healthy rate (Strauss & Pollack, 2003). Stigmas such as the one connected to obesity have a profound impact upon group rejection and anticipated group entry stress in children,

with heavier children being significantly less likely to be accepted into a group dynamic (Sunwolf & Leets, 2004). In effect, the stigmatized are distinguished as a separate identity, not allowed within socially created peer-groups (Smith, 2007). Not only that, but individuals are made to feel that they are themselves responsible for this separate identity, and the stigmatization that accompanies it.

Personal Responsibility for Stigmatization

An important aspect of the messages within communication stigma is the concept that the stigmatized are themselves to blame for the condition that sets them apart from the norm (Smith, 2007). A study by DeJong (1980) showed evidence that personal responsibility was communicated via the stigma of obesity, as peers often labeled stigmatized children as being self-indulgent or lacking in self-control, which was then assumed to be the cause of their obesity. DeJong's study provided groups of teenage participants with photographs and information of obese and non-obese girls their own age, with one obese example offering information about a glandular disorder causing obesity, and one without, but expressing a sincere desire to lose weight through improved diet. Results of the study showed that although an overweight peer who was able to proffer a sufficient "excuse" for his or her condition was perceived as almost as likeable as the normal-weight peer, the second peer without the glandular disorder was consistently rated as significantly less likeable, even if this individual expressed a desire to achieve social normality (DeJong, 1980). The participants within this study demonstrated a correlation between obesity and a negative social bias, providing an example of the inherent responsibility for a person's

condition that is a part of the obesity stigma. These messages of personal responsibility and blame act to reinforce desired sets of behaviors within the obesity discourse, and it is natural that recipients of these messages will engage in various behaviors in effort to cope.

Coping With Stigma

Although little has been done to explore how children or young adults manage to cope with stigma, research has focused on how adult obese persons have worked to cope with stigmatizing messages. Overweight adults have shown efforts to communicatively combat the responsibility aspect of stigma, as participants in Throsby's (2007) study reported a deeply-held belief that their bodies were innately fat-prone, as well as the belief that their obesity was not a matter of their own doing, but rather was caused by "life getting in the way." Similar narratives for coping have appeared in other research on obesity (Degher & Hughes, 2007). Participants in Throsby's (2007) study universally reported that their bodies were genetically "fat-prone," making the issue of their obesity an unavoidable matter of genetics. Furthermore, for those who suffered from adult-onset obesity and therefore had less reason to cite the "fat gene" as an excuse, above-average weight was described as a matter of key life events that were either largely or entirely out of their control, such as the dissolution of a marriage, unrelated health issues, or lifestyle changes. By framing obesity as a matter out of their hands, participants engaged in a discursive act of resistance to the aspect of stigma communication that claims individuals are responsible for their physical appearances.

Public Discourse

The final aspect of Smith's (2007) concept of stigma communication is perhaps best explained through public, rather than interpersonal, discourse. The media at large puts forth a great deal of effort in order to frame obesity as a threatening and damaging factor for physical health. Media representations of obesity not only act to inform on the health risks inherent in maintaining an above-average weight, they also communicate meanings that influence how certain sub-groups of the population, such as those living with obesity, are viewed (Lyons, 2000). Thus, public discourse takes on a moral and ethical perspective on how to view obese persons. Whereas a focus on health concerns provides a clear example of the physical peril that is communicated through the media, the social peril that Smith describes is perhaps less overt. The framing of obesity as social peril may best be found through the increasing emphasis that is placed upon thinness as a social ideal (Rich & Evans, 2005).

Without acting to discount the severity of the health risks inherent in morbid obesity, Rich and Evans (2005) attempted to bring to light the fact that often those who are overweight or moderately obese are lumped with those who are morbidly obese in the statistical reports of health risks, effectively subjecting the former to the same stigma of ill health associated with the latter. Rich and Evans once again made note of the concept that the obesity discourse positions the individual as inherently responsible for his or her weight, and that media framing leads to the concept that socially desirable or even virtuous traits are inherent in maintaining an average weight (Rich & Evans, 2005). By creating and reinforcing a connection between thinness and

positive character traits, the media perpetuates the stigmatization of obese persons by connecting them with the opposite traits, or self-indulgence and a lack of self-control. Rich and Evans argued that offering alternative narratives regarding the obesity discourse will allow for a more level discussion of obesity within our culture, which could act in part to alleviate the stigma placed upon persons of above-average body weight.

Stigmatizing Memorable Messages

Knapp et al. (1991) noted that the majority of people reporting on their memorable messages described instances in which the sender was believed to be acting with the receiver's best interest at heart, with a smaller percentage believing messages were sent in order to hurt the recipient or were motivated by selfishness. Regardless, because stigmatization is such an inherent part of the body weight discourse (DeJong, 1980; Strauss & Pollack, 2003), it is likely that memorable messages concerning body weight will often include less positive events.

Research concerning memorable messages has illustrated that messages can enact a socializing effect on recipients, describing societal expectations for their behaviors (Holladay, 2002), and containing content on how message recipients should change or improve their self concept (Knapp et al., 1981) In this way, memorable messages correspond strongly with the concepts behind communication of stigma, because stigmatization messages can be seen as signals that individuals' behaviors are not meeting societal expectations and should be changed or "improved" (DeJong, 1980; Strauss & Pollack, 2003).

Summary

Individuals who are classified as overweight or obese within our culture are likely to be subjected to stigmatizing messages at some point in their lives. These messages carry with them specific content, including as an individual's personal responsibility for his or her stigmatized condition, and a degree of social marginalization. Because of these factors, it is important to examine the content of memorable messages pertaining to obesity and weight loss. It is equally important, however, to consider that memorable messages may function positively to provide support concerning body weight and appearance.

Supportive Communication

Introduction

Support messages make up a key aspect of the body weight discourse. Individuals who qualify as overweight or obese often seek out support from others, as do those attempting to either reduce body weight or maintain weight loss (Kayman, Bruvold, & Stern, 1990). Additionally, utilization of available social support has been related to successfully maintaining reduced body weight (Kayman et al., 1990). Therefore, memorable messages of support within the obesity discourse are another valuable avenue for study. This portion of the literature review will explain why social support is best conceptualized as an act of communication, and examine several key aspects of social support messages, including their effectiveness and outcomes.

Social Support as Communication

Although social support can be conceptualized in many ways, it is most appropriately viewed through the communication lens. Of the three separate perspectives that emerge from the literature on social support--sociological, psychological and communicative--each perspective has its own merits (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Goldsmith, 2004; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). Of the three, the conceptualization of social support as communication (supportive communication) is the most well-balanced and appropriate for our purposes. As noted by Vangelisti (2009), whereas the sociological and psychological perspectives place a focus upon group membership and the type and amount of support available respectively, “a communication perspective focuses on the interactions that occur between the providers and recipients of support... the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that individuals engage in when they are trying to provide someone with help (enacted support)” (p. 40). The emphasis upon the communicative acts between two parties (i.e., messages) makes the communication-based perspective on social support the best means of exploring the nature and function of body weight-related memorable messages. Once this perspective has been adopted, key aspects of supportive communication can be analyzed, beginning with how recipients evaluate messages of this type.

Evaluating Supportive Communication

It is important to gain an understanding of how individuals evaluate the effectiveness of support messages once they are received. Comforting

communication, defined by Burleson (1994) as “messages having the goal of alleviating or lessening the emotional distress experienced by others” (p. 135), provides a solid starting point in understanding social support as an act of communication, and one that can easily be applied to those who have dealt with the largely negative body weight discourse. As noted by Bippus (2001), the concept of comforting communication places a specific emphasis on support as a communicative act, and is conceptualized as being made up of person-centered messages, those that are “tailored to individuals rather than their role or position” (p. 302). Person-centeredness is the basis of Burleson’s (1994) coding system for describing the sophistication of comforting communication in terms of: (a) listener-centeredness (rather than speaker-centered), (b) neutrality (avoiding evaluative statements about the people, feelings or actions involved), (c) feeling-centeredness (emphasis on the person’s feelings rather than the events that had transpired), (d) acceptance of the distressed individuals (avoiding placing emphasis on the comfort provider’s perspective), and (e) provision of cognitively-oriented explanations of receivers’ feelings that aid receivers in finding reasons for their feelings they may be incapable of perceiving during the intensity of the moment.

Bippus (2001) elaborated upon existing research on comforting communication in a study designed to better understand how message receivers evaluate the supportive communication they are offered by other individuals. Through a mixed methods study examining individuals’ perceptions of times in their lives when they received social support from a significant other, results demonstrated five

sets of criteria often utilized to evaluate the skillfulness of comforting communication: (a) other orientation, caring and accepting, (b) problem solving, (c) relating, (d) refraining from general negativity, and (e) different perspective. Beyond the skillfulness factors outlined within Bippus' study, three outcome factors also emerged from the data, explaining what types of outcomes from the supportive communication are most likely to result in the message receiver seeing the comforting messages as effective: (a) positive mood, either an upswing in the mood of the distressed person, or a higher regard for the person providing comfort, (b) empowerment, a feeling of increased ability to cope with their upsetting situation due to the comforting messages, and (c) stopped rumination, resulting in the distressed person no longer thinking about the issue at hand continuously once they have received the supportive messages.

Burleson (2009) continued to elaborate on the effectiveness of support communication interactions, first by defining several phases of supportive interactions enacted by the distressed person and the support-giver. Supportive interactions involved (a) displays of distress or support seeking efforts by the recipient, (b) the provision of supportive messages by the helper, (c) responses by the recipient to the helper's messages, and (d) reactions by the helper to the recipient's responses. Four factors emerged as particularly important to predicting recipients' reactions to support messages. Factors included the message, the source of the message, the interactional context, and the recipient of the message.

Message content for supportive communication consists of factors such as the explicit message from the support giver, the degree of facework or politeness strategies that are enacted, the type and quality of support, as well as non-message and nonverbal factors (Burleson, 2009). The sender, or the source of the message, also has an impact on how the support seeker receives the message. Factors such as gender, quality of relationship between the two parties and credibility of the sender are important to take into account (Burleson, 2009). The context in which the supportive interaction takes place cannot be discounted either, because the increasing diversity of settings (face-to-face, computer mediated) and the physical setting factors (privacy, location, noise) can impact the outcome of the supportive interaction (Burleson, 2009). Finally, the support recipient's own features, such as demographic characteristics, personality dimensions, and cognitive attributes may exert an influence on the outcome of supportive communication. It is worth noting that these contributing factors do not operate in isolation, "but it appears that many (and perhaps most) of these factors operate in concert with each other" (Burleson, 2009, p. 27).

Supportive Memorable Messages

The memorable messages framework easily lends itself to supportive messages regarding weight and physical appearance. Bippus' (2001) findings on supportive messages containing an emphasis on problem solving is echoed within Knapp et al.'s (1981) conceptualization of memorable messages: "the content of memorable messages is also most often... action-oriented- i.e., contains prescriptions of what one should or should not do rather than passive remarks..." (p. 32-33). Past

research has shown that recipients of memorable messages view the senders to have positive motivations, giving advice or comments with the recipient's own welfare in mind (Knapp, et al., 1981), and have reported a strong change in their lives due to these messages (Holladay, 2002).

Summary

Just as individuals who are overweight or obese are likely to receive messages of stigmatization, they are likely to also be recipients of memorable messages of support pertaining to their physical appearance. Memorable messages have shown to be orally delivered messages concerning issues that individuals consider to be important to their lives (Stohl, 1986). Additionally, memorable messages are often structured as rules, at times designed to reinforce societal expectations for an individual (Knapp et al., 1981; Smith & Ellis, 2001). With this in mind, it is clear that memorable messages are applicable to studying key messages concerning body weight. Therefore, the following research question was offered:

RQ1: What are the memorable messages associated with being of above-average body weight?

These factors concerning memorable messages are just as applicable when studying messages received from individuals once their weight has been reduced. Research has shown that even when an individual exits a social role, society's messages may not change, or do so slowly over time (Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1998). Additionally, because reducing body weight for overweight or obese individuals has been shown to correspond with an improved self-image, as well as gains within social

and professional lives (Adami et al., 1997), the memorable messages concerning body weight once weight has been reduced is another important area of study:

RQ2: What are the memorable messages associated with significantly reducing a person's body weight?

Memorable Messages and Identity

Being of above-average body weight can lead to the development of a specific, separate socially-constructed identity (Degher and Hughes, 1999). Knapp et al. (1981) stated that, along with an individual's ability to get along with others, an individual's self concept is one of the two most common topics that make up memorable messages. Existing research has illustrated the importance of memorable messages in terms of social identities such as motherhood, (Heisler & Ellis, 2008), and therefore can be adapted for other identities as well. This study examines not only the content of memorable messages about body weight, but also their effects on individuals' body weight-related identities. Therefore, a final research question was posed:

RQ3: What effects do memorable messages associated with body weight have on individuals' senses of identity?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Although the memorable messages framework has been utilized in a variety of contexts, it was applying these concepts in the context of body-weight and self image messages that allowed for valuable insights into what key messages individuals have received both prior to and post-weight loss. This study was an investigation of these messages through the application of the memorable messages framework (Knapp et al., 1981). Depending on the stage of development at which the individual receives these messages and whom these messages are from, messages pertaining to body weight and appearance could have a profound effect on his or her socially constructed identity. Because of this, this study also accounted for the effects that the memorable messages may have on the individual's sense of identity.

In order to accomplish the goal of understanding memorable messages concerning weight and their effect on the socially constructed identity, this study explored the concepts through a qualitative methodological lens. By engaging individuals who experienced being overweight or obese in one-on-one interviews, an impression of how memorable messages about body-weight and appearance affected these individuals was achieved. A qualitative, phenomenological approach to methodology was particularly appropriate for this study, because the memorable

messages-based interview format allowed for the disclosure of a variety of detailed personal experiences that might not have otherwise come to light.

Qualitative Phenomenological Communication Research

Phenomenology has a rich history. Stemming from its inception within the discipline of philosophy, phenomenology was created as an attempt to better understand human consciousness and how meaning is created through encounters (Husserl, 1931). Phenomenology was later adapted into a methodological design, and it is that concept that is utilized within this project, as such an approach is particularly appropriate for the study of memorable messages.

Phenomenology relies on the notion that experiences and objects are given meaning through lived experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Phenomenological investigation centers on producing an understanding of lived experience by focusing on individuals' accounts of that experience. By examining lived experience for meaning and common features, the abstract truth is made subjective and thus knowable (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007).

This focus on lived experience is what made qualitative methods designed through the phenomenological paradigm appropriate for this study, which focuses on the human experience of significant weight change through the framework of memorable messages. In-depth qualitative interviews served as the most appropriate and thorough way to investigate the memorable messages and associated identity-related implications that accompany significantly reducing one's body weight. By identifying common features of memorable messages in terms of both their content

and their meaning making processes' subsequent effects on individuals' identities, this study allowed for a greater understanding of how individuals are communicated to about body weight.

Sampling Design

The participants in this study were required to be adult men and women 18 years-of-age or older. Participants were recruited based upon having reduced their weight to a degree that they considered personally significant. Avoiding a specific weight-loss requirement allowed for insight into the amount of weight reduction each participant considered personally significant to his or herself as an individual. This choice also encouraged responses for study participation, as several participants upon contacting the researcher were up front in wanting to confirm if their weight loss was "significant enough" for the study's purposes. Data were collected during the 2010 fall semester as well as the subsequent winter recess.

Solicitation of Participants

Upon securing institutional review board approval, participants were recruited through university-approved ads placed throughout the campus of a large Midwestern university and distributed to weight-loss and fitness centers throughout the area. These ads clearly and explicitly stated the importance of weight and weight-loss in this study, and emphasized interview participation as an opportunity to discuss individuals' weight-related experiences both prior to and post-weight reduction. Recruitment ads (see Appendix B: Recruitment Ad) supplied potential participants with the investigator's email address in order to confirm interest in participation, and

allowed potential participants to receive further information as to the study's purpose and expectations for participation once interest in participation had been confirmed. Potential participants were provided with an HSIRB approved informed consent document informing participants of the purpose of the study as well as ensuring them of confidentiality throughout the study's duration.

Participants

Interview data were collected from 9 participants who responded to the study's advertisements. Of the 9 participants, eight were female and one was male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years, with one participant declining to disclose age information (see Table 1). Participants self-identified as having lost an amount of weight that they found to be personally significant, which ranged from 20 pounds to over 200 pounds lost. Of 10 responses received for the study, one participant interview was discarded for failure to respond appropriately to questions during the interview process, thus not yielding any information usable for the study. Thus the total number of study participants was nine.

Interview Procedure

Participants took part in open-style interviews with the researcher in a respondent interview format, one that was particularly designed to illicit the open ended responses that the topics required (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted, respondent interviews place the focus on participants themselves and their own experiences, rather than the world surrounding them. Memorable messages framework was adopted to shape the interview protocol (see Appendix A:

Table 1

Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Sex
Claire	21	Female
Nikki	22	Female
Colleen	46	Female
Rose	60	Female
Renee	24	Female
Kate	18	Female
Sawyer	28	Male
Shannon	20	Female
Zoe	Not Disclosed	Female

Interview Protocol) to solicit the rich and diverse messages that persons who have dealt with being of above-average body weight received.

Interviews took place on-site at a large Midwestern university, averaging one hour plus time for debriefing. Upon confirming a desire to participate in this study a briefing period took place where potential participants were given time to review and sign the informed consent document, as well as ask any questions or gain clarification as to the study's protocol and purpose.

Prior to the interview, the researcher disclosed to participants a personal history as someone who struggled with weight issues during childhood and adolescence, as well as adulthood once body weight was successfully reduced. This disclosure helped to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, and accounted for the researcher as a human instrument. As stated by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), the interdependence of the researcher and the researched is of key importance in this type of study, as the researcher his or herself becomes a methodological instrument. By establishing credibility through shared experience and willingness to share examples of personal memorable messages concerning weight, the researcher worked toward establishing the level of credibility and trust that was of the utmost importance when asking individuals to disclose information concerning a sensitive topic such as body weight and appearance.

Disclosing the researcher's personal history also worked to begin the bracketing process in order to account for the influence personal history with a topic can have. Temporarily setting aside, or "bracketing" (Fischer, 2009) personal

experience is a key part of the phenomenological research process. Bracketing was accomplished prior to the interviews being conducted via the researcher listing personal experiences with memorable messages concerning body weight. By acknowledging and bracketing personal experiences with memorable messages concerning body weight prior to beginning the interview process, the researcher allowed for as clear an interpretation of participants' lived experiences as possible.

Interviews were conducted in a professional manner, with a focus upon the participants' comfort and respect for the possibly difficult subject matter. Interviews were recorded both electronically via laptop microphone and cassette tape recorder to ensure no information was lost. Upon conclusion of the interview, a debriefing period took place whereupon the participants were once again assured that their identity would remain protected, and participants were supplied with a list of available counseling options should they have lingering discomfort due to the discussion of sensitive topics within the interview.

Instruments

The memorable messages framework was utilized for the interview protocol in order for the interviews to properly account for the key messages received concerning body weight, reduced body weight, and the effects these messages had on identity. In keeping with the design of memorable messages Knapp et al. (1981) outlined, the interview protocol (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol) was designed to examine the content, context and source of messages concerning weight and weight reduction.

Previous research with memorable messages demonstrated its appropriateness for the interview format (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Keeley, 2004).

The interview protocol discussed memorable messages post-weight loss, followed by pre-weight loss messages and finally identity effects caused by those messages. Major questions began with asking participants to describe their weight loss experience, followed by questions pertaining to pre and post-weight loss message content, source, context, and any effects these messages had on self perception.

RQ1 and RQ2 were aimed at the makeup of memorable messages concerning weight and appearance pre and post-weight loss, and thus began with a request for examples of these messages from the participants' personal experiences. Elaboration was requested concerning how these messages made the individual feel at the time, whether he or she responded, and if possible, how the individual would respond to the messages if faced with them in the present day. As RQ3 asked what effects these messages had on identity, participants were questioned as to whether or not they felt body-weight had impacted their senses of identity through their lives, and what effects the memorable messages had on their self perceptions and behaviors.

Participant disclosures or opinions often led to important and valuable information not previously accounted for within the interview protocol, so follow-up questions and probes into these concepts were utilized by the researcher when appropriate. In particular references to individuals' senses of identity when discussing body weight and appearance were met with further questions and requests for

elaboration. This once again demonstrated the importance of a qualitative methodology for the study's purposes.

Data Analysis

In order to account for RQ1 and RQ2, interview data concerning memorable messages received about body weight both pre and post-weight reduction were accounted for through thorough questioning concerning messages received during both of these periods. Because RQ1 and RQ2 sought to create a general understanding of memorable messages concerning body weight, numerous aspects of the messages, including the source, context, responses to and content of the memorable messages were examined and discussed via the interview protocol (See Appendix A: Interview Protocol) and thus were subject to analysis.

RQ3 was also addressed within the interview process by questioning participants about what, if any, connection the memorable messages concerning their body weights may have had with their self-perceptions, including any changes in their senses of identity or behaviors. The researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing (Fischer, 2009) both before and throughout the coding process, which accounted for personal meanings and experiences that may have worked to impact what themes emerged from the data.

Upon completion of data collection, over seven hours of recorded interviews were transcribed, resulting in 123 pages of transcription. The transcribed interviews were read from beginning to end a total of six times in order to code for emergent themes, with three subsequent readings taking place as needed to further establish

connections between specific message types and identity effects. The interview data was subjected to open and axial coding methods, which stem from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory. Grounded theory emphasizes theoretical concepts emerging through thorough analysis of the data and their coded categories.

Open coding is often referred to as an unrestricted form of coding because the researcher has yet to decide the range or definitions for the categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Open coding is useful as it "quickly forces the analyst to fracture, break the data apart analytically, and leads directly to... grounded conceptualization" (Strauss, 1987, p. 29). This initial coding process worked toward producing key concepts from the participants' interviews in terms of memorable messages about body weight and their effects on identity. Specifically, an in-depth interpretation of the experiences within interview data took place to identify these key concepts. Each research question was subjected to open coding to identify the important and recurrent key terms, phrases and concepts within memorable messages concerning body weight pre-and post-weight loss.

Once the initial stage of open coding concluded, axial coding for each research question took place. Axial coding is designed to further illuminate not only the context and conditions of the discovered categories, but the relationships between the categories (and subcategories) themselves (Strauss, 1987). The subsequent readings of the interview data were performed as part of this coding process, and worked to illuminate the relationships between the themes surrounding the messages participants

received about their body weights and physical appearances and the reported effects of these messages concerning their identities.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology of the study that took place concerning memorable messages, body weight and identity. Information was presented on (a) the importance and appropriateness of adopting a phenomenological design for the study, (b) the sampling design, (c) procedures for soliciting participants and what criteria was used to determine who took part in the study, (d) the procedures for the interview process and debriefing once the interviews had been completed, (e) the interview procedures utilized for data collection, (f) the instruments for the proposed study, and (g) the techniques that were used for data analysis in order to best address the study's research questions. Now that the methodology has been thoroughly discussed, the results of the data collected for the study can be examined, including the themes that emerged for the study's research questions.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter reports on the results of the qualitative analysis of the interview data collected regarding the content of memorable messages that individuals received both before and after a period of weight loss, and what effects these messages have on identity. The concept of grounded theory was utilized to illuminate themes and shared experiences across the experiences of the interview participants.

Pre-Weight Loss Memorable Message Themes

RQ1 asked “What are the memorable messages associated with being of above-average body weight?” Pre-weight loss messages discussed in this study were reported to have taken place between 55 years to one year prior to the interview with a mean time elapsed of 17 years. Some individuals failed to disclose a time the message was received (see Table 2). Seven interview participants discussed family members communicating these messages (six coming from parents and one from a sibling), with valued peers communicating two cases (see Table 2). Throughout these messages, one overarching theme emerged from which the subsequent themes branched off: the participant’s possession of a separate, less-valued social identity.

Possession of a Separate, Less-Valued Social Identity

Several themes emerged from analysis of these messages; however, all themes fell under a larger classification of messages that communicated a distinct, less-valued

Table 2

Pre-Weight Loss Memorable Messages

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Claire	Peer	11 years	“Well, you can be Santa Clause because you’re already fat.”
Colleen	Father	31 years	“You’re so pretty if only you lost a few pounds.”
Kate	Sister	5 years	Being called fat. Instructions to never wear her clothes because she would “stretch them out.”
	Mother	8 years	“Yeah, you should definitely (suck in your stomach).”
Nikki	Mother	Unspecified	“Well you should... you should wear it this way and cover up your tummy.”
	Mother	Unspecified	“Are you sure you want to eat all of that? Don’t eat that, here, eat this.”

Table 2 – Continued

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Renee	Father	1 year	“So, when are you going to start running again?”
Rose	Mother	55 years	“I am sorry, I am not getting you a can-can slip. That is for thin girls to wear, and I can’t get you one because you’re too heavy.”
	Mother	55 years	“If you are heavy, you can’t also afford to be sloppy. Because... you know, people will perhaps forgive your weight, but not if you are also sloppy.”
Rose	Mother	50 years	“No, (cupcakes) are for your sister, and she needs to eat and you can’t because you’re too heavy.”

Table 2 – Continued

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Sawyer	Friend	3 years	“Sawyer, you’re a little brother... you’re a little brother to me.”
	Stranger	8 years	“Oh my God, a fatty, kill it.”
Shannon	Mother	Over 1 year	“Watch what you eat, watch your weight. Make sure you don’t put on any more weight.”
Zoe	Father	20 years	“No, you can’t do sales. You are too fat to do sales.”

social identity for the message receiver due to his or her body weight and personal appearance. Within this classification three separate themes emerged, each of which worked to emphasize or reinforce the message recipient's weight-related stigmatized identity. These themes included messages which emphasized to the message recipient that he or she possessed a separate social identity due to his or her body weight, messages that emphasized the lower social desirability of his or her weight-related identity, and messages that instructed the individual to make behavior changes to hide or disguise body weight.

Emphasizing the Separate Social Identity Due to Body Weight

The first theme identified in the memorable messages was one that illustrated the difference between the message recipient and other individuals. In doing so, these messages emphasized that body weight and appearance were working to set the recipient apart from his or her peers and other individuals. In a sense, the message recipient was not "normal," and at times was even made to feel responsible for this difference. These messages were communicated through language that worked to clearly and distinctly set the person apart from others. Five of the interview participants discussed memorable messages that fit this theme, including "Zoe", age unreported, who discussed such a message that she received from her father while she was in her mid-20's and was considering making a change in her professional life by applying for a new job:

I was... maybe... 24. And I had just accepted a manager position with a staffing company. And my dad... was just... very upset. He's like "no, you

can't do sales; you are too fat to do sales." And why am I leaving this other job where I'd been several years and had done real well at. And his real concern was that I did not have the polished look capable of doing sales... So that was probably the first strong signal that, whoa, this weight is an issue. Even though Zoe noted that she would go on to later become very successful at her new sales-oriented position, the message illustrated the separation of what individuals of above-average body weight can or cannot do from a social perspective. Zoe emphasized that her father's message was her first strong indication that her body weight would prevent her from doing something that individuals of different body types would be able to do. Her father clearly indicated body weight as the reason he felt she should not take the job, because within the memorable message he plainly stated she was "too fat" to accept the job (and, we can assume, do the job properly).

These messages have been shown to occur at a young age as well. An interview participant known as "Rose", 60, detailed a memorable message from her mother that involved her hopes for receiving a specific garment as a Christmas present, which eventually led to this exchange between herself and her mother:

When I was a kid... there was nothing I wanted more for Christmas than a pink can-can slip. It would have been the late 1950's and that just struck me as the height of beauty and sophistication and femininity... I can visualize it to this day, having this conversation, and (my mother) said "I am sorry; I am not getting you a can-can slip. That is for thin girls to wear, big girls don't look good in can-can slips and I can't get you one because you're too heavy."

Rose's mother's message that big girls don't "look good" in certain garments that are "for thin girls" once again emphasized the recurring theme of the separate social identity within memorable messages concerning weight. Body weight had clearly set her apart, in this case from being able to dress the same way as thinner girls her own age.

Interview participants detailed messages emphasizing their separate social identities due to weight coming from peers as well as family members. "Claire", 21, described such a message coming from a peer while preparing for a performance in front of her fifth grade class:

I was working in a group with three other kids and we had to put on like... not a play, but an impromptu sort of... in front of the class, act something out.

And I don't remember exactly why? But we were going to have Santa Clause be in it. And one of the other girls in the group said to me "Well, you can be Santa Clause because you're already fat."

Claire's classmate's comment that she could perform the part of Santa Clause because she, unlike everyone else in the group, was "already fat" effectively singled her out as different because of her body weight.

It is worth noting that the core of these messages was emphasizing the difference between the message recipient and others due to weight and appearance. Messages that clearly emphasized a lack of social desirability were a part of memorable messages pre-weight loss, and made for the second theme among messages that emphasize the separate identity.

Being Less Socially Desirable Due to Body Weight

Some memorable messages interview participants received possessed a distinct quality of emphasizing a lack of social desirability due to their appearances. The criteria for these messages that set them apart from the previous category were an unavoidable evaluative component that either set the message recipient apart as unattractive, not being considered as a candidate for romance, or being de-humanized because of their body weight. Sawyer, a 28-year-old man, remarked upon this on several separate occasions throughout the interview process, including how his previous body weight had made him, in the eyes of others, less of a candidate for romantic interest or romantic physical intimacy:

Just saying “I’m not attracted to you because of your physical stature.” Or you’re like... a big teddy bear and I want to hug you and you’re my little brother. So, the little brother type, pre-weight loss.

Sawyer’s memorable messages of individuals he had expressed romantic interest in referring to him as “a little brother” show the lack of social desirability that is a part of the body weight discourse. As opposed to the previous category of messages which would have stopped at Sawyer being considered a different “type” because of his appearance, this message, to Sawyer, included a negative evaluation of his physical stature. This message communicated to Sawyer that not only was he different because of his body weight, but this difference was what has kept the message source from being physically attracted to him.

Later in the interview Sawyer provided another clear example, though this one was framed as an example of the reaction he received while frequenting clubs prior to his weight loss:

I've heard some of the nastiest things at (clubs). I heard someone say, I was 20 (years old at the time), and I'm walking through the crowd- just walking-, "Oh my God. A fatty, kill it." And I was just like, whoa. It made me feel like I didn't deserve to be alive.

This type of extreme memorable message concerning body weight speaks volumes, but at the core, both the message and how it was delivered (in public, in an environment for meeting individuals and interacting socially) were rooted in the marginalization of an individual due to his or her less-desired social identity, in this case the identity related to body weight. This message was an example of one that acts to de-humanize the message recipient because of his or her appearance. The message classified Sawyer as a distinct, negatively valenced "fatty" and "it". Clear messages were sent that the individual was valued significantly less due to appearance.

Shannon, a 20-year-old woman, explained during our interview that the key memorable messages regarding her body weight prior to weight loss were all, on some level, related to being less socially desirable, if they were not overtly negatively valenced, then at their core, because she touched upon them when discussing pre-weight loss conversations with her mother:

'Cause my mom would like, she would always like, say like, "watch

what you eat, if you're..." ... I always felt growing up if I was overweight then... you're not as pretty, you know?

While the message content contained advice for Shannon in terms of behavior, the key element was that she interpreted this directive as a sign that her body weight meant that she was not as pretty as she would be if she were to reduce her weight. Her body weight was interpreted as a significant factor in not only setting her apart, but reducing her level of physical attractiveness.

Memorable messages about body weight and appearance prior to weight loss carried this specific content regarding social desirability throughout the interview process. This was reflected further when contrasted with post-weight loss memorable messages. It was clear, however, that many of these messages carried with them the idea that the individual was not as socially desirable as he or she would be if he or she were physically smaller and weighed less.

A third theme emerged from messages received pre-weight loss that went beyond emphasizing the separate identity and its negative impact on social desirability, and placed the predominant emphasis upon advising message recipients on how their body-weight related identities could be either changed or hidden.

Instructions for Changing or Hiding the Weight-Related Identity

A third theme identified within the data also worked to emphasize for the message recipient his or her membership within a separate, stigmatized identity. These messages gave the recipient instructions, either directly or indirectly, on how to either disguise or counteract the weight-related identity through the adoption of

certain behaviors. These messages set themselves apart from the previous categories by the presence of clear instructions on how to change or even hide the social identity connected with being of above-average body weight.

Among the six participants who discussed such memorable messages was “Nikki”, a 22-year-old woman who reported receiving messages about her body weight throughout her childhood and young adulthood. Nikki discussed messages coming from her mother, whom she identified as her key source of pre-weight loss memorable messages about her body weight and appearance:

But my mom would always, you know, like, whenever we went shopping it’d be like... “Well you should... you should wear it this way and cover up your tummy.” And that was always a thing, I don’t know. I’m trying to remember but I think I pushed a lot of it out of my head.

Messages instructing her to “wear it this way” and “cover up (her) tummy” illustrated that there was something about her appearance that should be adjusted, or, as directly stated, covered up.

This message of adjusting dress or physical appearance being necessary to somehow compensate for a person’s body weight was echoed by several participants. Rose discussed how she also was the recipient of instruction on how to utilize dress as a way to counteract the undesirable identity that accompanies being of above-average body weight. However, in this instance the message was even more explicit in framing body weight as something that should be compensated for through dress, specifically within the cultural views of the 1950’s:

Now, when you grow up in the 50's it's a different world than growing up now. When I was a little girl my mother was concerned with propriety... And I can remember her often telling me "If you are heavy, you can't also afford to be sloppy. You have to dress up better." Because... you know, people will... perhaps forgive your weight? But not if you are also sloppy.

Rose's mother's message outlined that if a person is heavy, he or she can not afford, socially, to also possess the stigmatized identity of an individual who is sloppy in his or her personal appearance. This emphasized not only that being overweight was a social identity that a person needed to work towards being forgiven for (and thus was personally responsible for to begin with) but opens a person up to even further social peril and stigmatization. The expressed instructions to "dress up better" again emphasized the theme of communicating that people of above-average weight must compensate or change in some way in order to attempt to be socially acceptable.

These messages were composed in order to express to individuals that their weight-related identities should be compensated for or changed to become more acceptable socially. Some of these messages also implied that engaging in these behaviors would benefit them not just physically but emotionally. "Colleen", 46, touched upon this distinction while discussing a memorable message received several times during her teenage years regarding her body weight and personal appearance:

I think that the message has always been, the overriding message is, and I think there's a lot of girls who are overweight who get this message, is "You're so pretty, if only you could lose a few pounds", kind of thing...I can

remember in my teens... My dad was very positive, very nurturing, loving dad... But I do remember... maybe around 15 or so... that message that I was heavier than I should be? And if I lost a little weight I'd be happier, that kind of thing.

Colleen's perception that the message included the idea that she would be happier if she reduced her body weight is an important one. The message source was identified as being, on the whole, a positive and nurturing figure in her life. However, the message still contained clear evaluatives, and advice for how losing weight would lead to social benefits. However, here we have a clear indication that the message also emphasized that not only would she have been more socially desirable (as it is implied that although she is pretty, the implication was she would be more so if she reduced weight) but that her mood or disposition overall would improve as well.

RQ1 sought to examine the memorable messages received prior to a period of weight loss, and three distinct but related themes emerged from the overall concept of emphasizing the separate social identity due to body weight. These three themes were (a) emphasizing the separate social identity, (b) being less socially desirable, and (c) instructions for changing or hiding the weight-related identity.

Post-Weight Loss Memorable Messages

RQ2 asked "What are the memorable messages associated with significantly reducing a person's body weight?" These messages were received from one and a half years ago to only a few weeks prior to the interview, with a mean time elapsed of 3.3 months. Some individuals did not disclose a time the post-weight loss message was

received (see Table 3.) These messages proved to be distinct from pre-weight loss messages in terms of their sources and composition. Interview participants were less likely to be able to produce a single, verbal message when asked about post-weight loss memorable messages, and were more likely to describe a type of message, received several times and from several different sources (see Table 3). Seven participants reported receiving post-weight loss messages from close friends or social acquaintances, with two participants describing messages from family members. This is particularly notable when compared to sources reported from pre-weight loss memorable messages which were primarily sent by family members.

Also, three participants throughout the interview process individually noted nonverbal messages coupled with the verbally delivered message, and at times, emphasized the importance of these nonverbal messages. For instance, when discussing being reunited with a man she hadn't seen since high school and his positive reaction to her weight loss, Claire specifically noted the importance of nonverbal messages, saying:

And it... it was, I guess, more of the message... rather than what he said was how he looked when I saw him.

Claire stated that more of the memorable message content was in the nonverbal component than the verbal. In her interview, Nikki also emphasized the importance of nonverbal messages in post-weight loss memorable messages:

Table 3

Post-Weight Loss Memorable Messages

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Claire	Peer	7 months	“Wow, it’s really great to see you. You look great.”
	Friend	6 months	“Oh my gosh, how much weight did you lose? Look at you!”
	Friend’s Aunt	5 months	“You look great. How much weight have you lost?”
Colleen	Brother	Within 1 year	“Oh my God, your face, Oh my God. You look completely different.”
	Brother	Within 1 year	“How long did you do on the treadmill?”
Kate	Friend	Within 7 months	“Oh my God, you’re so tiny, like, oh my God. I can’t believe it.”
	Friend	Within 7 months	Being asked for tips on weight loss.
	Friend	Within 3 months	“You’re not fat, there’s no way you could be fat. You look great.”

Table 3 – Continued

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Nikki	Friend	Within 2 years	“Dang, you look like you lost some weight there. You look great.”
	Friend	Within 2 years	“You have lost weight, you look really good. Really, what have you been doing?”
Renee	Friend	Several weeks	“What is this? Where are you?”
Rose	Friend	Unspecified	“Oh, you’re looking really good. You’re losing weight.”
	Store Clerks	Unspecified	“Oh you look really nice in that. Let me show you this beautiful dress.”
Sawyer	Co-worker	Several weeks	“Should you really be eating that?”
	Co-worker	Within 3 months	“Wow, you don’t look as fat in street clothes as you do in scrubs.”
	Stranger	Unspecified	“I hope this doesn’t come across as wrong, but you look absolutely amazing. What did you do?”

Table 3 – Continued

Pseudonym	Source	Time Elapsed	Message
Sawyer	Stranger	Unspecified	“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but you’re shrinking. You’re shrinking.”
	Parents, sister, co-workers	Unspecified	“I don’t remember you being that big. I don’t remember you looking like that.”
Shannon	Peers	Within 1 year	“Oh, you look good. You’ve lost weight.”

I think it would just be the look and up and down, “You look great!” kind of thing... I mean because “You look great” can just be “You look great today.”

But when they look me up and down and like, bug their eyes out, you know?

Other mention was made of nonverbal memorable messages such as others touching individuals’ faces, their clothes, and gesturing. These messages indicated that weight loss had taken place, such as when “Renee”, 24, met up with a friend for a football game in her hometown:

I was at, I went back (home) a few weeks ago and one of my sorority sisters came up and grabbed my face and was like “What is this?” And then she grabbed me and she goes “Where are you?”

Renee specifically mentioned the nonverbal behaviors that accompanied the verbal portion of this post-weight loss memorable message, as her friend not only acknowledged the weight loss, but physically touched Renee at the same time.

Renee’s friend asking “Where are you?” is also notable. This reaction emphasized that her previous identity was gone, replaced by something new, even if the only thing that had changed was Renee’s body weight.

Whereas the possession of a separate, less-valued social identity attached to being of above-average body weight emerged, the overarching theme of confirming the individual’s new social identity emerged in post-weight loss memorable messages.

Confirmation of the New Social Identity

The post-weight loss messages that interview participants reported worked toward emphasizing a particular identity. Compared to pre-weight loss memorable

messages, these messages were significantly more positive in terms of content, because the new emergent identity was perceived as more socially acceptable. Within this overall theme, three sub-themes emerged within the data: (a) acknowledgement of the individual's changed appearance, (b) positive evaluation of the changed appearance, and (c) questions on how the individual had made the change.

Acknowledging the Change in Appearance

Although many interview participants' memorable messages post-weight loss carried with them clear evaluatives (which will be shown within the second message theme), on six occasions participants recalled messages from individuals that simply acknowledged a change had been made, working to validate their new sense of identity. Statements such as "Oh my gosh, look at you!" or asking questions such as "Did you lose weight?" were commonly recalled messages in terms of lost body weight. Colleen's post-memorable message from her brother was of this nature, as he commented upon the change in her appearance:

And, um... the thing that he has said a number of times while sitting there talking is, "Oh my God, your face." You know? The idea that there is such a clear... for him, a moment where he looks at me and like, "Oh my God, you look completely different."

Colleen specifically mentioned the message being delivered on several occasions. The fact that Colleen's brother noted that her weight loss had led to her looking "completely different", particularly her face, is a clear example of the theme of acknowledging that the weight-loss had significantly changed her appearance. The

weight loss had led to her looking “completely different”, despite the fact that only her body weight may have changed in terms of her physical appearance.

“Kate”, an 18-year-old woman, also discussed this type of message when meeting up with a friend she knew from her hometown after losing weight while away at college:

I met up with her at the movies and I was wearing, like, a tighter fitting shirt.

She was like “oh my god you’re so tiny, like, oh my god” and she ran up to me and was like “I can’t believe it.”

Kate noted that her friend ran up to her, displaying enthusiasm at seeing the change she had enacted. Her friend referred to her as “tiny”, and expressed disbelief at the reduction in body weight. All of this combined into a message that emphasized that a remarkable change had been made because of body weight reduction.

Shannon also recalled a memorable message post-weight loss with her father that acknowledged the change in appearance, by retroactively commenting upon her previous weight-related identity:

(My father) was like, “Yeah, you were getting kind of chubby

before.” And I was like, “What? No I wasn’t. I wasn’t fat.” And he goes,

“Well, you were on your way to be...”

This message also emphasized that a change had been made in regard to her physical appearance due to her weight loss, though clearly contrasting it with an evaluation of her previous body weight. These messages worked toward confirming an individual’s new social identity by acknowledging that a change had been made. This particular

message is notable in that it carried with it some subtext of her previous weight being less desirable than her current weight, but this concept is fleshed out into the second post-weight loss memorable message theme elsewhere within the interview data.

Positive Evaluation of the Changed Appearance

Many memorable messages that participants received centered around others emphasizing a positive evaluation of their weight loss. This theme, although similar to the previous, is distinct in that the message carries with it a clear emphasis on not just that a change had been made in body weight and personal appearance, but that said change was clearly being received positively on a social level. Seven interview participants noted an increase in positive attention from others, and comments from peers about the quality of their appearances due to the decrease in body weight. As opposed to pre-weight loss messages concerning identity, these messages were full of reinforcement and positive language. Shannon's post-weight loss memorable messages gave clear examples of positive reinforcement:

Basically I get a lot of comments like, "Oh, you look good. You've lost weight" and like, I just feel like when people say that like, I just feel like I look prettier now that I've lost weight, you know? I feel just... that people make more comments or pay more attention to me now that I've lost weight.

Shannon's message remarked upon her weight change, but also the common factor of incorporating value in the change. It is not solely that her appearance had changed; it was that this change was a positive. Nikki described receiving frequent positive post-

weight loss messages from a variety of sources while discussing her own post-weight loss memorable messages:

I just remember I had a lot of friends who would be like, “Dang... you like, you lost some weight there.” Or... “You, you look great”, was... that was the token one.

Here Nikki pointed out that even though she may have received a variety of different messages concerning her weight loss, the message of “you look great”, with its positive valence attached to it, was the most common one she received in terms of memorable messages. This mirrored the pre-weight loss messages clearly, by switching the emphasis from messages pointing out the lack of social desirability due to the identity associated with being of above-average weight, with new, positive reinforcement of the post-weight loss identity centered around looking good and physically attractive.

Claire’s pre-weight loss memorable message echoed this idea, as it came from a male peer she had not seen for several years before her period of weight loss:

He, um, he was like “Wow, it’s really great to see you. You look great.” And he didn’t really like, make any comments about, you know, how much I had lost? But that was like, the most gratifying.

The man in question did not comment on her weight change specifically, but Claire attributed his positive evaluation of her appearance to her recent period of weight loss. The message was coupled with the idea that it was also great to see her, tying together the positivity of seeing her and the positivity of reducing body weight.

This theme extended beyond commenting upon the change in appearance due to reducing body weight to placing a positive value upon the change. Just as pre-weight loss messages at times went beyond comments on the weight-related identity and started to emphasize instructions or advice, a third theme mirrored this idea within the post-weight loss messages.

Questions on How the Change Took Place

The third and final theme that emerged within the memorable messages individuals received post-weight loss was others questioning them about how they achieved their weight loss. Those sending these messages asked recipients for details about their weight loss and what behaviors led to body weight reduction. Messages such as these were discussed by six interview participants. These messages were notable in that although at times they were from peers or individuals that the message recipients kept in steady contact with, they also came from those with whom participants did not have a great deal of contact. Claire detailed one of these instances during her interview:

One of (my friends') aunts who hasn't seen me since I was like... 15 or 16 just, just walked right up to me and said, "You look great! How much weight have you lost?" And she was just like, I mean, I'd met her twice. So I didn't feel comfortable talking to her about that.

Claire specifically mentioned a level of discomfort with this body-weight related message, which was not uncommon from those who were subjected to these questions. Particularly, as was Claire's case, when the source of the message was not

someone with whom the message recipient had kept regular contact. Sawyer recalled such messages coming from grocery store employees while he shopped:

Meijer, uh, I go to a certain Meijer, cashiers... I'm used to seeing them, "Hello", "Hello", the end. And they just ask me "What have you done to lose weight, I've gotta know!"

Sawyer mentioned the change in behavior from these individuals that, even though he may see them on a semi-regular basis, had previously not had a conversational relationship that extended beyond the exchange of hellos. Now, post-weight loss, these individuals went so far as to question how he had reduced body weight. This questioning about the weight-loss process that made up so many memorable messages proved to be an uncomfortable one for several interview participants who made note of it. Nikki described such a feeling when discussing such an event:

This girl came up to me in the library, and I hadn't talked to her in forever, like... maybe I knew her in freshman year and we kind of talked once in a while. She came right up to me and was like "You have lost weight, you look really good" and I was just like, "Oh, thanks." And she was like "Really, what have you been doing?"...and that, um, I think that... that was just really weird for me because... I don't know. It wasn't like, oh yeah there's this secret that I'm going to divulge to you and you're gonna be the same way.

These memorable messages are clear examples of how post-weight loss messages can carry the theme of questioning the individual as to how he or she achieved his or her weight loss and, therefore, the more socially desirable identity that accompanied such

a change in appearance. Nikki's frustration at this type of message was telling, as these messages were often disconcerting to individuals, particularly in contrast with the previous messages that had been instructional in nature, outlining advice that the message recipient was expected to follow. In essence, the message recipient was often uncomfortable because they had been placed in a higher social status due to perceived knowledge that they possessed regarding reducing body weight. It is, as Nikki said, the expectation of a "secret" they possessed which others wished them to divulge, when often the weight reduction was accomplished through long-term behavioral change.

While many participants discussed being asked for advice on how to achieve weight loss, Zoe's interview outlined how the stigma concerning body weight remains even after body weight has been reduced. Specifically, one can be viewed harshly based upon how they enacted the change:

My sister seems to have... a real anger towards the process of bariatric surgery? She feels it's somehow deceitful? I almost sense it's like you're tricking the system... 'cause you're not putting in the hard work to lose weight?

Being of above-average body weight is so deeply rooted in stigma, specifically the personal responsibility for the stigmatized condition, that exiting the role in a way that's "deceitful" or "tricking the system" carries with it its own degree of stigma.

These three themes that emerged from the interview data all correspond with the overall theme of confirming the new social identity of the memorable message

recipient. Coupled with the messages received pre-weight loss, clear connections between their content emerged. It is also important, however, to examine the effects on individuals' identities related to these memorable messages.

The Effects of Memorable Messages on Identity

RQ3 asked "What effects do memorable messages associated with body weight have on individuals' senses of identity?" Notable themes emerged from the interview data in regard to both pre and post-weight loss memorable messages. The meaning making process that took place as a part of receiving these messages led to effects on individuals' identities. With this in mind, the identity effects reported will be discussed separately in terms of pre or post-weight loss messages.

Pre-Weight Loss Messages

The meaning making process that accompanied the messages that participants received was connected with two distinct identity-related effects. Participants described a sense of diminished self-worth in connection with the messages received. Also, a common theme that emerged from the interview data was participants expressing a desire to be accepted regardless of their weight-related appearances.

Diminished Self-Worth

Messages received pre-weight loss tended to negatively impact individuals' identities. Throughout the interviews terms such as "awful", "negative" and participants emphasizing a lacking of confidence were common when participants commented on how memorable messages impacted their identities. Five interview participants specifically noted negative identity effects connected to messages

received prior to the weight loss process, effects that corresponded with feelings of diminished self-worth. Kate gave a clear example when discussing her sister's memorable message of repeatedly calling her "fat", and instructing Kate not to wear her clothes because she would "stretch them out":

(I felt) awful! It's like... no confidence. You know? Because then you see yourself as like, only that, you know? Once you have that in your mind.

Such pre-weight loss memorable messages emphasize being different due to body weight, and lead to seeing one's self as "only that", or making that social identity particularly salient. Memorable messages that "singled out" individuals and set them apart in terms of their social identity were shown to have a profound impact on how message recipients viewed themselves. Rose explained:

You know, it was a moment like... wow, there is really something wrong with me that I never considered before. And, um, gosh, this is terrible. It was very distressing... me receiving it as "There's something wrong with the way you look and it's centered around your weight"... because that is wrong, and there's something wrong with you.

Memorable messages setting individuals apart because of a separate, less socially valued identity repeatedly corresponded with expressed negative feelings of being "wrong" or "different" than others. Rose made the connection within her quote of feeling both that there was something wrong with her appearance, and thus something wrong with herself, or her identity.

Zoe touched upon the theme of diminished self-worth due to pre-weight loss messages as well. When asked how she felt regarding the pre-weight loss message she had received, she replied:

(I felt) very worried. It probably made me work harder because of it... It was like I had to overcompensate.

Zoe touched upon the feeling of worry that accompanied the idea that she may not be able to keep up naturally with her peers due to her body weight. The pre-weight loss memorable message Zoe received instilled in her a feeling that she had to somehow overcompensate for the diminished self worth that was a product of her body-weight and appearance. It was perhaps because of this feeling of diminished self-worth that another pre-weight loss message emerged from the interview data: individuals desiring acceptance.

Desire for Acceptance

Pre-weight loss messages corresponded with individuals wishing to be accepted without changing themselves. This feeling was most strongly associated with memorable messages from parents and family members, both with messages concerning the separate social identity and the instructions on how to change or hide this identity from others. Of the four examples of this stemming from pre-weight loss messages, Renee described this feeling in response to her father's frequent questioning pertaining to whether she planned to engage in exercise prior to her weight loss:

It just, it made me feel crappy. Because like they're my parents, they're supposed to just like... accept. Accept who I am. Both of them, they're not runners. It's not like my parents go out and do triathlons on the weekends, they're not runners. They walk the dog maybe like once a week. But like, so, a lot of my attitude was like "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

This desire for unconditional acceptance was common in response to memorable messages about body-weight prior to weight loss. Interview participants noted on several occasions that these messages filled them with a desire to be accepted, rather than given instructions on behavior or reminders of their separate social identities due to weight. Shannon, while discussing her reaction to pre-weight loss messages from her mother, expressed such feelings:

They definitely hurt me, yeah. I feel like she shouldn't say anything like... just because you're still the same person, like... her comments... like, she should love me unconditionally, like, no matter what I'm still the same person. And I never thought that I had a problem or anything, so for her to say something about it... and she can be so like, harsh. I'm too fat and then I'm too skinny and okay, just stop saying anything.

The feelings Shannon expressed due to her mother's memorable messages pre-weight loss echoed the desire to be accepted unconditionally by message sources. Shannon's frustration at her mother's lack of approval of her weight was worth noting because it spoke of a larger desire for body weight and appearance to be irrelevant in terms of acceptance.

Similarly, Nikki discussed frustration at her parents' dissatisfaction with her physical appearance pre-weight loss, particularly because she had worked so hard to accept her body as it was prior to the weight reduction:

This is like, a sick... kind of thing, but... I always wished I would develop an eating disorder just to be like, "Now are you happy? I'm angry, you know, and nothing good is happening, but at least I'm skinny! And now I'm depressed."

And I know it's like, it's like... twisted? But it's that sort of thing where I was just like... so upset about... because I was happy! Except when they would bring it up.

Nikki's description of her desire to be accepted is profound, and serves as a powerful demonstration of how important it was for her to feel accepted by her parents in terms of her appearance pre-weight loss.

Themes which emerged within pre-weight loss memorable messages corresponded with distinct identity effects reported by interview participants. Feelings of diminished self-worth and a desire for acceptance for their pre-weight loss identities were common throughout the interview data. Although these themes provided clear examples for the identity effects related to pre-weight loss memorable messages, appropriately enough, post-weight loss messages were shown to have remarkably different effects in terms of identity.

Post-Weight Loss Messages

The meaning making process associated with post-weight loss messages also corresponded with distinct themes in regards to participants' identities. The messages

were utilized by participants for reaffirming their new weight-related social identities, as well as serving as motivation to continue weight-loss related behaviors. Post-weight loss messages were also related to individuals reflecting upon the body weight discourse, specifically the transition from a negative to a positively regarded social identity due to weight reduction.

Identity Reaffirmation

While the pre-weight loss memorable messages were often connected to significantly negative effects on individuals' identities, post-weight loss messages often corresponded with positive impacts. Participants repeatedly made reference to feeling "more confident", and receiving a "confidence boost" following post-weight loss memorable messages. Participants also remarked upon post-weight loss memorable messages serving to reaffirm their new identities. Claire elaborated upon this while discussing the importance of her post-weight loss memorable message:

I think I still... have... (the memorable message) has helped. I still have my idea of who I am and what I look like. But I think it's a little distorted? So it's good to hear what other people say and I try really hard to internalize that... otherwise I might go crazy.

Claire mentioned her "distorted" view of her identity, as it had yet to "catch up" with the positive reactions of her peers communicated to her through memorable messages. Claire describes internalizing these messages as an effort to reaffirm the new identity that accompanied her weight loss.

Kate discussed reaffirming her new identity by reflecting upon weight-loss messages when her new identity was jeopardized by feeling heavier or by fears that she may have been re-gaining weight.

I've reflected on (the messages), yeah I have. Yes I have. I keep like, thinking of them over again. Like, "That's okay, you look great. People keep telling you that you do, they think so." Like... when you feel chubbier. And like, you like...you can't really have gained that much weight. It's... it can't have happened...and you're like, "Well, they just told me yesterday that I look good, so..." or hopefully, like, recently, so it can't have like... changed that fast.

Receiving the positive post-weight loss messages, particularly in the recent past, helped to reaffirm the new identity during times where it may have been momentarily threatened by perceived weight gain or feelings of insecurity. Kate was able to reaffirm her new, post-weight loss identity because of the recency of the positive messages she had received.

Colleen touched upon the constant reaffirmation of her new identity due to both feelings of validation from her brother and an increase in positive attention from men. Specifically, when she was introduced to a group of men by her brother while visiting his place of employment:

He was proud of me, you know? That was the motivator for me, even last week, well, a few days ago... I was (at his place of business) and there were all these very, well, some might be married, I don't know... a lot of men.

And... I can tell when he introduces me now. I have to remind myself how I look. Because I do notice a distinct difference in how men relate to me and that has been a real eye opener, a real eye opener.

The post-weight loss memorable messages of pride and support Colleen received from her brother were supplemented by the pride he showed while introducing her to other men, all of which worked to reaffirm her new, post-weight loss identity. Colleen also touched upon the increasingly positive messages she had received from men. This attention was described as a “real eye opener” in regards to her changed identity.

Post-Weight Loss Messages as Motivation

Perhaps because of this important reaffirmation, these positive evaluation messages became valuable to participants. Another theme that emerged was reliance upon these messages for motivation to continue certain behaviors. Participants expressed that if they either gain weight, or their new social identity becomes “normal” rather than a positively valenced change, the messages would cease. This possibility resulted in motivation for Kate:

Yeah, and definitely like... if you haven't heard it for a while you have to like, work harder. Because you feel like you... something's changed, and you like, don't deserve it for... recently something happens. So you have to work harder and you'll hear it again and be like, “Okay.”... I feel like, um, they're not mentioning it because it's like, backtracking. That's what I always worry about.

Kate touched upon the importance of post-weight loss memorable messages for the new identity that accompanied weight reduction. A loss of messages motivated behavior of “working harder” to regain the important messages. She also expressed the fear that a loss of messages meant that she had been “backtracking” into an old, pre-weight loss identity. Colleen touched upon similar behaviors when talking about her continuing exercise habits, and the importance of exercising for continuing to receive the positive post-weight loss messages:

(The treadmill) will be in this room for three months, and then it'll slowly make its way into the other room, and then to the porch. But it's like to keep that going, to keep on that trajectory of feeling good and positive, that's the key. Is the... in my case, the treadmill or exercise in general. So yeah, I want that to continue and I want that positive message. So in order for that to happen that (treadmill)'s gotta come back in here.

In order to keep the positive feelings and the positive messages that come with the post-weight loss identity, Colleen recognized the importance of continuing the exercise behaviors that helped her to enact the change to begin with. However, other participants discussed problems when the messages cease coming, despite continuing their new behaviors and maintaining their weight loss. Nikki discussed feelings of discomfort due to her new post-weight loss identity becoming normal, and the subsequent loss of the positive messages:

It kind of was like, “mountain of compliments!” And now it's... I still am surprised every day I look in the mirror and I'll be like “wow”, you know, and

I'll be like "Maybe I'll get compliments today", and no. I'm just a normal person.

Nikki's realization that her new post-weight loss identity became "normal" rather than a positively valenced change served to be a challenging one, particularly as she herself continued to be surprised by her changed appearance, even if other individuals no longer noticed or chose to comment upon it. These quotes emphasize the importance that post-weight loss memorable messages have on identity, particularly because they correspond with the messages that fell under the theme of positive evaluation of the individuals' changed appearance.

Reflecting Upon the Body Weight Discourse

Similar to participants responding to pre-weight loss messages with a desire for their identities to be accepted without having to engage in any changes, post-weight loss messages corresponded with individuals reflecting upon their prior identities in connection to the body weight discourse. The post-weight loss messages that emphasized the positive evaluation of the body weight reduction led to message recipients questioning the behaviors of others or even resenting them. Five cases of this theme emerged from the data, including when Nikki discussed a conversation she had with a peer about her weight loss:

And I told him like, I don't... I went through this change, blah blah blah. He was like...he didn't really take it seriously. I think that's a lot of things like... people don't imagine. And I kind of wonder how they would treat me because

I gained a lot of confidence in losing that weight, and I wonder how they would have treated me before.

Nikki's friend not taking the body weight change seriously led to her considering whether or not individuals would treat her differently were she still at her pre-weight loss body weight. This theme emerged within Sawyer's interview as well, though he openly discussed feelings of resentment at blatantly being valued more socially due to his weight loss, including by people who had previously not seen him as a potential romantic interest:

I've had people come up, give me their numbers, buy me drinks, come up and tell me "You know, I just wanted to tell you you're looking really hot and I wouldn't mind talking to you and going on a date."...In my personal opinion? Fuck them... Because for the past four years I've said "hello" to them?... And yeah, now they want to know me because of my physical appearance and not who I am on the inside.

Upon receiving positive messages about his appearance post-weight loss, Sawyer reflected upon the body weight discourse that had previously led to him being viewed as less attractive. At times, these messages resulted in questions and resentment for message recipients. Rose discussed this feeling of resentment in her interview while discussing positive evaluative messages she had received post-weight loss:

They judge you on your appearance and you're treated better if you are thin

than if you are heavy. (I felt) a little resentful to be honest with you. Um... for the same reason, you don't know me, you don't know who I am. How is it that you judge me more positively as a thin person than if I am a heavy person?

Rose and Sawyer both openly discussed feelings of resentment due to the positive messages they received post-weight loss. Reflecting upon the body weight discourse, specifically how they were viewed before reducing weight, led to negative feelings toward the new messages. Participants explained that they were “the same person” identity-wise pre and post-weight loss, and yet the body weight discourse had created for them a new, more socially desirable identity.

Post-weight loss memorable messages were shown to have several distinct effects on message recipients' senses of identity connected to the positive valence placed upon these messages. While the post-weight loss messages were almost universally positive, it was notable that the effects occasionally resulted in feelings of discomfort or resentment for message recipients.

Summary of Interpretive Analysis

Memorable messages pre-weight loss proved to fall under the larger theme of possessing a separate, less valued social identity, including (a) emphasizing the separate social identity due to body weight, (b) being less socially desirable due to body weight, and (c) instructions for how to hide or change the weight-related identity. Post-weight loss messages were associated with the theme of confirmation of the new social identity, including (a) acknowledging the change in appearance, (b)

positive evaluation of the changed appearance, and (c) questions as to how the change took place.

The identity effects of pre-weight loss messages were shown to include (a) overall negative feelings and a lack of confidence, and (b) a desire to be accepted for who they are without having to change their physical appearance. Post-weight loss messages' identity effects that emerged within the data were (a) messages reaffirming the new, post-weight loss identity, (b) these messages serving as motivation to continue weight loss behaviors, and (c) reflecting upon the body weight discourse.

These themes require further analysis and interpretation, as well as an examination of their implications for the further study of memorable messages and communication concerning body weight and appearance. The limitations of the study will be discussed, as well as future directions for related research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Interpretation

Applying the memorable messages framework to body weight and identity has allowed for valuable insights into both the content of these memorable messages, and what effects the messages have on individuals' senses of identity. This thesis examined these important areas of study, by contrasting the memorable messages pre and post-weight loss and related effects on identity.

Overall, data collected for this study were consistent with existing research on memorable messages, because they proved to be messages participants were able to recall with clarity regardless of passage of time since they received said messages, and were perceived to have had an impact upon their lives in some manner (Knapp, et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986).

Pre-Weight Loss Memorable Messages

Pre-weight loss messages, the focus of RQ1, corresponded with existing research on the content of memorable messages. They were shown to be brief, orally delivered messages from a source perceived to have had higher social status (Stohl, 1986). Pre-weight loss memorable messages tended to come primarily from a parent, which is consistent with existing research that emphasizes parents as key memorable message sources (Smith & Ellis, 2001). Several themes emerged from these messages, including messages which emphasized a separate social identity due to

body weight, message recipients being less socially desirable due to their weight, and instructions for changing or hiding the weight-related identity. These themes are worthy of further analysis, and lead to a greater understanding of pre-weight loss memorable messages.

Emphasizing the Separate Social Identity Due to Body Weight

What is particularly compelling about the themes that emerged from the content of the pre-weight loss messages is their correspondence with the more socially-oriented aspects of existing memorable messages literature. The theme of emphasizing the separate social identity due to body weight illustrates memorable messages' tendency to work towards the reinforcement of current societal expectations (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986). It is these macro level expectations in regard to body weight and personal appearance that become particularly salient for the individuals receiving these messages. In essence, the expectation to achieve and maintain a certain level of thinness is communicated through messages regarding the fact that these individuals possess a social identity that is separate from the societal expectation. This expectation is further reinforced by memorable messages which indicate the message recipient is less socially desirable due to his or her body weight. Message recipients are marginalized, or "peripheralized on the basis of their identities..." (Hall, Stevens & Meleis, 1994). The weight-related identity brings with it this degree of marginalization, which leads to numerous negative social and cultural effects (Smith, 2004). These effects began to manifest

themselves through the interview data as participants described messages that communicated a lack of social desirability due to body weight.

Being Less Socially Desirable Due to Body Weight

It is because pre-weight loss memorable messages communicated a lack of social desirability that such messages can be anchored in existing research regarding stigmatizing communication (Smith, 2007). The body weight discourse has long carried with it themes of a separate social identity and behaviors communicating to individuals that said identity carries with it negative societal impacts (Strauss & Pollack, 2003; Sunwolf & Leets, 2004). Social marginalization has been a key factor in the discussion of stigma communication since its inception (Cahnman, 1968; Goffman, 1963), and the themes that emerged within this study serve as clear examples of this aspect of stigmatization. Cahnman (1968) explained that “in stigmatization, deviance, rather than being an attribute of the deviant, becomes a label attached to a person by others (p. 293). The act of stigmatization is communicated to the individual, specifically, through memorable messages that communicate a separate social identity and a lack of social desirability. The connection between these emergent themes within memorable messages concerning body weight prior to weight loss and the existing conceptualization of stigma as communication is telling, as well as an important topic for future research.

Instructions for Changing or Hiding the Weight-Related Identity

The third pre-weight loss memorable message theme of instructions for changing or hiding the weight-related identity is also rooted in existing memorable

messages research. Rules of conduct or advice for behavior have been recurring themes throughout works on memorable messages (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Knapp, et al., 1981; Smith, et al., 2009; Stohl, 1986). Pre-weight loss messages proved to be another clear example of this theme, because many of these messages were shown to center around the message recipient being given advice or being communicated rules on behaviors or modifications to his or her appearance due to their body weight, including how to dress or what foods he or she should or should not eat. Individuals with stigmatized identities are often given advice on how to deal with or conceal these identities (Chenard, 2007; Schneider & Conrad, 1980), including the stigmatized identity that accompanies being of above average body weight (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). This is particularly compelling due to the fact that Knapp et al. (1981) emphasized memorable messages as a source of advice on how the message recipient could improve his or her self-concept.

Post-Weight Loss Memorable Messages

Post-weight loss messages also corresponded strongly with existing conceptualizations of memorable messages in terms of brief, orally delivered messages from socially reputable sources. The post-weight loss messages differed, however, in a few respects. As noted within the results of the study, individuals recounting their post-weight loss memorable messages placed a notable emphasis upon the nonverbal aspects of the message as well as the actual verbalized content. Remarks were made that the message was “more in” the nonverbal communication than the verbal content, or that the nonverbal messages helped to give a greater

context to the true meaning of the message, i.e., allowed the message participant to be sure that they were commenting on the body weight change and truly felt it was positive.

This reliance upon the nonverbal messages can be attributed to the salience of the existing pre-weight loss identity, which was cemented in part due to the previous weight-related memorable messages. The nonverbal messages were remarked upon because they helped to confirm or reinforce the newer messages; as this message reinforcement has been shown to be a key function of nonverbal communication (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Knapp et al. (1981) noted that memorable messages are reliant upon the message recipient's current self-image for how applicable they are taken to be. If these individuals had not yet stabilized their new social identity post-weight loss, the nonverbal messages' reinforcement of the verbal content could be of particular importance. This is consistent with existing research that shows identity effects of possessing a social identity related to being of above-average weight can linger even after body weight has been reduced (Sarlio-Lahteenkorva, 2000; Turner, 1990). Vangelisti (2009) also noted that from a communication standpoint, supportive acts consist of interactions between providers and recipients of support via both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Because post-weight loss messages tend to be of a supportive nature rather than stigmatizing, the nonverbal emphasis is appropriate.

The recurring emphasis on an increase in confidence and positive feelings due to these post-weight loss messages is also rooted in literature concerning acts of supportive communication. Interview participants often remarked upon feeling

positive about their appearance or empowered due to the memorable messages post-weight loss, both of which are characteristics of successful supportive communication (Bippus, 2001). This is even more remarkable when contrasted with the content and effects of the pre-weight loss messages. Important peers or significant others were the predominant source of supportive, post-weight loss messages. This corresponds with supportive communication literature's emphasis on the importance of the sender regarding how the message is received (Burleson, 2009).

Acknowledging the Change in Appearance

Post-weight loss messages also corresponded with existing memorable messages research in regard to their reinforcement of current societal expectations (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986). Messages which acknowledged the change in appearance fit within this theme. Messages that acknowledged that the reduction in body weight significantly changed an individual's appearance, such as Colleen's brother's comment that she "(looked) completely different" act to reinforce the importance of weight for overall physical appearance. Similarly, Shannon's father informing her that although she had lost weight, she had previously been "on her way" to becoming fat, acted to reinforce the societal expectation that increasing body weight is regarded negatively by society. Messages that placed a positive valence on the changed appearance reinforced this societal expectation even further.

Positive Evaluation of the Changed Appearance

Achieving a more socially desirable weight also resulted in messages that included positive evaluation of the new appearance. Consistent comments such as

“you look good” or “you look great” that were a part of the interview data correspond with memorable messages’ content of reinforcing the societal expectation that not only is weight a tremendous factor in determining what someone looks like, but losing weight results in a better, more desirable appearance. These positive evaluation messages emerged throughout the interview data, giving further evidence of the social benefits of adhering to society’s expectations for thinness. These memorable messages behaved as appraisal support (House, 1981), or messages that act to confirm, validate or affirm the message recipient in some way. In this case, the supportive messages confirm that the new, positive social identity associated with the weight reduction. It is worth noting that such affirmation of the post-weight loss identity also acted to retroactively reinforce the stigma associated with the previous identity. This was shown within the identity impacts of post-weight loss memorable messages, including individuals’ reflection upon the body weight discourse.

Questions on How the Change Took Place

The post-weight loss theme of questions pertaining to how the weight loss was achieved is best understood when contrasted with the memorable messages theme of rules of conduct or advice regarding behavior. Individuals were often recipients of these memorable messages regarding how they should behave or certain rules they were to follow due to their body weight. However, once weight has been reduced, it can be seen that this role shifts entirely to place them as sources of advice and rules for how to achieve similarly socially desirable changes.

While individuals were originally in possession of a social identity that needed to be corrected, they have since bypassed a level playing field and essentially been lifted above on a social level. Those who possess the ability to successfully reduce their weight possess an increased amount of positive social value, or “all those... symbolic things for which people strive” (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 31). Reducing weight is symbolic of both self control and higher levels of physical and social attractiveness. Because the formerly stigmatized individuals possess this positive social value due to their body weight reduction, others they come into contact look to them for advice or instruction on how they, too, can achieve such a transformation.

It is individuals being asked for advice or instructions that make the questioning about the weight loss process theme such a memorable message. Message recipients’ social standings have changed so drastically that they are now seen as sources for advice and rules for behavior, including requests from individuals with whom they had not previously had regular contact; specifically, rules for how to reduce body weight, and in doing so, improve social identity. Participants expressed frustration at others desiring an “answer” for how to reduce their own weight, when they themselves had often reduced through long-term hard work and behavioral change.

Weight-Related Memorable Messages and Identity

This study’s conceptualization of identity stems from Mead’s (1934) ideas of the self developing through the larger dynamic of the social environment. In other words, society and the process of socialization are responsible for the creation,

development and refinement of the individual self. The memorable messages framework helps to provide a clear example of this process, because these messages themselves work to project certain rules and expectations, and in doing so, have a notable impact on identity.

Pre-Weight Loss Messages and Identity

Individuals' processing of memorable messages received pre-weight loss was associated with a number of identity effects. The themes that emerged from these messages corresponded with expressions of a diminished sense of self worth. Participants also frequently described a desire for their identities to be accepted without having to change.

Diminished Self-Worth

Pre-weight loss messages corresponded with feelings of negativity and a diminished sense of self-worth for many interview participants. Reports of feeling "awful", lacking confidence, and feeling "different" than others were common. These stigmatizing memorable messages corresponded with profound effects on individuals' self concepts, as they caused individuals to engage in reflected appraisal (Mead, 1934) of their identities. Cooley's (1956) concept of the "looking glass self" supports this idea as well, as it too reinforces the key role that the views of others (in this case communicated through memorable messages) play in shaping the identities of others. The frequency of these negatively valenced pre-weight loss messages coming from parents is particularly telling, because existing research on the effects of the "fat"

identity have shown a correlation between obesity and negative family relations (Carr & Friedman, 2006).

Desire for Acceptance

Memorable messages received prior to weight loss all fell under the larger theme of a separate, less socially-valued identity. Because of this identity related message, individuals confessed a desire to be accepted “as they were” or “unconditionally”, particularly when stigmatizing messages came from one or both parents. This stands to reason, because the communication between parent and child is an enormously influential one in terms of development of the self and different aspects of identity (Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Feldman, Greenbaum & Yirmiya, 1999; Reese, Bird & Tripp, 2007).

Post-Weight Loss Messages and Identity

Post-weight loss messages were generally associated with a more positive social identity, and carried with them positive effects on individuals’ senses of identity. An increase in confidence was a common theme for individuals discussing the effects of these messages, which is logical due to their supportive, accepting nature (Bippus, 2001). However, some participants described these messages resulting in negative feelings, reflecting upon the body weight discourse associated with their previous weight-related identities.

Identity Reaffirmation

Post-weight loss memorable messages served to reinforce the new social identity that accompanied weight loss. Recalling these messages was a common

activity when individuals felt the need to “prop up” their new identities. This message recall takes place because the previous pre-weight loss identity is a great deal more salient, particularly for those who were classified as overweight or obese during a relatively young age (Adami, et al., 1997). A key part of the social role-exiting process is the social reactions from others (Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1988). It is logical then that these formerly stigmatized individuals would come to rely upon post-weight loss memorable messages to help with the change in their identities, and would be uncomfortable if and when those messages ceased. These messages form a key part of the social discourse that acts to shape their identities (Mead, 1934). In the face of such a profound transition in social identity, the generalized other reinforced through recalling these messages is even more important.

Post-Weight Loss Messages as Motivation

The difficulty with the identity transition was shown within the data, as participants described post-weight loss memorable messages acting as motivation. Participants described “working harder” to regain positive body-weight related messages once they had slowed down or ceased. Specifically, a lack of positive post-weight loss messages inspired participants to either increase their weight-loss related behaviors, or begin the behaviors again after they had ceased. In essence, the post-weight loss messages became conflated with both making progress in body weight reduction, and the affirmation of the weight-loss related social identity. The difficulty in an extreme change in an identity’s social value contributes to this reliance upon the messages. Individuals had transitioned from a stigmatized social identity (being of

above-average body weight) to a prized social identity (one who not only is of a more normal body weight, but possesses the ability to decrease in body weight). As the memorable messages associated with the change have been shown to play a key role in identity affirmation, they also act as motivation to continue the behaviors that caused the change.

Reflecting Upon the Body Weight Discourse

Reflecting upon the body weight discourse was shown throughout the interview data, including instances of participants reflecting upon their previous identity in the face of post-weight loss memorable messages. As it can be difficult to exit an identity even after it is no longer appropriate (Turner, 1990), and role residual is a key part of the identity exiting process (Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1988) participants reflecting upon the pre-weight loss identity in the face of more positive messages and reactions makes sense. The stigmatization that participants faced due to the body weight discourse that accompanied their previous weight colored views of post-weight loss messages. For the first time participants found themselves in a place to confront and face the injustice inherent in the body weight discourse. This manifested itself through feelings of resentment caused by positive post-weight loss messages. In the past when the “fat” identity was socially reinforced, individuals reflected upon the stigmatization, desiring acceptance. Similarly, once the body-weight related identity changed, individuals reflected upon the body weight discourse and the memorable messages that made up their key interactions concerning weight. Reflection upon these messages and the discourse is a key form of sense-making for identity (Mokros,

2003). The body weight discourse remained an important part of individuals' identity formation process both pre and post-weight loss. While message sources may have intended to compliment those who had reduced weight, these messages were often composed to be what the sender believed the recipient wanted to hear (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Participants described feeling that there was nothing "wrong" with themselves to begin with, so these compliments had a complex effect.

Implications

The results of this study have significant implications for the study of memorable messages, identity, and the body weight discourse. The memorable messages discussed within the interview data were in keeping with several of Stohl's (1986) key characteristics. Messages discussed within this study tended to be of a personal nature, often were designed as rules of conduct or advice for message recipients (pre-weight loss) and reinforced societal expectations. Messages often came from a source perceived by the recipient to be of higher social status (either parents or positively-regarded peers). The fact that post-weight loss messages, rather than doling out advice for individuals, requested advice instead, is particularly noteworthy.

Also of importance is that while messages did include brief, orally delivered messages, there was a noted inclusion of nonverbal messages as well. The participants' emphasis on nonverbal messages helping to legitimize or enhance the verbal memorable message is a valuable insight that should be studied further in different contexts. Particularly in the case of memorable messages concerning identity

changes, as nonverbal messages can serve a valuable purpose in reinforcing these messages, heightening their impacts (Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Nonverbal messages can be examined in future studies to account for another key aspect of memorable messages.

The fact that participants often noted several different memorable messages from several sources concerning their body weights is also important, as previous memorable message studies often focused upon a single recalled memorable message. Messages from a single source regarding an individual's identity may have an effect, but the repetition of messages from different sources could be a great deal more profound, causing the message recipient to be more likely to view the message content as being accurate (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Mead's (1934) concept of the generalized other is also applicable within this context. The repetition of messages makes them more salient for when the individual takes on the perspective of the generalized other in relation to their new identities. Mead (1934) conceptualized identity as being shaped not through the influence of a single other or even a few significant others, but by an individual's socio-cultural environment as a whole. Therefore, the numerous message sources constitute a socio-cultural norm, rather than a single person's opinion or reaction, making it profoundly more salient for the message recipient's identity.

The results of this study demonstrate that memorable messages are important in the process of identity formation, maintenance and change. Participants reported clear identity effects related to multiple messages received both pre and post-weight

loss. Of particular importance is the evidence of a powerful salience of the pre-weight loss identity even once body weight has been reduced and subsequent memorable messages have begun to reflect that change. The salience of a particular identity that has been changed could necessitate repetition of memorable messages to truly impact an identity, and this is an avenue for further study. Memorable messages have already been shown to play an important role in the construction of social identities (Heisler & Ellis, 2008), which has shown itself to be true within the results of this study as well.

The impact of memorable messages on body weight related identity is a logical progression from symbolic interactionist concepts. Mead (1934) conceptualized self-concept as a reflected evaluation of the generalized other, with this evaluation process being an inherent part of socialization. As Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) stated, “When people are asked how they know that they possess certain characteristics, a typical answer is that they have learned about them from other people” (p. 549). Individuals of above-average or reduced weight learn about their corresponding identities from other people in the form of memorable messages. Reflection upon interactions such as memorable messages fits with Mokros’ (2003) work concerning the communication of identity. Similarly, the body weight discourse was shown to be an important part of the identity negotiation process, in keeping with existing research on identity as communication (Mokros, 2003).

The importance of memorable messages for body-related identities is far-reaching. Any sort of body-related identity that falls within the public eye may be

accompanied by memorable messages pertaining to the social evaluative it corresponds with, advice or questions pertaining to the identity, and subsequent identity effects. Sexual or gender identity, pregnancy, disability, or any social identities with clear physical cues could be associated with memorable messages of this type. Messages with profound effects on an individual's identity.

The social and practical implications of this study for the body weight discourse are noteworthy, as well. This project illuminates how society frames both being overweight or obese and reducing body weight in terms of stigma, support and social standing. Communicative behaviors pre-weight loss such as instructing individuals on their weight-related behaviors and emphasizing a lack of social desirability had profound effects on participants, such as a desire to be accepted and feelings of diminished self-worth. The memorable messages received by participants worked toward maintaining the existing body-weight discourse, and it is telling that no participants reported a pre-weight loss memorable message that worked to counteract or discredit the stigmatizing discourse of obesity. Post-weight loss messages worked to maintain this discourse as well, by asking the individual for advice on weight-reduction and emphasizing his or her increased social desirability. This study shows that even complimentary post-weight loss messages can cause negative feelings of discomfort and resentment for message recipients. Messages that communicate an increase in social desirability simultaneously emphasize the stigmatization inherent in being of above-average body weight, causing feelings of resentment for message recipients.

These behaviors not only effect message recipients, but the sense making process that accompanies these messages can have unexpected effects that are not accounted for in the body weight discourse. These effects include a profound desire for an identity to be accepted pre-weight loss, and discomfort or resentment at being placed higher on a social level once the previous body-weight identity is no longer in effect. The results of this study can be used to help those who are overweight, obese or reduced-weight. If message recipients better understand the body weight discourse, negative identity impacts could be lessened. The information in this study could also work to educate message senders on how important their communicative choices are for the identities of others. Specifically, communicating to above-average body weight individuals that they (and in turn, their identities) are accepted and valued whether or not body weight is ever reduced will provide key support and may help alleviate stigma. Refraining from communicating messages regarding weight loss may not be realistic or even desired by those who have reduced weight. However avoiding messages that request information on the weight loss process and being mindful of possible feelings of resentment caused by weight-related compliments may be wise for those communicating with others about weight.

Limitations

Although this study yields valuable results regarding memorable messages concerning body weight and their effects upon individuals' senses of socially constructed identity, several limitations must be discussed. My own experiences as an overweight youth and young adult, coupled with a significant weight loss later in life,

served as the inspiration for the choice of this topic of research and supplied important motivation to investigate it thoroughly. However, these experiences may have colored the choice of what themes were significant for both pre and post-weight loss messages. I have personally experienced many of the thematic patterns that emerged within the data to at least some degree, and that personal experience no doubt played some part in the interpretation process. My experiences may also have impacted the interview process in some way, regarding what questions were followed up on, or what pieces of information were marked as important. For instance, disclosures referring to instructions for behavior to hide or change body weight resonated with me personally, and were commonly met with requests for more detail or clarification. In order to best account for this, I engaged in what Fischer (2009) referred to as reflexive bracketing, or continuously checking for the imposed meanings placed upon data, and looking back upon data again to account for any other meanings that may have gone unnoticed due to the influence of personal experience.

Certain language choices within the interview protocol and follow up questions were influenced by my experiences as well, which could have had an impact on what was disclosed. Specifically, my disclosure at the beginning of the interview included an emphasis on the detrimental effects of my own weight-related memorable messages. Language such as this must be accounted for, in that it can have notable effects on the framing of subsequent interview data (Fischer, 2009). However, it is not the goal of phenomenological qualitative communication research to

eliminate researcher influence. Rather, the researcher's interpretive lens is something to be managed or even embraced (Fischer, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My own experiences as a person of above-average weight worked to give me a level of credibility with interview participants, which may have positively impacted the level of disclosure within the interviews.

A second limitation of this study was the possible influence that collecting and synthesizing the existing works on identity, memorable messages, stigma and support may have had upon thematic analysis. Collecting and incorporating these concepts were necessary to frame and account for the proper depth and breadth of such experiences, but it is possible doing so has colored what was deemed important about the data. The bracketing process was again an integral step in analyzing the interview data as accurately as possible in terms of my experience with the existing body of research.

Finally, the type of participants who responded to the advertisements for this study must be acknowledged in terms of limitations, because it stands to reason that such a study attracts persons with a certain level of willingness to discuss weight issues, or with specific reasons for doing so. Also, only individuals who had received memorable messages and were willing to discuss them were invited to participate in the study, as recruitment material stressed the importance of memorable messages as well as weight loss.

Future Research

The findings within this study should allow for significant avenues for future research, particularly in the application of memorable messages concerning important identities such as the one associated with body weight. The themes that emerged from within both pre and post-weight loss memorable messages can and should be examined further to determine how common they may be within the obesity discourse, as well as what additional identity effects may result for message recipients. The effects that memorable messages can have in regard to aiding a transition in identity are particularly interesting, because individuals within this study often disclosed both recalling those messages to aid in the transition, and occasional discomfort or disappointment once those messages became less frequent or stopped altogether. The fact that individuals use memorable messages in this way could be studied further in the context of different changes in identity beyond that associated with reducing body weight. The types of memorable messages received by individuals who have not undergone any change would also make for a valuable area of study, including those who live with obesity without ever reducing weight. The study's participants' emphasis upon nonverbal cues that accompanied the memorable messages can be explored further. Nonverbal messages may contribute to memorable messages in a variety of other contexts as well. Similarly, the repetition of post-weight loss memorable messages is an avenue for further study, particularly messages in response to a change in identity. Finally, this study shows how the change in memorable messages can be used to contrast two separate periods of an individual's

life and development, a model that could also be used in other avenues aside from that of body weight

Conclusion

Individuals of above-average body weight are exposed to memorable messages concerning their body weights. Should individuals reduce weight, they will be exposed to further, more diverse memorable messages. With these messages also come significant impacts upon social identity, be they positive or negative, supportive or stigmatizing. By investigating these messages, steps a clearer understanding is reached in terms of how we enact the body weight discourse and the effects it has on individuals. This study provided valuable insight into how participants assign meaning to the memorable messages they receive, and how this process ultimately impacts their identities. Memorable messages serve as a valuable framework for studies such as this, but this thesis has shown that further refinement is possible for how memorable messages are enacted within certain circumstances. The effects these messages have are profound, and by studying them further, it is possible to better understand the role communication plays in identity, both for better and for worse.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction

First of all, let me thank you sincerely for agreeing to take part in this interview. I recognize that discussing issues with weight is not an easy thing to do with anyone, let alone in a formal setting such as this. I want to disclose to you before we start my own history with obesity. Growing up I was overweight and eventually obese once I entered adolescence. Around the time I turned 18-years-old, my body weight decreased a great deal, but over the past ten years it has continued to change, including periods of both weight-gain and weight-loss, and with those changes, there have been key messages from people in my life that have stuck with me. Because of this, I want you to understand that I am engaging in this interview with you with nothing but the utmost respect and sincerity, and I promise you that I take this process and the subject matter extremely seriously. At every point you can be assured of the confidentiality of what you choose to disclose to me here today.

Interview Questions

- A. Tell me about your weight loss experience – when it started, how it happened, is it still going on?

Many people can remember key messages they receive throughout their lives that have stuck with them and have had a profound impact on them in some way. Messages that could have been received some time ago, but you recollect them from time to time and they remain relevant to you and your life. We're talking more

specifically for this study about messages concerning body weight and appearance.

Such as messages about physical appearance, related habits, health related concerns

-Tell me about a message someone said to you concerning your weight loss?

How was the message given to you? Face to face, written, through another person, some other form?

-When did you receive this message (how recently)?

-Where were you (physically) when you received this message?

-How would you say this message made you feel at the time?

-Did you respond to the message at the time? If so, what was your response?

-Prior to this interview, have you thought about this message since you received it?

Under what circumstances did you think about it?

-Who was the source of the message?

What was your relationship to this person?

How long had you known this person at the time of the message being sent to you?

Was this someone you had regular contact with?

-Was this message typical of how this person spoke to you?

-What was it about this message that made it particularly memorable to you?

-Would you say this message has had an affect on how you perceived yourself?

If so, was this effect a positive one? A negative one?

Has this effect been a long-lasting one?

-Did this message cause any change in how you perceived yourself?

Was this change an easy transition? A difficult one?

Has this change been a constant one? Temporary?

B. Would you say issues concerning body weight and personal appearance have had an impact on you throughout your life?

-Can you tell me a story of when you first became aware of your identity in terms of body weight or appearance?

-Again, we're hoping to learn about specific memorable messages you've received. You've discussed messages that you received during/after your weight reduction process, we want to discuss the messages that can be received before the weight loss process as well.

-Can you recall a message someone said to you concerning your body weight prior to your weight loss?

How was the message given to you? Face to face, written, through another person, some other form?

-When did you receive this message (how recently)?

-Where were you (physically) when you received this message?

-How would you say this message made you feel at the time?

-Did you respond to the message at the time? If so, what was your response?

-Prior to this interview, have you thought about this message since you received it?

Under what circumstances did you think about it?

-Who was the source of the message?

What was your relationship to this person?

How long had you known this person at the time of the message being sent to you?

Was this someone you had regular contact with?

-Was this message typical of how this person spoke to you?

-What was it about this message that made it particularly memorable to you?

-Think back on the memorable messages that you've discussed here today. You've talked about how they made you feel at the time, when you think back on these messages now how do you feel about them?

If the source of that message was in the room right now, would you respond to the message differently than you did at the time? In other words, is there anything you'd like the source to know about how the message affected you.

-How has your weight or appearance affected how you think about yourself, your sense of identity or who you are?

-How have the memorable messages you've discussed effected how you perceived yourself?

Was this a positive change or a negative change?

Was this more long term or a short term change?

-How have the messages impacted your behaviors?

Were these changes easy to enact and continue with or difficult?

Have these behavior changes been continuous since? Do they continue today?

Have they either stopped or changed in some way?

Have You Recently Lost a Significant Amount of Weight?

As a Grad Student in WMU's School of Communications, I am researching the memorable messages received concerning body weight and personal appearance, to better understand how we communicate about weight.

Participants must have lost what they personally consider to be a significant amount of weight.

Participants will be asked to attend a single 2 to 3-hour interview discussing messages received prior to and post weight-loss. Total participation time will take less than four hours.

**If you would like to find out more about participating in this study, contact the researchers at 269.352.0874
Or via email at scott.richmond@wmich.edu**

Appendix C: Approval Letter from the HSIRB

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: October 26, 2010

To: Autumn Edwards, Principal Investigator
Scott Richmond, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Naugle".

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 10-10-27

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Memorable Messages Concerning Identity and Body Weight" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 26, 2011