Ageing & Society **27**, 2007, 407–424. © 2007 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0144686X06005757 Printed in the United Kingdom

Constructions of ageing and narrative resistance in a commercial slimming group

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ABSTRACT
This study focuses on the role of organisational setting and age in shaping individuals' narratives of embodied selfhood. It compares older and younger women's use of 'narrative resistance' to negotiate identity in light of their ageing and the negative social and personal meanings of being fat. Cordell and Ronai (1999) observed three types of narrative resistance among overweight people: loopholes, exemplars and continuums. This paper identifies two others: 'justifications', for behaviour that associated with weight gain, and 'repentance', for behaviour that reaffirmed a commitment to losing weight. Drawing from six months of participant-observation and in-depth interviews with 20 older and younger female clients of a commercial weight-loss organisation, this article shows that both the meanings women attributed to their experiences of slimming, and their opportunities for benefiting from organisational resources, varied by their stage in the lifecourse. The weight-loss group generated narrative strategies and opportunities for its members that were informed by both cultural constructions of ageing and the organisation's interests. While these strategies stopped short of empowering the clients to abandon restrictive dieting altogether, they did enable the older respondents to excuse temporary setbacks in weight loss and their deviation from (what they described as) the more exacting appearance standards of youth. At the same time, the strategic narratives reaffirmed constructions of ageing that present the older female body as uncontrollable and older women as unconcerned with physical attractiveness.

KEY WORDS **–** women, ageing, body, weight loss, appearance.

Introduction

Slimming groups are part and parcel of the contemporary consumer culture that fosters the purchase of body-related goods and services by emphasising the individual's responsibility for his or her appearance (Featherstone 1991). Many of these messages are directed at women, who are instructed that slenderness is synonymous with health, self-control and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005757 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beauty, while fatness implies low self-esteem, illness and self-indulgence (Myers and Biocca 1992; Oberg and Tornstam 1999). As a form of 'discursive constraint', these messages are central to 'establishing and perpetuating negative stereotypes' of overweight people and shaping both 'their behaviour and how they think of themselves' (Ronai 1997: 125). Social scientists and cultural theorists have pointed to the ways that individuals actively respond to such discourse (Croteau and Hoynes 2000; Joanisse and Synnott 1999).[1] For example, drawing upon life-history interviews with overweight women, Cordell and Ronai (1999: 31) provided evidence of 'narrative resistance', which they defined as 'the narrative strategies subjects used to create and manage their own identities and defy the power of discursive constraint'. They identified several forms of these strategies, but paid little attention to the role of social context in either facilitating or restricting their use. Other writers have focused explicitly on the resources that groups and institutions provide for identity construction and forms of resistance, but none has considered how the meaning and value of those resources vary by age (Gimlin 2002; Honeycutt 1999; Martin 2000).

In recent years, authors from several fields have begun to remedy the previous omission of older women from the academic literature on female embodiment (*e.g.* Arber *et al.* 2003; Daniluck 1998; Faircloth 2003; Hurd Clarke 2002*a*; Poole and Feldman 1999; Woodward 1999). Some have linked the lack of scholarly interest in older women's corporeality to broader constructions of ageing that define older females as sexually ineligible and socially invisible (Arber and Ginn 1991; Bernard and Meade 1993; Calasanti and Slevin 2001). In essence, these authors contend that negative constructions of ageing have not only served to marginalise older women, but also marked them as unworthy subjects for academic investigation (Tunaley *et al.* 1999). This article is a contribution to the growing literature on ageing and the body. It builds on the concept of 'narrative resistance' by locating its practice within a particular context, a commercial slimming group. In so doing, it documents one set of institutional factors that inform women's narratives of embodied selfhood and weight loss. This research also examines cultural constructions of ageing as they are played out in the weight-management setting. Such constructions influence women's self-narratives and others' expectations about their capacities, behaviours and concerns (Arber and Ginn 1991). They also position women differently in relation to body-management practices like dieting (Hetherington and Burnett 1994), such that both the meanings that women attribute to their experiences of weight loss, and the extent to which they can benefit from organisational resources, vary by their stage in the lifecourse.

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Dieting culture

Most women want to be slimmer, including those who are not overweight (Allaz *et al.* 1998; Cash and Henry 1995). Compared to men, women are considerably more likely to diet and to use drastic weight-loss measures, including appetite suppressants, laxatives and surgery (Berg 1995; Grogan 1999). Although most studies of weight management among females have focused on adolescents (Field *et al.* 1999; Nitcher and Vuckovic 1994) and young adults (Lee 1993), the available research on older women's bodily experiences shows that, like young women, they too are concerned about weight (Hurd Clarke 2002*a*), and that gender differences in body satisfaction exist throughout the life span (Pliner *et al.* 1990).

Women's slimming practices have been widely criticised by feminists, who see them as a reflection of the 'cult of thinness' that equates a female's social value with her physical appearance (Hesse-Biber 1996). Feminist writers have also argued that many women's struggles with food and body size are complicated by the demands of marriage and motherhood (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991). That is, while women are expected to provide nutritious and appetising meals for their families, at the same time they feel obliged to forgo this food (Inness 2001). Finally, research has shown that restrictive dieting – when practised alone or in groups – rarely produces long-term weight loss (Hesse-Biber 1996). Most women who try to lose weight are therefore left feeling both dissatisfied with their body and ashamed of their failure and presumed lack of self control (Rodin 1992).

Women's efforts to be thin are nonetheless understandable given the significant sanctions for deviating from appearance standards (Sobal 1999). Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that the social costs of fatness – measured by education, income, employment, marriage and divorce – are particularly profound for women (Gortmaker *et al.* 1993; Rodin 1992; Sargent and Blanchflower 1994). In a cultural context that rewards physical attractiveness, success in dieting has also been described as a source of jealousy and conflict between women (Brownmiller 1984; Wolf 1991). While such factors have led some writers, like Bordo (1993), to claim that women have few opportunities today for developing identities that are free from oppressive beauty mandates; others have criticised such arguments for representing women as mere 'victims' of patriarchal oppression (Davis 1995; Grogan 1999). In fact, Smith (1990) insisted that women do not simply accept cultural messages around thinness and beauty, but actually 'do femininity' in an active way. Femininity, Smith (1990) argued, is a 'skilled' practice that must be learned through manuals and guidance as in fashion magazines, which teach women appropriate

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ways of being and acting. Yet, women respond to such instruction by positioning themselves individually in relation to beauty standards: they accept some, reject others and try to come to terms with those that seem beyond their reach (Gimlin 2002).

Identity management and the stigma of obesity

While Smith's (1990) work drew attention to women's negotiation of the cultural constructions and social practices of femininity, other scholars have addressed such processes in relation to stigma generally (Goffman 1968) and obesity in particular (Honeycutt 1999; Joanisse and Synott 1999; LeBesco 2004). They have claimed that if overweight people – particularly women – are to construct a sense of self that is not dominated by the negative cultural meanings of fatness, they must find ways to resist them. Overweight women in one study rejected such meanings through linguistic 'identity work' or 'narrative resistance', whereby 'subjects actively participate in the construction of their identity by reorganizing the categories made available into alternative conceptions of self' (Cordell and Ronai 1999: 30). The authors identified three strategies in their narrative resistance: 'exemplars', which suggest that the speaker lacks traits associated with a stigmatised group (*e.g.* 'unlike other fat women, I am not lazy'); 'loopholes', which deny responsibility for norm violation (*e.g.* 'I'm fat because of my genetics'); and 'continuums', in which the speaker locates herself closer to the cultural ideal than the stigmatised (*e.g.* 'I'm healthier than most fat people'). While these discursive techniques enabled some of the studied overweight women to reject the negative identity implications of fatness, Cordell and Ronai (1999) claimed that they simultaneously perpetuated anti-size bias. That is, each speaker suggested that she was a rare exception to the rule (of the lazy, self-indulgent and unhealthy fat person), and therein reinforced both negative constructions of being overweight and the discriminatory practices they promote.

Cordell and Ronai's (1999) analysis drew from the literature on deviance disavowal, including Scott and Lyman's (1968) work on 'accounts' or 'socially-approved vocabularies' for lessening the negative meaning of untoward acts. They identified two types of accounts: 'excuses', which deny responsibility for wrongdoing (*e.g.* by blaming someone else), and 'justifications', which accept responsibility for behaviour while discounting its pejorative status (*e.g.* by asserting that it caused no harm). Various writers have expanded this typology to include accounting forms like 'concessions' (such as admissions of guilt), 'refusals', which deny that the untoward act occurred, and 'promised reform' or 'repentance',

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whereby actors disavow norm-violating behaviour and commit themselves to normative actions (see Fritsche 2002). While working less explicitly in the 'accounts' tradition, many other authors have addressed the narrative aspects of identity management (Charmaz 1994; Sandstrom 1998). Schwalbe and Mason Schrock (1996) noted that the narrative construction of identity is not solely a matter of self-creation, but also a group production of the symbolic resources for individual presentations of self. The characteristics of commercial weight-management organisations, including their formal structures, informal hierarchies, profit motive, their rhetoric about the causes of weight loss and gain, and the emotional labour performed by their personnel, are all reflected in the vocabularies that their clients use to understand and describe both the embodied self and their own weight-loss efforts (Lester 1999; Martin 2002).

Women, body size and constructions of ageing

Cultural understandings of ageing and old age also play a role in women's beliefs about appearance and body size (Allaz *et al.* 1998; Hetherington and Burnett 1994), although the specific effects of ageing on women's body satisfaction remain unclear. Some authors have argued that the weight gain that normally accompanies ageing means that older women are even more likely than younger women to be dissatisfied with their bodies (Chrisler and Ghiz 1993; MacDonald and Rich 1984). The accruing literature also suggests, however, that ageing may actually increase women's ability to accept their weight and reduce their guilt about eating (Apter 1996; Hetherington and Burnett 1994; Öberg and Tornstam 1999). Indeed, even though many women aged 60 or more years want to lose weight, often their weight-loss goals are more realistic than those of younger women (Allaz *et al.* 1998). Compared to the latter, they are more accepting of a wider range of body shapes (Hurd Clarke 2002*b*), and less likely to undergo cosmetic-surgery procedures to reduce body size, such as liposuction and 'tummy tucks'.[2]

Such findings may reflect cohort effects, but nevertheless have led researchers to argue that old age provides a degree of detachment from beauty imperatives (Apter 1996; Daniluk 1998).[3] From their interviews with women aged 63 to 75 years, Tunaley *et al.* (1999: 756) showed that some older women viewed 'weight-gain as a consequence of the "inevitable" physical decline and deterioration bound up with stereotypes of old age', rather than as a marker of personal failure. Although their respondents were not entirely satisfied with their body size, their beliefs about physical changes over time reduced self-criticism and feelings of

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guilt; they also resisted the pressure from family members to lose weight by asserting that in old age they no longer had the responsibilities of earlier life and deserved to enjoy themselves. The investigators concluded that because (otherwise negative) discourses of ageing allow older women to see body size as beyond their control, they effectively absolve them of culpability for being overweight.

The research reported in this paper was built on previous findings that women actively reflect upon images of 'beauty' and the associated discourses. It was reasoned that women utilise the available social and personal resources to construct their identities in relation to the cultural pressure to be slim. These resources include broad understandings of personal ageing, previous embodied experiences and their historical contexts, and the institutional vocabularies and group settings in which the discourses are interpreted and personal identities expressed. For the women in this study, such factors not only fostered a sense of responsibility for body size and a commitment to weight loss, but also provided them with a greater or lesser capacity to think through that commitment and to forgive themselves their deviation from appearance ideals.

Research methods

The data for this study have been drawn from participant-observation over six months in a multi-national weight-management corporation's weekly sessions in Aberdeen, Scotland, and from in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The sessions were held at premises in the city's central shopping area, which attracts a diverse clientele in terms of age and educational and occupational backgrounds. After attending the meeting for two months and obtaining permission from the leader, all 40 or so (female) members were invited to participate in the study. Twenty women agreed to be interviewed: among them, 15 were aged 55–76 years and five aged 18–25 years.[4] The achieved sample slightly over-represented the younger clients, who were the minority. All of the respondents were white and lived in the Aberdeen area at the time of the interview; 15 had been resident in Scotland all their lives. Fourteen had been or were currently employed part- or full-time, while four of the five younger ones were students. Among the older respondents, all were or had been married, and four were widowed. None of the younger women was married, but one had previously cohabitated with a male partner. The older women had been members for slightly longer on average than the younger ones, and were more likely to have dieted in the past. Six older respondents had previously attended the meetings, dropped out and then rejoined.

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The interviews addressed many topics, including the respondents' motivations for joining, the influence of others on their decision to lose weight, and the challenges they had faced. Basic information on employment, children and marriage was also collected. All but three of the one-hour interviews were conducted in the women's homes. In eight cases, follow-up questions were put by telephone. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and the respondents were invited to review the transcriptions, but none did so.

Thematic analysis of the interview and observational data was carried out according to the basic principles of the 'grounded theory' approach, by which explanatory categories are generated through the continual interplay of data gathering, coding and analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The transcripts and field notes were read, re-read and coded by the emerging categories that were informed both by the themes that stemmed from other interviews and by the issues raised in the research literature. To exemplify, questions about the challenges of organised slimming elicited expressions like, 'I had to stop socialising with workmates', and 'my friends go clubbing without me', and these were coded into a 'social isolation' category. The completed interviews were then re-checked for the presence (or absence) of this theme, for variations in its meaning, and for the effects on the respondents. In subsequent interviews, specific questions were asked about coded themes that had not emerged spontaneously. Based on the respondents' feedback, some categories were put aside.

The project was motivated in part by my own experiences of 'fatness' and 'thinness' and my sense that neither feminist nor biomedical perspectives on weight management fully capture the complex nature of the practice or its variations by age, gender, class and ethnicity. Over the past 20 years, I have joined slimming groups several times, and therefore entered the research site with certain expectations about what would be found. These were undoubtedly shaped by my feminist views, which lead me to be critical of beauty ideals and practices like dieting (including my own), to strive to 'hear' women's words, and to acknowledge women's potential to resist the cultural imperatives. Numerous authors have argued that it is important for researchers to acknowledge their involvement and impact on the research setting, not least because respondents' accounts are necessarily influenced by the research relationship (Cotterill and Letherby 1993). Wishing to minimise my influence on the informants, I endeavoured throughout the study to 'make myself vulnerable' to fellow clients (Stanley and Wise 1993), both by situating myself personally, politically and intellectually, and by taking part in the group's activities, including the slimming programme itself, rather than simply conducting observations and interviews. I differed from the respondents in many pertinent ways,

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being American rather than Scottish, a middle-class academic, and decades younger and smaller in stature than most members of the group. Such differences surely influenced both my interactions with the participants and the narratives that they shared with me.

Findings and discussion

The respondents engaged in various linguistic strategies for constructing identity in relation to the overweight body. Those strategies were informed by an organisational rhetoric that encouraged the clients' commitment to slimming, and which in turn had been shaped by the cultural discourses that both devalue older women's bodies and link younger women's social worth to their appearance.

Continuums and exemplars: meanings of body size and weight management

The organisation conceptualised the goal of weight loss that it promoted in two ways: as a means of improving health, and as a strategy for increasing physical attractiveness. Such constructions were evident in the company's literature, which stressed the benefits of 'a healthier way of living' and of 'a new shape' – these messages featured in the weekly discussions. On several occasions, the group leader reminded us that 'eating better' would make us 'look better and feel better'. While the members' explanations of why they joined the group reflected these organisational constructions of weight loss, they also mirrored discourses of ageing that deem it inappropriate for older women to be preoccupied with their physical appearance (Tunaley *et al.* 1999). Accordingly, most of the older respondents attributed their dieting primarily to concerns about the health implications of being overweight. For example, Mary (aged 66 years) said, 'whenever I go to the doctor's surgery, he says that I need to lose weight. … I know it's true because I'm not able to do the things I used to without losing my air. … It'd also be nice to look a bit smarter in my clothes'. Although Mary's narrative began by focusing on health, it turned to her appearance, which she – like several younger respondents – expressed in terms of wanting to look smarter in clothes. However, Mary's language differentiated her motivations from the younger members', in referring to a desire to look smarter only in *her* clothing. She implied that she does not feel compelled to look good in all clothes or, more specifically, to look nice in styles designed for younger women.

Cassie (aged 67 years) made a similar point: 'Maybe it's easier because I'm not a young girl. You see them in town wearing the wee tops and trousers. … Those clothes aren't really right for someone my age'. Cassie

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located herself on a continuum of appearance ideals in which the pressure to display one's body in revealing clothing decreases with age. As Cordell and Ronai (1999) noted, such narrative constructions alleviate the negative identity implications of being overweight by contrasting the speaker favourably with a 'worst case scenario'; while their respondents described a continuum that distanced them from larger women, Cassie's 'worst case' was based less on body size than on exacting beauty standards.

Although the younger respondents also discussed their weight-loss goals in relation to various appearance-related continuums, such constructions actually emphasised the inadequacy of the younger women's bodies. For example, several characterised clothing size as a measure of their body's acceptability (or lack thereof). Emily (aged 21 years) explained this process of self-assessment: 'When you look in the magazines, it's all size eight or 10 and here's me, a size 20. You know what I mean, I'd like … to be able to go into a shop and pick up even a size 12 and have it fit'. Emily described a finite spectrum that ranged from an ideal 'size eight or 10' through a respectable size 12 to her own size 20. Rather than distancing herself from the deviant, Emily's narrative located her at the extreme negative end of a body-size continuum. Other younger respondents expressed negative self-perceptions by contrasting their experiences to those of slimmer friends. For example, Sarah (aged 22 years) said that she joined the dieting group because she was 'tired of never looking good … never being able to wear the clothes that my friends could wear. … They see something they like and they can just buy it!' Sarah constructed an 'exemplar' of the ideal slim female, who can purchase and wear attractive clothing, that she contrasted with the deviant, obese case (Cordell and Ronai 1999). In so doing, she differentiated herself from women with 'acceptable' bodies.

While the younger respondents made similar comparisons that alluded to perceived male approval, many older respondents downplayed the relevance of their body for their relationships with men. Margaret (aged 69 years) described her partner's expectations of her appearance: 'I don't think he's too bothered. We've been married for donkey's years. … I've never been slim'. The tendency of many of the older women to minimise the role of male approval in their motivation to diet may have derived partly from being in a successful, long-term relationship, so that they did not believe that finding or keeping a man depended on a slim body. This tendency was also consistent with the notion that older women should not be overly concerned about their physical attractiveness, an assumption that the male partners of some older respondents seemingly encouraged. For instance, Cassie described how her husband might react if she cheated on her diet: 'He might say, "Do you think your doctor would want you eating that?" But he'd never say, "Don't eat that or you'll look fat."'

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Cassie's words may not have precisely captured her husband's, but articulated well her impression of his attitudes.

Loopholes and justifications: explaining dieting setbacks

During the weekly meetings, the members were weighed and their progress (or lack of progress) was recorded by the leader. The 'weigh-in' caused much anxiety and frustration (*cf.* Stinson 2001). For example, on learning that she had gained a pound (body weight) during the previous week, Marjory, aged 55 years, exclaimed, 'It can't be true! These scales can't be right!' After reassuring her that the scales had not been altered, and telling her that their accuracy had not been questioned by others, the group leader proposed several reasons for Marjory's weight gain; the leader asked if she had recently eaten salty food or consumed a lot of water earlier in the day. Marjory said that she had done neither. The leader probed: had Marjory eaten all of the food she was permitted? When Marjory said that she had not, the leader responded, 'That's probably it. Lots of people tell me that if they don't eat everything, they don't lose'.

Such exchanges served important functions for both the organisation and the individual dieters. For the former, they reinforced the company's rhetoric about weight loss as a simple matter of 'reasoned eating' that lies fully under the dieter's control. Among the members, they helped to infuse a puzzling and seemingly illogical practice with some degree of order. Like Cordell and Ronai's (1999: 40) notion of a 'loophole', and Scott and Lyman's (1968: 47) concept of 'excuses', they also identified external, often uncontrollable factors that contributed to being overweight, which at least temporarily alleviated the women's responsibility for failing to comply with weight-loss expectations.

Although group members of all ages voiced anxiety about the weigh-in, the younger and older respondents talked about the experience quite differently. For example, the older dieters tended to discount the potential embarrassment of an unsuccessful weigh-in by emphasising the shared experience of disappointment. Rhoda (aged 69 years) stated, 'If you have put on, it's not the end of the world. [The other members] don't look down at you because they've been there'. Some older women even made light of their failure to comply with the weight-loss expectation. Caroline (aged 70 years) described her most recent weigh-in: 'I dinna [did not] lose weight, but it stops me from getting even huger. … You want to do it for [the leader] if not for yourself. I just haven't got round to doing it (laughs)'. Despite wanting to lose weight, Caroline's amusement suggested that she experienced little guilt or embarrassment about dieting failure. She explained her feelings: 'I would like to be slimmer, but then I think, I've worked hard all my life … what's the harm in a few sweeties?' Like

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the women interviewed by Tunaley *et al.* (1999), Caroline may have wished to be thinner, but she contended that a lifetime of hard work qualified her for self-indulgence in old age. In so doing, Caroline 'justified' her sweets by accepting responsibility for her action while denying its negative meaning (Scott and Lyman 1968: 50). Although Cordell and Ronai (1999: 39) did not refer explicitly to justification as a form of narrative resistance, one of their interviewees employed this device when she asserted that being overweight had not made her unhealthy: 'There's nothing I can't do. I walk, I play ball. … A lot of people talk about their weight and say that they can't breathe and can't walk up a flight of steps. I don't have that problem'. While this woman justified being overweight by denying its physical harm, Caroline instead drew upon discourses of ageing that characterise the latter stages of life as a time for personal fulfilment.

Such age-specific accounts were endorsed by the organisation, at least by the group leader. During several of the weekly lectures, the leader referred to the 'challenges' that many older women face when trying to lose weight, including 'slow metabolism', hormonal changes and the difficulty of exercising after illness or surgery. Such explanations not only provided older women with age-specific, physiological reasons for dieting setbacks, but also reinforced the notion that the bodily experiences and goals of 'ageing women' are distinctive. Having no such organisational resources to draw upon, the younger members frequently referred to the shame associated with a failure to reduce. Emily (aged 21 years) explained, 'You try to lose weight because of the scales. … You have to go on them, and you might be really embarrassed because someone else sees how you've done. They know if you've been bad'. Despite using the second-person pronoun – rather than saying directly what she felt – Emily expressed a personal responsibility for her weight loss, including a concern that the failure to reduce would reveal that she had 'been bad'. Other young respondents related the weigh-in to humiliating body monitoring outside the group. For example, Maddy (aged 25 years) compared her reactions to the weigh-in to her feelings of self-doubt during an overweight adolescence: 'When I get weighed and I've gained, it's like being back in gym class with all the other girls thinner than me. It's stupid, but I feel like I'm the only one who didn't … [or] can't lose weight'.

The older members rarely associated the weigh-in with past experiences of body-related shame or censure, even though they often recalled being heavy in childhood. Margaret (aged 69 years) said, 'Oh, I was a round wee'un. Back then, they thought it was healthy for children to have a bit of meat on their bones'. Margaret's narrative pointed to both variable social meanings of body size and to one explanation for the different perceptions of the younger and older respondents – namely, the historical contexts in

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which they were raised. As young people during the post-1945 years of food scarcity, the older women were unlikely to have faced the anti-size bias that grew at the end of the 20th century. Accordingly, most older members told me that they had become concerned about their weight only in adulthood, while the younger ones recalled seeing themselves as 'fat' and 'ugly' even as youngsters.

Repentance and scapegoating: relationships within and without

Accounts of 'repentance' figured centrally in the respondents' narrative identity work (Fritsche 2002), both during the interviews, in which many spoke about their dedication to weight management, and in meetings. Each week, the leader asked for volunteers to report how much weight they had lost and to share other 'successes'. In response, members typically described a recent challenge that they had overcome by adopting organisationally-legitimised practices, such as avoiding situations that might threaten their resolve or sticking to a pre-planned eating strategy. On one occasion, Maddy (aged 25 years) told the group, 'I used to go to the pub with my workmates two or three times a week … but I stopped going because I wasn't losing any weight'. The other dieters reacted positively, and commended Maddy's commitment to slimming.

Such exchanges allowed members to share support and encouragement. Like the loopholes used to explain dieting setbacks, they also reinforced the idea that people can and should control their weight by making the 'right' decisions. Finally, by focusing on slimming successes rather than failures, they gave the members the opportunity to define themselves in relation to the organisationally-sanctioned behaviour, much of which involved some form of sacrifice, and through this to provide evidence of their 'genuine' contrition. For the younger respondents, such sacrifices frequently involved abstaining from social eating and drinking. Emily (aged 21 years) said that she and her friends, 'used to go out clubbing and we'd drink quite a lot. I can't do that now. … Some of my friends think I'm avoiding them, but I don't want them knowing I'm in [the group], at least not until I've lost a bit of weight'. While Emily's description evinced her devotion to slimming, it also suggested that dieting created difficulties in her social relationships by excluding her from their activities. Moreover, because Emily was unwilling to reveal her involvement in the programme, the social rewards for her repentance were limited to those offered by the organisation and the slimming group, at least until Emily has lost 'a bit of weight'. Other young respondents also concealed their participation from non-members. Catriona (aged 23 years) explained, 'I guess it's just embarrassing. It's like, you think of [a slimming group] as a place where your fat old gran' goes. It's not exactly cool'.

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The organisation did not encourage the members to sever ties with outsiders in the interest of weight loss, but its recommendations for social dining (such as familiarising oneself with restaurant menus in advance) were suited to the ordered lives of older dieters more than to less predictable young-adult ways. So too were the organisation's suggestions for eating at home, given that they generally assumed that members were the primary food providers in their family. In fact, all but one of the younger women in this study still lived full- or part-time with their family of birth, and their mothers frequently cooked for them. Dieting often led to minor problems in their relationships with the food provider. Karen (aged 18 years) said, 'My mum is good when I first start dieting, but after two weeks, she's back to cooking the fatty things she knows I like. If I don't eat it, she'll get upset. That's where the downfall starts'.

Karen effectively blamed her mother for the 'fatty things' she consumed, an example of what Cordell and Ronai (1999) described as a loophole, and Scott and Lyman (1968: 50–1) as the excuse of 'scapegoating'. Karen's account was also informed by the organisation's rhetoric, in that it employed its notion of a 'saboteur', *i.e.* an individual who intentionally or unintentionally undermined the member's weight-loss efforts. Several discussions were devoted to identifying our saboteurs and considering the possible methods for coping with the threats they posed to dieting success, but the emotional significance of meal preparation was never acknowledged, nor that those who prepare meals, like Karen's mother, 'get upset' when their dishes are rejected (DeVault 1991; Lupton 1996). Similarly, neither the organisation's literature nor the leader addressed the symbolic meanings of shared meals, or how those meanings vary across the female lifecourse. As those responsible for family-meal preparation, most of the older members responded to their diet's requirements by preparing different evening meals for themselves and for their family members, both because the latter resisted changes in their meals, and because the women felt obliged to accommodate their tastes (as most had done for years). The burden of this additional work (arguably a behavioural form of 'repentance'), which most of the older interviewees fatalistically accepted as auxiliary to their weight-loss efforts, strikingly was never mentioned in the group meetings. Thus, while the older dieters avoided the relational conflicts experienced by younger respondents, they did so at the cost of extra household duties.

Conclusions

The findings of this research have drawn attention to the importance of both organisational setting and age in shaping individual identity-work

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practices. Specifically, the slimming group provided its members with particular accounting strategies (like excusing weight gain as the result of eating too little) and opportunities (like inviting members to express their repentance by describing a challenge they had recently overcome). So too, the organisation legitimised self-accounts informed by constructions of ageing, as by suggesting loopholes, such as the assertion that a slowing metabolism makes weight management especially difficult for older women. Finally, both cultural understandings of ageing and the composition of the slimming group meant that such accounts were not equally available to all its members. Because the younger dieters were embarrassed about participating in a group that they considered appropriate only for older women, the positive implications for their identity were limited by the confinement of their 'repentance' narratives to the group.

As with Cordell and Ronai's (1999) findings, this research has identified the narrative forms of continuums, loopholes and exemplars. With the exception of the loopholes (or 'scapegoating') employed by the younger respondents, only among older dieters was it found that these linguistic techniques constituted 'narrative resistance', *i.e.* a way of distancing oneself from the negative social meanings of fatness. Furthermore, many of the older respondents' narrative strategies drew heavily from discourses of ageing, such that they focused less on differentiating the speaker from heavier women, and more on the different beauty ideals that apply to younger and older female bodies.

When these discourses were played out in a commercial slimming group, they were themselves mediated by organisational interests that aimed to maintain the members' commitment to dieting and their sense of responsibility for body size. In this setting, notions about physical changes over the life-course served less to diminish older women's desire to lose weight than to enable self-forgiveness – for their temporary lapses from normative bodily control, and for their divergence from what they see as the more exacting appearance standards of youth. Cordell and Ronai argued that narrative resistance of this kind perpetuates oppressive anti-size discourse by asserting the speaker's exceptionality among fat people. A similar point can be made concerning the strategies adopted by the older study participants, in that they affirmed both the demanding nature of beauty ideals for younger women and constructions of ageing that present older females as asexual and unconcerned with appearance.

The findings suggest that 'justifications' and 'repentance' can be added to Cordell and Ronai's three narrative forms. Given that they referred explicitly to Scott and Lyman's (1968) work, the fact that they did not report 'justification', as employed by at least one of their respondents,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005757 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems an oversight but could be put down to their sample. This study has focused on overweight women in a slimming group, but in contrast, Cordell and Ronai's respondents were chosen because they self-described as 'overweight'. The criterion did not exclude female dieters (or those engaged in other activities that evince repentance), but it certainly lowered the chances of their inclusion in Cordell and Ronai's sample.

Women's understandings of appearance and weight loss are shaped not only by organisational processes and discourses of ageing, but also by their life trajectories, personal relationships and the historical era. Each group of respondents in this study passed from childhood into early adulthood in a distinct social environment. The latter decades of the 20th century witnessed the proliferation of idealised human images, food abundance, the increasing availability of technologies for rationalising the body, and shifts in norms and values around gender and sexual practice. In the changed context, working on appearance has become a moral project (Shilling 2003), to the extent that the younger respondents' understanding, of the (unacceptable) body as a marker of (undesirable) selfhood is unsurprising. Moreover, being in their late teens and twenties and having not yet attained the socially-valued accomplishments of motherhood, employment and a romantic partner, the younger members arguably had fewer resources than the older women by which to construct their identities. Seeing weight loss as a means of increasing their social value and attractiveness to others, the younger respondents' dieting may or may not have brought their body into line with contemporary appearance standards. Whether or not this was the case, because their participation in organised weight management problematised their relationships with others, it seems that the young women's efforts to meet those standards came at considerable personal cost.

This study was limited by the small sample size and its focus on a single weight-loss setting. Additional research involving other weight-management companies, non-profit dieting groups and government-funded slimming programmes would provide greater insight into older and younger women's experiences of organised weight management. More emphasis on variables such as class, ethnicity and sexual orientation would also elucidate the relationship between age and thinness norms, and understanding would be raised with more attention to cohort effects. Longitudinal research that addresses the impact of changing social values on women's body (dis)satisfaction across the lifecourse is also needed. Such studies would further understanding of the themes examined here, including women's attachment to beauty ideals and the ways that their negotiation is both provided for and limited by cultural constructions of ageing, group processes and organisational structures.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005757 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

1 Following Tunaley *et al.* (1999: 756), 'discourse' is defined as, 'an extra-locally organised framework of meanings' that takes shape in relation to social institutions and relationships and directs individuals' behaviours and identities.
2 See the statistics on the age distribution of those receiving cosmetic surgery in the United States (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2005).
3 The present dearth of longitudinal data on women's body satisfaction makes it impossible to assess the relative importance of cohort effects.
4 Throughout the article, these groups are described respectively as the 'older' and 'younger' women.

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Accepted 2 October 2006

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005757 Published online by Cambridge University Press