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Narratives of Slimming: Women and Weight Management in Irish Society

by

Jacqueline Anne Marie O’Toole M.Soc.Sc

Thesis submitted to the National University of Ireland, Galway
School of Political Science and Sociology

in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Sociology

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Supervisor: Dr Anne Byrne

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Declaration

I, the Candidate, certify that this thesis is all my own work and, except where appropriately acknowledged and cited, does not include the work of any other party. I have not obtained a degree in this University or elsewhere on the basis of this work.

Signed

Date

Jacqueline O’Toole
Publications arising from this Research

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother,
Anna O’Toole
ever present, ever caring, ever full of fun

and

to the memory of my late father,
Jim O’Toole (1930-2016)
a storyteller, a gardener
Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam
Abstract

This PhD study presents a feminist sociological analysis of the construction of narratives of slimming in Irish society. Theoretically, the study is informed by three main arguments: firstly, that the pursuit/attainment of a normatively defined body weight has become one central determinant of social acceptability for women; secondly, the social construction of obesity as ‘crisis’; and thirdly, that women’s lives are framed by continuities and change in contemporary Ireland. Located in the Northwest of Ireland, the data corpus for the final study is made up of one year’s observation in four commercial weight loss classes, double interviews with two class leaders and nine women participating in these classes and a narrative analysis of key documents from the weight loss organisation, *Slim Ireland*. Taking a different approach to previous ethnographic studies of slimming classes this study incorporates a narrative inquiry approach to develop a narrative ethnography. Adapting Gubrium and Holsten’s (2009) threefold conceptual framework of the interplay between narrative frameworks, narrative environments and narrative practices, I interrogate the links between institutional storytelling and women’s personal narratives of slimming. Deploying the use of exemplars, two of the women’s narratives are presented as in-depth case-studies. The study advances a rich understanding of the temporal, cyclical and complex nature of weight management for women immersed in slimming classes. The findings reveal that successful slimming is articulated in the slimming classes as a quest for a better body, involving a linear, progressive temporality. This generates a set of limited narrative resources for women that draw from wider discourses of health, appearance and responsible citizenship. These are implicated in the women’s personal narratives which are oriented towards accounting for and claiming a moral self, demonstrating that they are ‘good women’ both within and outside the classes. However, two storylines that emerge from the analysis of their narratives, episodic commitment and ambivalent participation, illustrate how the quest narrative is disrupted in women’s narratives and further, how weight management contains paradoxical and ambiguous meanings for women. The women have a long and varied history of immersion in slimming and related practices which has had a profound impact on how they live their everyday lives in Irish society. This study makes important contributions to analyses of women’s everyday lives in Ireland, to narrative inquiry, and to critical weight studies.
Acknowledgements

Although I claim this work as my own, family, friends, and colleagues have played a huge role in helping me get it to submission. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart. Mile Buíochas!

I wish to pay particular tribute to Slim Ireland and the women who participated directly and indirectly in this study. Without their support and openness in telling me their stories, this thesis would never have been possible.

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and Jim. We have been blessed with lovely parents, who encouraged my
brothers, sister and me to pursue our dreams. They inspired us to be kind to
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Abbreviations

BMI: Body Mass Index
BMW: Border Midland Western Region of Ireland
BNIM: Biographical Narrative Interview Method
CSO: Central Statistics Office
EEC: European Economic Community
EU: European Union
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
GI: Glycaemic Index
GUI: Growing Up in Ireland Survey
NUIG: National University of Ireland, Galway
NWCI: National Women’s Council of Ireland
WHO: World Health Organisation
WW: Weight Watchers
Key to Symbols

Cited Texts
... words / sentences edited out

underlined and italicised text indicates emphasis

[ ] author’s clarification

Verbatim Quotations
... (at beginning of quote): not the beginning of the speaker’s statement

... (at end of quote): not the end of the speaker’s statement or speaker interrupted

... (during quote): words edited out

.... indicates a pause in talk

[unclear] indicates unclear talk, obscured either by background noise or poor recording

[laughter] indicates laughter

‘uhms’ and ‘eh’ etc. indicate speaker’s verbal inflections

italicised text: speaker’s direct quotes/direct quotes from *Slim Ireland* documents
Chapter 1: Introducing the Study

What happens to my body happens to my life (Frank, 1991:13)

Introduction

This study presents a feminist sociological analysis of the construction of narratives of slimming in Irish society. The main focus is on women’s narratives of their weight management experiences in the context of their participation in commercial weight loss classes in northwest, rural Ireland. Underpinned by a narrative inquiry conceptual framework, the study advances a rich understanding of the temporal, cyclical and complex nature of weight management for women immersed in slimming classes. I argue that there is a dearth of research in Ireland on aspects of women’s everyday lives. This study aims to rectify this gap in current research. It has its origins in my own dieting biography which provoked an initial interest to research Irish women’s weight loss experiences. In this chapter, the aims, context, rationale and methodology used in the study are introduced. I situate the intellectual puzzle (Mason, 2002) guiding this study, the story of which will unfold in the remaining chapters.

Aims and Research Questions

To begin, let me introduce Sue. Sue was 47 at the time of the interview, married with four children and worked part-time outside the home. She was immersed in a variety of practices of weight management and told me on more than one occasion that she was keen to understand weight management more as she has been involved in it for a good deal of her life. She felt participation in this study may facilitate this goal.

---

1 I use the terms ‘commercial weight loss classes’ and ‘slimming classes’ interchangeably.
2 I use Ireland and the Irish state to refer to the sovereign state of the Republic of Ireland in which this study is based.
3 Weight management is the collective term deployed to describe dieting, weight loss and related practices. I make use of the terms dieting and weight loss where appropriate throughout the text.
In the first interview I carried out with Sue, I invited her to tell me why she joined the classes:

I decided to join the slimming class because I felt that I was beginning to have a weight problem, and I needed ... I was at least em, 2 stone maybe, close to 2 stone overweight, and em, it was beginning to get me down. Okay. And, when I went to buy clothes or do anything like that I was always so depressed and I knew that if I didn’t address it I was going to run into serious trouble with it, and I began to feel really down about myself as well. And I decided, ‘Here goes. I’m going to give this a go’, which I did. And I feel that I need to go to a class, that I need to face somebody every week with the weighing scales for me to be disciplined enough to do that. And I found it great. Em...well, I knew that if em, I didn’t address the way I was heading that I was going to continue to gain weight. And that at some stage or another I was going to say, ‘Hey, stop this because you ‘gotta toe the line here and do more exercise’ and that, and I have em, 4 kids so I’d really be busy all the time, running and racing with them. You come home, you grab a sandwich, you run, you grab a biscuit, get a cup of tea, go in the car, come back, and I decided that em, I was putting myself after the 4 kids all the time as I still tend to do and that I was doing nothing for myself at all. So I thought, even if I got out one evening a week to do that [to attend a slimming class], for one hour, that it would help me, and eh, it has done.

In these opening lines, Sue intersperses her personal narrative with a dominant storyline about women and weight/body size that invokes the inevitable negative consequences that seemingly follow for women once they self-define or are categorised as having a ‘weight problem’. Such consequences may include feeling depressed due to the inability to buy appropriate clothes and the need to engage in a disciplined regime to bring the ‘overweight’ body back into line. For Sue her ['overweight'] body is unsatisfactory, has the potential to spin out of control and is in need of constant surveillance. She links her ‘weight problem’ with her experience of mothering and one particular practice embedded in the identity narrative of a ‘good mother’ - that of putting the children and others first. However, tensions are evoked here in claiming an identity of a ‘good mother’ (May, 2008). Sue feels being a ‘good mother’ may have engendered an unregulated eating and exercise lifestyle. There is a sense of embarking on a guided quest as she seeks to ‘toe the line’ and stall her current pathway into even more weight gain. Joining the class offers Sue an opportunity to reframe the weight loss context as positive and empowering as she seeks to wrest some control and transform her weight/body size in the encouraging environment of a slimming class. Of course, it also means going out for one evening a week, without her children and attendant mothering duties.

This short extract extrapolated from Sue’s much wider narrative reveals the significance of this PhD study. The principal aim of this research study is to
forge a theoretical understanding of institutional narrative resources about slimming and their impact on the women’s narratives of their weight management experiences. To achieve this, the central research question is:

How are the narratives of weight management that are generated within the slimming class implicated in women’s narratives of their weight management experiences?

To address this central question, three objectives were devised to take account of the complexity of weight management in women’s everyday lives, and to extend the central research question:

- to deconstruct the narratives and stories crafted and told of weight management within the slimming classes
- to identify how women narrate, make sense of and practice weight management in their everyday lives in the context of their involvement in slimming classes and related practices.
- to establish the social and biographical contexts in which women narrate their practices of weight management.

**Background to the Study**

There are four main entry points that led me to research women and weight management and which provide a rationale for this study: the social construction of obesity as ‘crisis’; weight management as gendered and normative; the persistence of gender inequality in Irish society; and personal motivations. Before I discuss these, a brief explanation of what I mean by weight management, dieting and weight loss is necessary. Lattimore and Halford (2003) believe that dieting is an umbrella expression for a number of different weight management and weight control practices. Indeed, dieting is a commonly used term deployed alongside and often in place of weight management to capture the phenomenon of transforming body shape, weight and size through weight reduction. In this study I use the term ‘weight management’ to refer to a set of practices associated with dieting, weight loss, exercise modification and lifestyle changes that generally involve the
conscious manipulation of food choice and eating patterns to reduce or maintain weight (Germov and Williams, 2008:300).

Monaghan (2008a:75-79) generates a useful typology of what he terms the embodied meanings of ‘diet’ and ‘dieting’. He identifies three main concepts to capture the differing meanings: having a diet, modifying one’s diet, going/being on a diet/dieting. It is the latter concept that has most relevance to the current study. Monaghan (2008a) suggests that to diet becomes an action/verb where actions have starting points and intended future-perfect goals. Normative embodiment is prioritised and a change is brought about in habitual diet to bring about observable and measurable reductions in weight. Finally, in this conceptualisation, dieting and weight loss are not limited to mere physical transformation of the body as discourses of dieting also position it as life-changing, promoting self-improvement and happiness and ease with one’s body. I will now briefly outline the four entry points to situate the study.

The Social Construction of Obesity as ‘Crisis’
The first entry point for this study refers to the well documented increasing problematisation and surveillance of body weight and size in Western societies including Ireland. According to most reports, the population of Ireland is getting heavier and this is having major negative societal consequences today, these predicted to increase substantially into the future (IPSOS/MRBI, 2015; WHO, 2015). In this context, obesity has been framed as an ‘epidemic’, positioning it as a set of social, medical, political, cultural and personal problems (Boero, 2012; O’Toole, 2010; Saguy, 2013). Drawing from the literature in critical weight studies, what runs through this PhD thesis is a questioning of the hegemony of the ‘obesity as epidemic’ and obesity ‘crisis’ narratives. The moral panic over obesity has given rise to a range of measures to address what is considered to be its intractable embeddedness in many Western societies. Such measures are underpinned by normative narratives of public and personal health status and moral behaviour, located in the notion of the responsible citizen in neo-liberal societies.
Weight Management as Gendered and Normative
The second entry point for this study is the positioning of weight management as gendered and normative. A wide-ranging body of work has demonstrated that there exists a set of normative expectations that constitute an ideal body type for women described as the thin, slender, youthful, fit and ‘healthy’ body (Bordo, 1993, 2003; Germov and Williams, 1996a, b, 2008; Mooney et al., 2009, 2010) and more recently as the thin and toned body (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a, b; Gailey, 2014). In addition, the cultural landscape within which women and body size is constructed is increasingly anti-fat and embedded in discourses of ‘obesity as epidemic’ discussed above (Gailey, 2014; Murray; 2008; Throsby, 2009c). Bordo (2003:202) suggests that dieting is the ‘most popular form of correction’ for women in contemporary Western societies. Monaghan (2008a:163-164) theorises that within late modern, body conscious/oriented societies, embodied selves are reflexively constructed and mobilised amidst almost daily warnings from experts about dangers and risks associated with fat bodies. Such warnings are increasingly couched in militaristic language: ‘fight the flab’, ‘the war on fat’, ‘obesity – the terror from within’.

Normative body weight is closely linked to gendered issues of beauty ideals, aesthetics and health and responsible citizenship, moral behaviour and increasing societal and self-surveillance of individual lifestyles (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a; Gailey, 2014; Malson and Burns, 2009; Monaghan, 2007a, b, 2008a, b; Reed and Saukko, 2010; Tischner and Malson, 2008). Chernin (1981, 1985) and Bordo (1993) point out that there are considerable social pressures placed on women to avoid being seen to be overweight and/or fat and that a ‘tyranny of slenderness’ permeates many women’s lives. LeBesco (2009) reminds us that extreme thinness is also conceptualised negatively in many Western societies. Malson (2008:28) comments that contemporary discourses in which idealised female bodies are constituted borrow much from discourses of gender and feminised beauty ideals as well as discourses of health promotion. Attaining a normative body weight enables women to fit into gendered cultural aesthetics and demonstrate responsible citizenship through the external presentation of a healthy body and mind (Lupton, 1996).
It appears that the imperative is to achieve a body weight that is *not fat* and *is healthy* with the underpinning assumption that *being fat* and *healthy* are incompatible states of being (Bordo, 2003; Cooper, 2016).

It is within this context that I argue that appropriate body size has become one central determinant of social acceptability and social value for women. The normative status of the thin, fit, healthy and toned body is such that it is accepted as the ‘natural’ body size and shape and as a self-evident goal for women (Harjunen, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 1996, 2007). Dieting and weight management have become normalised for women particularly in Western societies. Moreover, dieting has been constructed as a ‘natural’ occupation for every woman and viewed as an essential part of being a woman (Harjunen, 2009:17).

However, actual weight management prevalence rates amongst women are difficult to establish. Mooney et al. (2010:181) point out that the prevalence of what they term ‘dieting’ in different countries is under debate as dieting terminology is open to individual interpretations. Gailey (2014:65) citing the Boston Medical Centre indicates that approximately 45 million people are on a diet at any one time in the United States and that more than half the population has dieted at least once in their lives. Stinson (2001:4) believes it is the rare woman who has not dieted at some stage in her life. According to Gimlin (2008a) women are more likely than men to diet and to use drastic weight loss measures to alter their body shape and size. Wolf (1990) takes this further, positing that the extent of dieting amongst women makes it a social and political issue as dieting is a form of self-inflicted semi-starvation. For Germov and Williams (1996b:630) there is a sexual division of dieting, and women and girls are more likely than men and boys to report dissatisfaction with their body shape and to perceive the need to lose weight (see also, Frost, 2001).
In Ireland, reliable statistics on women and dieting for weight loss are scant. However, information gleaned from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Report (Kelly et al., 2012) found that in 2010, 13.2% of children overall report that they are currently on a diet. This figure has remained stable since 2006. There are statistically significant differences by gender and age group. Overall, 17% of girls report trying to lose weight compared to 10% of boys, and older children are more likely to report trying to lose weight compared to younger children. There are no statistically significant differences across social class groups. The percentage of children dieting is highest among girls aged 15-17 years old (21.6%). A 2012 study of Irish adolescents (1,841 girls, 1,190 boys) found that disordered eating was more prevalent among girls than boys (McNicholas et al., 2012). Further, as girls got older they developed increased eating concerns, a higher drive for thinness and higher levels of body dissatisfaction (McNicholas et al., 2012). The evidence suggests that, similar to other Western countries, dieting begins early in young women’s lives in Ireland.

The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Irish Society
The third entry point for this study is grounded in my commitment to gender equality in Irish society. Sociological and feminist accounts of women’s lives in Ireland have increased significantly over the past 40 years. Focusing on various aspects of women’s lives, the key goals of uncovering and understanding gender inequalities and documenting and analysing the position of women in Irish society have been central (Barry, 2008; Byrne and Lentin, 2000; Byrne and Leonard, 1997; Moane, 2014; O’Connor, P., 1998; Quinlan, 2010; Reilly, 2008; Smyth, 2005).

I position weight management as part of everyday life. Here, I am referring to the commonplace, ordinary, familiar and generally taken-for-granted world of women’s lives (May, 2011; Scott, 2009). The everyday is central to the understanding of identities, agency and social life (Phoenix, A. 2013; Silva and Bennett, 2004). For sociologists, analyses of everyday life attempt to capture and recognise the ordinary and the mundane, and the routines
attached to social relations and social practices. In doing so the ordinary is taken seriously as a category of analysis. Sociologists illustrate that in everyday life social relations, experiences and practices are rarely straightforwardly mundane, ordinary and routine. Explorations of aspects of everyday life provide insight into how people perform, reproduce and challenge social life (Scott, 2009).

Everyday lives often appear as private and personal and the product of individual choices. This makes it difficult to recognise the impact of social structures on behaviour (Scott, 2009). However, I maintain that everyday life is infused with relations of power, order and regulation - theoretical concerns central to sociology. The argument made in this study is that the seemingly mundane and routine nature of dieting and weight loss is in fact illustrative of the relationship and tensions between micro-level experiences and macro-level social processes. Consequently, the normativity of weight management amongst women involves taken-for-granted practices which may in fact reveal something of the conditions of possibility for women. These have been minimally explored in research on Irish women to date. This makes the current study both timely and relevant. This project aims to make visible the invisible in women’s everyday lives in an Irish context. Therefore, I argue that how women’s bodies fit in, what they look like, what they do and what they embody about self and society were, and continue to be, key aspects of idealised normative femininity within which women are framed and frame themselves in Irish society. My study examines the tensions which this evokes.

**Personal Motivations**

My own biography reveals a paradoxical and cyclical immersion in weight management throughout my life. It is paradoxical in the sense that while I identify as a feminist wanting to change attitudes towards and practices of and on women’s bodies, I have at times engaged in practices to become slimmer. Throsby and Gimlin (2010) neatly describe this as critiquing thinness and wanting to be thin (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). My own journey into and out of weight loss has involved quite contradictory and complex sets
of experiences, being both a difficult and often lonely experience but also one that can reap pleasure and rewards. It is also a journey that can be buoyed by the ‘support’ of significant others and in my own case, not-so-significant others who feel free to comment on my changing shape and the perceived implications of same: ‘you must feel so much better in yourself’; ‘you look lovely’; ‘are you happier now?’; ‘you’re half the size you were, what an achievement!’. These were comments made to me when I lost a significant amount of weight some years ago. Firstly, there is the clear notion that to weigh less is about the generation of a positive sense of self where weight and self are intimately enmeshed. Secondly, there appears to be some moral value attached to weight loss. Thirdly, there is an allusion to the pleasure of weight loss. It would seem that there is something very intimate about commenting on an individual’s weight loss, but not necessarily weight gain, that allows everyday barriers to social interaction to dissolve.

Immersing myself in an hourly, weekly and monthly complex of adjusted eating behaviours, exercise regimens and weighing-in sessions has necessitated much reflection on the nature of my material body, self and identity and the relationship between all three. I have come to understand aspects of the nature of my own body-project and of reflexive identity construction and also the connections between these and wider social and cultural constructions of women’s bodies in Irish society. Influenced by feminist epistemology that has addressed questions of power and relationships within the research process, I seek in this study, to explore and represent the lived experiences of other women engaged in weight management.

**Methodological Approach**

A qualitative narrative inquiry strategy underpinned by contemporary feminist epistemology and social constructionism is deployed in this study. People lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives. It has been observed that people explain their actions to themselves and to others through stories (Bruner 1984; Ewick and Silbey 1995, 2003; Mishler 1986; Polletta, 2006;
Riessman, 2008; Sarbin 1986). Phoenix and Sparkes (2009:219) explain how the stories we are told, and the stories we learn to tell about ourselves and our bodies, are important in terms of how we come to impose order on our experiences and make sense of actions in our lives. Thus, most human experiences are expressed in the form of narrative in that people produce accounts of themselves that are storied. Arguably, stories and storytelling are ubiquitous and most, if not all societal activities could not take place without narratives (Chase, 2011; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Smith and Sparkes, 2011). This is the position adopted in the current study.

I posed an initial question asking: where are stories of women and weight management told and circulated? I identified a number of key institutional sites wherein such stories are located including slimming classes, doctors’ surgeries, gym classes and online blogs. They all exist within a contemporary consumer culture that fosters the purchase of body related goods and services by emphasising the individual’s responsibility for her health and appearance (Lupton, 1996; McNamara, 2012). I decided early on in the research that slimming classes would be a theoretically useful focus for the study. Slim Ireland, an Irish-run weight loss organisation with hundreds of weekly meetings, is where my fieldwork was undertaken. The entire data corpus is made up of one year of observation in four slimming classes in the North West of Ireland, 28 interviews with two class leaders and 12 women participating in the slimming classes and a textual analysis of 32 motivational talks.

Guided by Heyes’ (2006:129) observation that weight loss classes have historically demonstrated a consistent re-enrolment pattern across many years and my positioning of weight management as a storied landscape populated by plots, elaborate tales, moral characters, and circumscribed

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4 Slim Ireland is a pseudonym. There are a number of weight loss organisations running slimming classes in Ireland, the most well-known of which is Weight Watchers, founded in the USA in the 1960s. Others include Slimming World and Motivational Weight Loss™.

5 A further refinement of the sample took place for the purposes of inclusion in the final study. This is explained in detail in Chapter 5.
storylines, I set out to explore how an understanding of stories in the context of their telling (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) can bring forth novel insights into women’s experiences of weight management. Three principles frame my approach to this narrative ethnography of women and weight management: (a) stories often unfold over repeated interactions rather than being told in an uninterrupted fashion; (b) the meaning of the story is often negotiated by teller and audience and that includes myself as both audience and teller of the stories and narratives I gathered, analysed and re-present in this thesis; (c) power inheres in storytelling rights that are unevenly distributed (Polletta et al., 2011:115).

Women’s stories and narratives are not privileged as having epistemic expertise from which an undistorted view of the ‘reality’ of women’s weight loss experiences emerges. Rather, through a careful and close examination of one key institutional setting within which storytelling and stories of women and weight loss are constructed and told, I demonstrate how local narrative environments, drawing on wider narrative frameworks, are implicated in the women’s personal narratives of their experiences of weight management.

My work builds on a long line of insightful observation studies of slimming classes generally and critical research on women’s experiences of weight management particularly (see for example, Boero, 2012; Broom and Dixon, 2008; Cairns and Johnson, 2015a,b; Coleman, 2010; Darmon, 2012; Gailey, 2014; Germov and Williams, 1996a, b; Gimlin 2007, 2008a, b; Granberg, 2006, 2011; Herndon, 2008, 2014; Heyes, 2006, 2007; Lhuissier, 2012; Liechty, 2012; Longhurst, 2012; Martin, 2002; McNamara, 2012; Monaghan, 2008a; Mycroft, 2008; Stinson, 2001). The complexity and theoretical import of this research is interspersed throughout the thesis. My study adds to the richness of this work through deploying narrative inquiry. The focus on stories and narratives of weight management for women, institutionally generated within Slim Ireland, reveals the norms of narrative’s content, the norms of narrative’s use and the norms of narrative’s evaluation (Polletta et al., 2011:118).
Structure of the Thesis

The dominant social and cultural representations of weight management for women as normative, necessary and desirable suggest that the current study is timely in an Irish context. The overall contributions to research on women and weight management in Ireland are threefold:

1. Theoretically, the study interrogates aspects of women’s everyday lives which have received minimal attention in an Irish context
2. Methodologically, the use and value of narrative inquiry to the study of practices of everyday lives is demonstrated
3. Empirically, the stories analysed illustrate how dominant narratives of weight management and womanhood are both enabling and constraining of women’s personal narratives of their dieting and weight loss experiences.

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. In this, the first chapter, I outline the aims and research questions of the study. The context, rationale and methodology are introduced. The chapter contains a brief discussion of the wider research and literature in order to provide a backdrop and justification to the current study. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature to identify the theoretical and conceptual framework for the study. I begin with an explanation of how gender is theorised in this study. Four main bodies of literature are drawn on to embed the theoretical and conceptual framework: mind / body dualism; social constructionist approaches to the body; feminist theory on the body; and the body-project thesis. In chapter 3, the Irish context of the study is presented. The context comprises two principal elements: the social construction of obesity and a socio-historical précis of women in Irish society. The first part of this chapter analyses how obesity is discussed in Ireland, drawing from insights gleaned from other Western societies. The ‘obesity as epidemic’ narrative is introduced and critiqued. I draw from the critical weight / obesity studies to challenge the veracity of this dominant narrative on obesity. The second part of the chapter presents an overview of the changing contours of women’s lives in Irish society. Beginning with an account of how the dominant narratives of
religion, nation and family have positioned women in particular ways, I then discuss how these coalesced around women’s bodies. Ireland has transformed in recent decades and this is examined in the context of the changes that have taken place in women’s lives.

Chapter 4 builds on the first three chapters to present a theoretical justification for the deployment of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a relatively new addition to the methodological canon in sociology in Ireland. I review its progression and the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. In so doing, my overall commitment to feminist epistemology is outlined to further advance the theoretical work of this study. A framework for narrative inquiry is developed and justified. In chapter 5, I discuss the implementation of the research design and methods of data collection and data analysis. This chapter is a detailed description of how the study unfolded and the challenges met along the way. I explain the contours of a narrative ethnography and the approach to data analysis. Of all the qualitative approaches available, I believe narrative inquiry is best suited to this topic and therefore, it is imperative to reflexively and honestly account for how it is used in the current study. Representation and writing of women’s lives are ethical endeavours and in this chapter I deliberate on the ethical processes imbued in both practices.

Chapters 6 and 7 form the empirical core of the document. Chapter 6 plots the dominant storyline and narrative arc of slimming narrated in the slimming classes. A holistic-form analytical strategy (Lieblich et al., 1998) is utilised to analyse the data corpus from the observations across four slimming class sites, the 32 motivational talks, other documents from *Slim Ireland* gathered during the course of the observations, and interviews with the class leaders. This chapter highlights how institutional storytelling is an attempt to generate a coherent plot and set of storylines to support weight management as a quest for a better body, offering the promise of self transformation and the adoption of a ‘slimmer identity’. Although cognisant of the ambiguities and tensions attached to weight loss and dieting, *Slim Ireland* relegates these to
the background in order to foreground a linear narrative of the successful slimmer. Chapter 7 turns to the women’s own stories and narratives. An analytical strategy adapting Lieblich’s et al. (1998) approach is used to analyse the data corpus from the interviews. Introducing the notion of exemplar, I present two detailed case studies, those of Siobhán and Niamh. Both case studies illustrate the ways in which institutional storytelling informs and shapes the women’s narratives of their experiences of weight management. The narratives also point to the ways in which women contest and tell different stories about dieting and weight loss practices that disrupt the linear progressive temporality embedded in weight loss narratives. The value of narrative inquiry is highlighted here as the temporal and cyclical nature of weight management is captured in some depth. Chapter 8 draws from the theoretical and empirical material presented in the thesis to reflect on the overall narrative of the project and what it offers to an understanding of aspects of women’s everyday lives in Irish society. The main arguments are presented. My reflections on the thesis as a whole and on the narrative production of weight management are teased out. Finally, the implications of the research are outlined and pathways identified for fruitful areas of future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I present a detailed review of relevant and critical literature in order to embed the conceptual narrative deployed in the study. The aim of this chapter is to articulate the theoretical context that informs my analysis of narratives of slimming in contemporary Irish society. In particular, I examine the ways in which females’ bodies are regulated, understood and constructed, predominantly in relation to body management practices (Nettleton, 2013). This chapter builds on and extends the previous chapter to trace the theoretical debates within which normative body management practices, including dieting and weight loss, are constructed in contemporary Western societies such as Ireland. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007:154) comment:

What appears to be specific to the conditions of late modernity is a heightened anxiety as a new body regime emerges, marked by individualisation, discipline and regulation … politically, this may be read as the production of the neo-liberal subject.

I posit that narratives and practices of body management are critical and sociologically interesting exemplars of heightened anxieties around bodies generally in a late modern society such as Ireland. Further, I argue that these narratives have consequences for how women participate in weight management.

Giddens (1991), Turner (1992), Waskul and Vannini (2006) all attest that contemporary Western societies are somatic societies, pointing to how the body has become the ‘principal field of political and cultural activity’. What is meant here is that we have entered an era where the major social and political problems of our time are expressed via the human body. Obesity for example, is commonly constructed as one such social problem in Western societies, made visible through what I believe is the obsessive focus on the dangers of the ‘overweight’ body. Alongside the emergence of the somatic society, interest in the body has expanded rapidly amongst sociologists and
others. Many suggest that the inter-disciplinary field of ‘body studies’ has arrived (Shilling, 2003, 2012).

The body is central to everyday life and is something that all humans share. Nettleton and Watson (1998:2) argue that there have been relatively few empirical investigations into the body as it is experienced by human beings who both have and are bodies. This is particularly interesting in the context of sociology because as Monaghan (2006:280) states ‘sociology (is) a body relevant discipline’. Shilling’s (2012) much cited explanation for the apparent historical dearth in empirical studies of the corporeal is that the body may have occupied an ‘absent presence’ within sociology. The body was present he suggests in the classical sociology of Marx, Weber and Durkheim but it remained under-theorised.

As the key focus of this study is on women, I begin this chapter with a brief overview of how I conceptualise gender. I will then critically discuss four key sets of theoretical literature on body management: mind / body dualism; social constructionist approaches to the body; feminist theory on the body; and the body-project thesis. This is an extensive literature. I will extrapolate and justify significant concepts relevant to this study.

**Theorising Gender**

Immersion in feminist sociology has gleaned insights about gender and femininity which have inspired the current study. While feminist theorists differ in terms of theoretical argument and empirical focus, what they share is a commitment to challenging a gender order that serves to essentialise, devalue, and / or position women unequally. I share this commitment. I have argued elsewhere, albeit in a different context [that of social care practice], that gender is implicated in all social processes and further that it permeates institutional practices, individual and collective identities and social relations (O’Toole, 2009, 2013). I position gender as a core axis of identity and experience. In addition, I argue that at this particular juncture in history, gender has become an important lens through which to make sense of wider
social transformations (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007). Notwithstanding the relevance of gender, conceptual challenges persist, not least of which is the tendency to reproduce stereotypical binaries and dichotomies of male / female and masculine / feminine.

Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007:9) make a convincing argument to pay attention to different perspectives of gender in order to generate more comprehensive accounts of gender relations in society. Acknowledging this, my use of gender is informed by the work of Acker (1989), Bradley (2007), Butler (1990, 1993), Connell (1987, 1995, 2005, 2009), Jackson and Scott (2001, 2002), and West and Zimmerman (1987, 2002). It is worth briefly teasing out what I have drawn on from within their work to articulate my own position. I begin with the assertion advocated within classic feminist sociological approaches that gender is a social construction (Bradley, 2007; West and Zimmerman, 2002). This approach is exemplified in Arsel’s et al (2015:1553) explanation that:

... gender is not a naïve category that merely reflects the social world. Gender is rather a cultural category that is underpinned by socially constructed and contested assumptions and norms about identity and sexuality.

An initial contention is to define gender as a social structural phenomenon. This invokes the notion of a hierarchical distinction between women and men that is embedded in social institutions and social practices (Acker, 1989; Connell, 2005, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 2002:1-2). The second assertion is that, deeply enmeshed in wider social relations, gender is differently constructed in different societies and varies across time, place and culture. Thirdly, I derive from Connell (2009:10) the argument that gender is a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act.

Connell's (1987) seminal work illustrates that in different societies there may be a variety of ways to be feminine and masculine, to express femininity and masculinity. Therefore, she argues that femininity and masculinity are relative concepts which are socially and historically constructed. She states:

The meanings in the bodily sense of masculinity concern above all else the superiority of men to women, and the exaltation of hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men which is essential to the domination of women (Connell, 1987:85).
Bridges (2009:91) suggests that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, a masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations. This means the hegemonic position is always contestable.

Connell has been criticised by poststructuralists (Wetherell and Edley, 1999) for reproducing a tendency in modernist theory to specify fixed systems, in this case gender. However, she herself clearly states that her understanding of the gender order is flexible and always leaves open the possibility for change. Rich (2002) suggests that Connell’s work is a useful entry point for understanding relative forms of gender. Developing this, she suggests that rather than focusing on ‘kinds’ or types of femininity and masculinity as is inferred in Connell’s (1987) approach, the concentration should be on the various strategies women and men use to achieve femininity and masculinity. I find this suggestion extremely useful as it enables consideration of how women seek to achieve and / or subvert gender in the face of the omnipresence of gender in the wider weight loss narratives. In this sense, I argue that gender is lived by women and men in specific local and biographical contexts. Therefore, gender is produced, negotiated and maintained in everyday interaction (Jackson and Scott, 2002:2; West and Zimmerman, 2002).

In thinking about how gender is produced in the everyday, Butler’s poststructuralist (1990) understanding of gender as performative is unquestionably provocative. Arguing against the notion of fixed gender categories, Butler (1990) states that gender is brought into being through action. In this sense, gender categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are inherently unstable and free floating. She describes gender not as a series of roles, or costumes hung onto the ‘natural’ sexed body, but rather as a continuing performance of interactions between bodies and discourses. For Butler (1993) there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ sexed body as every sexed body bears the traces of discursive inscription and in particular gender inscription.
(Lloyd, 1999:21). Thus, gender relies on producing what it names. This works through the body: to understand gender, we must understand the body. In other words, *doing* gender via a stylised repetition of acts, gestures and movements, creates the illusion of *being* a particular gender.

Ultimately, Butler’s (1990, 1993) analysis leaves open the notion of endless possibilities to perform gender, regardless of what body one is born into and inhabits. While she does make clear that we are constrained into gender and that sexed bodies are materialised over time, Jackson and Scott (2001) state that there is a sense in her work that anything is possible. Gender identities can be played with, taken up and abandoned (Connell, 2009). This certainly appeals to feminist approaches wishing to understand how dominant bodily norms can be subverted. What also appeals from her comprehensive analysis is the proposition that gender does not necessarily flow from sex and that there are more than two sexes and genders.

Questions remain about Butler’s work. There is an absence of a theorising of the ways in which gender is institutionalised. Feminist sociologists consider this a necessity when analysing the workings of gender in society. Why for example, as Walby (1997) points out, does it take so long to change gender relations in different societies? Further, in societies that are mostly unequal, why can some people change their own gender arrangements while others cannot (Connell, 2009)? In this sense, Butler does not consider social structures in any detail to sociologically explain why gender is hierarchical, endures and is sustained in everyday social life (Jackson and Scott, 2001, 2002).

The position in this study is that gender affects every facet of our lives, including how we look, what we eat, how we dress (Bradley, 2007). But

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6 In the context of the current project, the wider literature on women and weight management illustrates quite clearly how dieting for weight loss is profoundly normative for women (see for example, Boero, 2012; Bordo, 1993; Cooper, 2016; Chernin, 1981, 1994; Evans et al., 2011; Gailey, 2014; Heyes, 2009; Longhurst, 2012; Malson and Burns, 2009; Monaghan, 2007a, b; Riley et al., 2008; Sobal and Maurer, 1999; Stinson, 2001).
gender is not deployed as a static or a fixed concept. Women express their femininity in a variety of ways. In the context of the current study, this is best understood through a careful consideration of the institutional resources that shape narratives of weight management, and women’s biographical and situated accounts of their weight management experiences. Moreover, gender is mediated by other social categories. In this study, age, rural location, heterosexuality, motherhood, and White Irishness all contributed to the analysis of the women’s narratives and to how sex and gender, in particular, were mobilised in the slimming classes (Broom and Dixon, 2008).

**Mind / Body Dualism**

The mind / body dualism as it is commonly understood, emerged during the 17th century through the work of the Enlightenment philosopher, René Descartes (Turner, 1984). Known as Cartesian dualism, Descartes sought to define the nature of the relationship between the mind and the body and indeed to conceptualise human nature itself (Howson, 2013). Drawing from a much earlier epoch of Platonic thought, he positioned the mind as holding the most essential component of human nature where the mind was prioritised over the body. Thus, he asserted an ontological distinction between mind and body, privileging the former. Personhood was deemed to be located in the mind, where the mind is considered as the source of thought through which the self is produced (Howson, 2013:3). In other words, it is the mind, and not the body, that guides action, intention and agency. The body, grounded in the senses, was subjugated to and subjected by the mind: a hierarchical dualism of mind over body. The body was understood as incapable of influencing perception and thought. The mind / body distinction suggests that the individual, rational self exists in parallel to an external world. Ultimately, Descartes believed the body has a taken-for-granted nature and is a mechanistic entity.

Cartesian dualism coincided with developments in scientific rationalism and method and the moves away from religious doctrine. The scientific method is based on the assumption that underlying truths about the world exist and,
further, that these can be uncovered through objective, empirical investigation of that which renders itself to observation. Located in positivism and empiricism, dualism has informed epistemological approaches in much of the medical and social sciences. For example, dualism paved the way for the body-as-object / machine thesis that became firmly embedded in modern medicine. Foucault (1977) illustrates how the medicalisation of the body relied on this distinction and how the body was turned into a site for the imposition of scientific rational observation, control and discipline. Indeed, Cregan (2012:69) suggests that dualism remains central to the bio-psycho-social understanding of the body that permeates medical discourse in Western societies today. Citing examples from organ transplantation, cosmetic surgery and gender reassignment surgery, she believes that all three illustrate the body-as-machine thesis. The body can be reshaped to suit the preferences constructed from within the individual’s mind (Cregan, 2012:69-73).

Notwithstanding the deeply problematic analysis found within Cartesian thought (Monaghan, 2008a; Monaghan et al., 2010), dualistic thinking has continued resonance in how bodies are conceptualised and narrated, if not in the academy then most certainly in the weight loss industry. My scepticism about the rhetoric embedded in this approach and my support of critical writers who challenge this approach (Shilling, 2012) is not undermined by examining how dualism is constructed in narratives of slimming and the consequences it has had for women. Three points are worth highlighting.

The first point relates to how dominant weight loss narratives are framed within the ‘mind-over-body’ perspective (see for critique, Cregan, 2006; Gerber, 2009; Gimlin, 2008a, b; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Malson and Burns, 2009; O’Toole, 2010; Throsby, 2009b). Here is invoked the notion that weight loss can be successfully achieved if the mind takes control of the body and conditions the body to eat less and exercise more. In telling stories women may, of course, reproduce the mind / body dualism. For example, Gailey (2014:52) found in her interviews with fat women that the women
talked about their bodies as ‘separate from their mind’ and indeed sought to distance themselves from the negative connotations associated with fat bodies. This, she suggests, invokes Cartesian ideals that permeate Western world views to the present day. Arguably, it is very difficult to move beyond such dualisms in everyday talk and practice.

Secondly, there are significant long-term consequences, particularly for women, of conceptualising the body as machine. Bordo (1999) points out that one key consequence was that the feminine and the [female] ‘leaky’ body (Shildrick, 1997) were seen as objects to be studied and controlled. Thus, the rational mind became associated with masculinity and the fleshy body with femininity. Women’s bodies were and continue to be subject to much societal surveillance and regulation to keep the ‘leaky’ body in check. We are constantly reminded in popular culture and in public health discourse of the dangers of our bodies being too fat or too thin, for example. This is related to the final point, the lack of attention in Cartesian dualism to the ways in which women’s [people’s] ‘lived in’ bodies have implications for how they narrate their experiences of everyday life including those of weight management. Having a fat body, for example, directly impacts on how fat women move in particular spaces, how they interact with others, how they relate to their body and how they are perceived and talked about by others (Tischner, 2013). With a keen understanding of the problematic legacy of Cartesian dualism, the social constructionist position taken in this study rejects the underlying assumptions of this approach, assumptions that gave rise to the objective, scientific view of the pre-social body as an object of exact calculation (Turner, 2008). I now turn to discuss the social construction of the body.
Social Construction of the Body

As mentioned in Chapter 1, social constructionism underpins the epistemological and ontological perspective adopted in this study. The body as social construct is premised on the theoretical assertion that bodies develop and are subject to alteration from within various social contexts. In contrast to the mind / body dualism which gave rise to what Nettleton (2013) terms naturalistic perspectives on the body, the constructed nature of the body thesis is that the body is socially created and therefore is contingent on its social and historical context. This broad consensus in social constructionism - that the body is both shaped and constrained by society - pushes thinking on the body away from the assertion contained in naturalistic perspectives that society springs from the body and is constrained by the body (Shilling, 2012). In other words, naturalistic perspectives conceptualise the body as a pre-social entity whereby the capabilities and constraints of human bodies determine socio-economic relations. All inequalities, for example, are not socially constructed but determined by the human body (Shilling, 2012:45).

There are differing schools of thought within the paradigm of the social construction of the body, ranging from symbolic interactionism to structural sociology through to poststructuralism. An early advocate of the approach, for example, is Mary Douglas’ (1966) seminal text which illustrates how the physical body is a form or surface in which the central rules, hierarchies and commitment of a culture are inscribed. According to Douglas, the body becomes a symbol of society and is a receptor of social meaning (Shilling, 2008). Notwithstanding the divergences within social constructionist approaches to the body, the starting point for the array of theorists is that bodies inhabit specific social, historical and discursive contexts (Cregan, 2006). Highlighted is the importance of the human body for social expression and interaction (Howson, 2013). For Mellor and Shilling (1997) a social constructionist perspective is one that argues that the individual is responsive to their social environment as a sensory self. Kirk (2002) neatly
captures the dynamics of social constructionist approaches stating that bodies are social at the same time as they are biological and physical.

**Regulating Bodies**

One major theorist who has had a profound influence on investigating the body from within a social constructionist perspective is Michel Foucault. Although claimed as a poststructuralist, Foucault advanced many of the limitations of social constructionism, particularly for its lack in theorising power. Shilling (2012) points out that Foucault is an important source for social constructionism and I draw from his considerable corpus of work on the body in this regard. He opened up new ways of thinking about how particular discourses have actively produced bodies and ideas about bodies (Howson, 2013). Further, his insights into the reasons why people engage in such regulatory practices as dieting, eating healthily and exercising provides a useful second piece to develop the theoretical scaffolding for my project (Balfe, 2007). My study is not a strict Foucauldian study in the sense of ‘testing’ the veracity of his conceptual apparatus to the analysis of narratives of slimming in Ireland (see, for example, Heyes, 2006; McNamara, 2012; who did complete such an undertaking in their respective analyses of commercial slimming programmes). However, my understanding of how normative meanings of body weight and weight management come to be accepted as ‘truths’, and thereby implicated in the production of narratives of slimming in both the weight management classes and in the women’s personal narratives, is informed by aspects of his conceptual toolkit. In particular, Foucault’s conceptualisation of power, governmentality, surveillance / normalisation and technologies of the self are the most relevant to the current project. Feminist theorists of women and dieting have critically evaluated Foucault’s conceptual toolkit. In the section following this, I address how they have engaged with Foucault’s work to illustrate its relevance to the current project (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993, 2003; Heyes, 2006, 2007).

**Regulating Conduct**

Discourse remains a powerful concept in Foucault’s canon. Discourses are:
practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... it is through discourses, that is, the mix of beliefs, ideas and concepts which make up and organise our relation to reality, that power and knowledge come together (Foucault, 1972:48).

Discourse refers to a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse constructs the topic and governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about. Foucault’s interest is in how those statements are regulated in the period in which they are produced. It is the question of how they are understood by contemporaries that is significant for the process of regulation, and it is the regulation that Foucault is interested in (Elder-Vass, 2012).

According to Hall (1997:42-43), Foucault analysed the production of knowledge through discourse illustrating how knowledge about the ‘social, the embodied individual and shared meanings comes to be produced in different periods.’ Discourse defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. Importantly, Foucault argued that the same discourse characteristic of the state of knowledge at any one time will appear across a range of texts and as forms of conduct at a number of different institutional sites within society. A discursive formation occurs when these discursive events refer to the same object, share the same style and support a common institutional pattern. Foucault sought to historise discourse, knowledge and ‘truth’. Discourses are not fixed and change over time as the social institutions which produce them change (Foucault, 1980).

In Foucault’s genealogical phase [his later work], he moves to examine social discourses of discipline, punishment and sexuality with a particular focus on the body. Foucault contends that the body is an entity invested with historically specific meaning and moulded by the forces of history and power. In this respect, it appears that the body is unstable and pliable, constructed in different ways at different times. The body in and of itself does not give rise to meaning but becomes meaningful through discourse (Lloyd, 1999:117).
The point of locus is power and how it works in specific institutional settings to regulate the conduct and bodies of others (Hall, 1997). For Foucault, power is omnipresent in every relationship and works in a capillary-like network throughout society (Riley et al., 2008). By this he means that power is never monopolised by one centre. This always leaves open the possibilities for resistance. Power then is exercised in and through complex strategic alliances, networks, techniques and mechanisms. Consequently, power is productive, relational and circulates (Foucault, 1980; Sawicki, 1991). Power is productive in that it generates particular types of knowledge (Heyes, 2006). Arguing that knowledge is a form of power, Foucault asserts that power is implicated in questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not. Truth does not exist in an absolute sense.

Governmentality is the term Foucault uses to describe the diverse ways in which we govern the conduct of ourselves and others and in so doing exercise power (Foucault, 1977). He deploys the concept to explain how disciplinary power, the form of power in modern societies, governs populations (Howson, 2013). Disciplinary power replaced sovereign power – rule by monarch – which was characteristic of a pre-industrial epoch. Coveney (2006:12) suggests that through governmentality a variety of methods have emerged for knowing populations and managing them through that knowledge. One method as outlined by Joseph (2012) is the power to influence the actions of others but doing so from a distance. Medical experts, for example, develop strategies to manage the health of individuals and populations. Coveney (2006) demonstrates that when the problematisation of a population’s health and welfare became visible, the techniques concerned with knowing that population and managing it through that knowledge grew. Foucault locates public health as a phenomenon that came into being in the 18th century, a discipline central to emergence of new techniques for achieving the control of populations through subjugating bodies. This marked the beginning of an era of bio-power (Foucault, 1984).
Neoliberal governance extends Foucault’s conceptualisation of disciplinary power. It operates through techniques of responsibilisation that transfer collective responsibility onto individuals who come to self-regulate themselves according to societal requirements and individual choice (Lupton, 1996, 1999, 2000; Rose, 1999). In this sense Foucault’s concept of power as productive comes to the fore. Neoliberal governance is not imposed on individuals. Rather it works through the embodied actions of free subjects (Cairns and Johnson, 2015b). Widespread structural problems in society are individualised and rendered as private problems that people feel in their everyday lives.

Foucault’s conceptualisation of power is useful as it enables consideration of the processes involved in the constitution of weight loss narratives. This requires thinking through how power operates through medical, scientific and popular narratives to generate knowledge about how women should understand, regulate and experience their bodies, more of which in the next chapter on the Irish context (Riley et al., 2008; Reed and Saukko, 2010). The question to ask is: whether and in what circumstances knowledge about women and weight management is to be applied. And of course, what must follow is a questioning of how such knowledge is disseminated and received.

Fundamentally, governmentality works to produce ethically responsible and ‘normal’ citizens. Further, McNay (2009:60) argues that governmentality is the embodiment of the ‘most definitive historical instantiation of disciplinary social control’. Governmentality studies explore how conduct is shaped by formal political rationalities and by the mundane ways in which individuals govern themselves and others in everyday life (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a:155). A relevant example of governmentality studies in an Irish context is Share and Share’s (2016) analysis of recent interventions into childhood obesity in Ireland. They assert that governmentality is a useful concept to frame how childhood obesity is positioned in Ireland. The authors argue that governmentality works by positioning a problem in particular ways (Coveney, 2008:210). In the case of childhood obesity in Ireland,
governmentality operates to quantify, individualise and responsibilise the phenomenon of obesity while simultaneously supporting processes of state and individual self-surveillance (Share and Share, 2016). What has emerged in Ireland is a moral panic about childhood obesity that is not supported by a careful analysis of recent statistics. Moreover, the stabilisation and indeed reduction of obesity receives only minimal attention in the public domain.

Techniques of surveillance and normalisation are the mechanisms that underpin modern disciplinary power and which contribute to the production of what Foucault terms ‘docile bodies’. There is a deep sense in Foucault’s theorising of the body that the ‘body is docile if it can be subjected, used, transformed and improved’ (Foucault, 1977:135). Producing a docile body requires that attention be paid to the more minute details of the body’s functions and relentless surveillance (Longhurst, 2012). Drawing from Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault explains how surveillance operates. The architecture of the prison system moulds and shapes individual prisoners to create an obedient subject (Foucault, 1977). The prisoner, believing himself (sic) to be constantly under the watchful gaze of the prison warden comes to modify his body in ways designed to suit the immediate needs of the prison institution but also of the requirements of wider society. In this way, the body of the prisoner is made docile and useful.

The prison illustrates how disciplinary power is rendered invisible while the objects and targets of power (bodies) are made visible (Tischner, 2013). Under apparent constant observation much like in the Panopticon, individuals begin to discipline themselves and in so doing social control is achieved. Foucault (1979:201) suggests that the need for an external force is made redundant as individuals are situated within a ‘power relationship independent of the person who exercises it’. However, power for Foucault is productive in that it works by persuading people to undertake activities and practices because they believe them to be in their best interests (Howson, 2013:157). In the current study, and similar to Gailey (2014:19), large women are expected to discipline themselves to become ‘docile bodies’ under the
normalising and regulatory gaze that surrounds body weight in contemporary Irish society. This is further strengthened by techniques of normalisation and normalising judgement.

Normalisation can be understood as a technique of power designed to shape individuals to comply with specific social demands (Manley et al, 2016). Norms are produced through the power / knowledge nexus and following Foucault’s theory, can change over time. Norms function to generate social control but not necessarily in a regressive manner. Rather, norms and processes of normalisation seek to act as positive techniques of intervention and transformation (Smart, 2010). According to Bordo (1999:255), social normalisation refers to modes of acculturation which work by setting up standards or norms against which individuals continually measure, judge, discipline and correct their behaviour and their presentation of self. The judges of normality are everywhere: teachers, doctors, health promoters, slimming class leaders (Nettleton, 2013).

Technologies of the Self
Of equal import in the context of the current study is Foucault’s focus on how people govern themselves. Developed towards the end of his writing career, Foucault believed that self-government is accomplished through technologies of the self, practices by which we come to know ourselves through discipline and training. This new form of control is ‘internalised and exercised through surveillance rather than force’ (Gadda, 2008:9). Foucault himself had recognised that in much of his work he emphasised technologies of power at the expense of technologies of the self. The former was forged through the concept of disciplinary power. Thinking through technologies of the self afforded Foucault an opportunity to engage with the generative aspects of the self. He posed the question, can the self engage in practices of self-constitution, of self-stylization (Foucault, 1988)? Technologies of the self:

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Foucault, 1988:18).
These refer to specific techniques or practices through which subject positions are inhabited by individuals (Hall, 1997:322). While disciplinary practices serve to regulate the subject, technologies of the self enable individuals to create ideal versions of themselves although often doing so by circumscribing to normative ideals. Harking back to the productive elements of power, Foucault indicates that technologies of the self are thus simultaneously constraining but also enabling (Heyes, 2007). Technologies of the self are exercised by normalised subjects in the pursuit of self-improvement, happiness and healthiness (Monaghan, 2001:332). Foucault conceives of these as ethical practices. They neither resist power nor liberate the self from regulation. Instead, they involve an active appropriation of the power of regulation by individuals for the purposes of ethical and aesthetic self-transformation (McNamara, 2012; Sawicki, 1998).

Techniques of the self involve processes of correction of the physical body and of attitudinal and behavioural norms (Manley et al, 2016). Thornborrow and Brown (2009) suggest that technologies of the self are undertaken under conditions of intense surveillance which ensure that individuals become critically aware in relation to normalising standards. For the purposes of the current study, I draw from Markula’s (2003) assertion that critical self-awareness constitutes the most important aspect of the technology of the self (for her in a sporting context). In the context of this study this becomes evident in the women’s willingness to engage in a physical transformation of their bodies. It is also evident in their desire to display the correct attitude as narrated in the dominant narrative of women and weight management articulated in the slimming classes (see also, Manley et al, 2016).

McNay (1992) argues that Foucault’s final work indicated a shift in his thinking from the constituted subject to the ways individuals use these technologies to actively fashion their own identities. In this she sources some relevance for feminists, pointing as it does to the potential for female agency. But one question remains: when are forms of self-discipline exercises in
autonomy and when are they to be seen as forms of discipline to which the self is subject (Grimshaw, 1993)?

Foucault’s Contribution
There remains a strong charge of over-determinism in Foucault’s analysis (Shilling, 2012; Turner, 2008). What is implied here is that ultimately Foucault believes that as individuals are formed within regimes of truth this leaves very little, if any, space for agency and autonomy. I am cognisant of the tensions that this accusation throws up. In the first instance, the notion of docility is problematic. As Cowton and Dopson (2002) elaborate, a Foucauldian characterisation of how control operates in society does suggest a limited capacity for interrogating the particularities of change and choice. The question emerges, are women made docile in regimes of power and subject to and subjugated by dominant narratives of weight management? Secondly, it is often difficult to see how governmentality, disciplinary power and technologies of the self are worked out in particular social contexts and in the presence of others (Inglis, 1997). For example, how do women and men work out the disciplinary practices associated with dieting (Mallyon et al., 2010)? A final and significant concern refers to the absence of a gender analysis in his work, a central argument working against Foucault (Heyes, 2013; King, 2004). Indeed, this can be taken further when we consider some of his comments on sexual violence, the undifferentiated male and female body and social inequality generally. Heyes’ (2013:9) cryptic comments are a useful guide for my study:

Although he is often represented as an antagonist for feminists in [that earlier literature, it was always the case that Foucault’s work was appropriated for feminist purposes without either close or obedient reading.

As mentioned in chapter 1 women in Ireland, as in other Western societies, have been subject to a normalising gaze that seeks to define and constrain them via their bodies and to mediate their experiences of femininity. However, my study is not a totalising account of governmentality in the sense of viewing women as subjects who uniformly and passively take up positions as inscribed in weight loss discourse (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a, b). I now turn to feminist theorising on
women’s bodies in contemporary societies. I focus in particular on feminist scholars that have drawn from the work of Foucault.

Feminism and Women’s Bodies

The apparent absent presence of the body in sociology stands in stark contrast to the position of the body in feminist scholarship and activism. Feminists have long known that the female body is a key site implicated in the reproduction of patriarchal society. In the 1970s second wave radical feminists and materialist feminists produced sophisticated accounts of the lives of women and how women’s bodies served as a real base for continued gender inequalities (Firestone, 1971; Mitchell, 1971; MacKinnon, 1982). Feminists demonstrated how violence against women and the dearth of reproductive rights, for example, were important political issues spotlighting women’s lack of bodily autonomy. Radical feminists attempted to reclaim the body, especially the reproductive body to generate a positive meaning of the feminine as a theoretical concept. The embodied nature of sexual difference was highlighted in this work. However, a significant difficulty was the tendency to uncritically universalise bodies and reiterate biological essentialism (Price and Shildrick, 1999:4-5).

Feminist theorists adapted social constructionism to challenge dualistic thinking and the taken-for-granted nature of the female body. These had served to justify and naturalise differences between women and men and the naturalisation of a system of structured gender inequality (Budgeon, 2003; Lorber and Martin, 2013). Acknowledging second wave feminists’ centre staging of the body in society in general and in the academy in particular, I argue that the central dilemma facing contemporary feminists is how to focus on the body while retaining an engagement with context, action and practice (Brackett-Milburn and McKie, 2001). Ussher (2006) suggests that there may be limited sets of possibilities open to women enacting femininity and that the body plays a significant part in this enactment. Thus, an understanding of the social context of bodies is paramount.
Many feminist scholars have theorised the relationship between women’s bodies, identities and social context in Western societies. Examples include Butler (1990; 1993) on performing gender; Davis (1997) on embodied practices; de Beauvoir (1949) on the social construction of woman; Fausto-Sterling (2000) on the construction of sexuality; Grosz (1994) on the centrality of women’s bodies to their identities; Hill Collins (1990) on Black women; Shildrick (1997) on ‘leaky’ bodies; Skeggs (2004) on gender, class and bodies; and Young (2005) on female embodiment. This brief list is illustrative of the explosion in rigorous feminist scholarship on women’s lives and bodies.

In what follows I focus on the work of two prominent feminist theorists of women and their bodies, Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, who clearly demonstrate the relationship between bodies and social context. I position their studies as foundational studies of the ways in which Western consumer culture promotes the gendered beauty ideal of ‘the slender female body, enacting cultural values of discipline, control, and sexual desirability’ (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a:158; see also, Campos, 2004; Cordell and Ronai, 1999; Germov and Williams, 2008; Gilman, 2008; Le Besco, 2004; Malson, 2008).

Putting the Female Body into Context
Bartky and Bordo moved beyond second wave feminism to theorise the position of women in contemporary societies and in relation to their bodies (Davis, 1997; Diamond and Quinby, 1988). In addition, both approach the body from within a social constructionist framework, influenced by Foucault. Diamond and Quinby (1988) suggest four possible convergences of feminism and Foucault that illustrate clear attempts to dismantle oft-times unrecognised modes of domination:

- both identify the body as a site of power which has enabled feminists to consider forms of control over women’s bodies (Sawicki, 1991)
- both point to the local and intimate operations of power rather than focusing on the supreme power of the state (Bordo, 1993)
both highlight the crucial role of discourse in terms of its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power (Bartky, 1990)
both criticise the ways Western humanism has privileged the experience of Western masculine elites as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom and human nature.

**Docile Bodies?**
Sandra Bartky (1988, 1990), a feminist philosopher, takes as her starting point Foucault’s powerful critique of modern society and the emergence of unprecedented levels of discipline directed at the body. She argues:

… the production of ‘docile bodies’ requires that an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity, not just their result; this ‘micro-physics of power’ fragments and partitions the body’s time, its space and its movements (Bartky, 1988:62).

Disciplinary power is exercised in a bureaucratic mode, is faceless, pervasive and anonymous, and aims to produce isolated and self-policing individuals (Bartky, 1988:80). However, Bartky departs from Foucault due to the absence of a gender analysis in his work and his treating the bodily experiences of women and men as conceptually and empirically analogous. Bartky (1988) brings to Foucault’s techniques of power a gendered analysis of women’s bodily practices. She carefully teases out how normative idealisations of femininity are instrumental in the production of gendered discipline where women’s bodies are rendered more docile than the bodies of men (1990:65). Femininity is an artifice, an achievement, a way of enacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh.

Bartky (1990) examines a range of practices that produce a body that in gesture and appearance is feminine. These include dieting and exercise as disciplinary practices which aim to produce a body of certain size and general configuration. This is the slender body, adorned appropriately and carrying herself well. She examines other sets of practices including repertoire of gestures, postures and movements, and practices that are directed towards the display of the body as an ornamented surface. Through
all of this the ideal feminine body is constructed, ‘a body on which an interior status has been inscribed’ (Bartky, 1988:71). Overall, she suggests that the disciplinary techniques through which women’s ‘docile bodies’ are constructed aim for regulation of each of the body’s visible parts, practices of regulation that are perpetual and exhaustive.

Expanding on Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon, Bartky (1990) observes that it is women themselves who practice discipline against their own bodies. Women become self-policing subjects, committed to relentless self-surveillance. With regard to dieting for example, Bartky (1990:66) states:

Dieting disciplines the body’s hungers. Appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will. Since the innocent need of the organism for food will not be denied, the body becomes one’s own enemy, an alien being bent on thwarting the disciplinary project.

In Western societies there is an absence of a formal authoritarian institution directing women how to behave (Bartky, 1990). Thus, the production of properly embodied femininity does not rely on public or violent sanctions, nor does it seek to restrain the freedom of the female body to move from place to place. Of course, we know that in many other societies, formal sanctions and restraints are in place to police women’s bodies. This creates the impression that the production of femininity is natural and voluntary: to diet is feminine. In one sense feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: no one is marched off at gunpoint for that weekly electrolysis treatment, gym class or daily beauty regime. However, for Bartky (1988) these practices are located within a far larger discipline, an oppressive and unequal system of sexual subordination. Further, she suggests that an adequate understanding of women’s oppression will require an appreciation of the extent to which not only women’s lives but their very subjectivities are structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices. Women internalise patriarchal standards of bodily acceptance which are incorporated into the structure of the self and become carefully negotiated skills for women. While Bartky (1990) recognises that while things have changed for women as pockets of resistance have emerged to the dominance of particular types of
femininity, she suggests such resistance is limited. Normative femininity is increasingly centred on women’s bodies, appearance and heterosexuality.

The Politics of the Body
With similar theoretical interest in women’s bodies and their position in contemporary societies, Bordo (1993, 1999, 2003, 2009) fuses Foucault and materialist feminism to explain the social constructionist nature of femininity in contemporary society and links modern consumer culture to the production of gendered bodies. However, Bordo (1993, 2003) is cautious that in a postmodern context there occurs an ‘over appropriation’ of Foucault’s ideas about the fragmented and unstable nature of power relations. Thus, while she implies that the body is a text to be inscribed upon and interpreted, she also clearly emphasises the materiality and situated-ness of bodies. Bordo (2003:38) states:

I view current postmodern tendencies thoroughly to “textualise” the body … as giving a kind of free, creative rein to meaning at the expense of attention to the body’s material located-ness in history, practice, culture. If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilising elements can be emphasised and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, is there a body in this text?

Attending to key points in post modernism and poststructuralist theory, particularly to notions of difference, multiplicity and subversion, Bordo is keen to highlight the historical location of women’s bodies in time, space and culture.

The dynamic between two key Foucauldian concepts, social normalisation and social resistance, are key drivers in reading how domination is enacted upon and through female bodies (Davis, 1997). Examining sets of practices such as eating disorders, Bordo (1993) illustrates how they arise from and reproduce normative feminine practices in Western culture. They train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands which, at the same time, are experienced in terms of power and control. It seems that women in Western cultures believe that if they can control or contain their bodies they can escape the unveiling, paradoxical demands placed on them to be good but never good enough. Indeed, they may even feel liberated in
an ironic sense by the very norms and practices which constrain them. For Bordo (1993) body shape and size are increasingly read as a visible indicator of the inner moral self (Cooper, 2016; Gailey, 2014; Malson, 2009; Monaghan, 2008; Throsby, 2011). Davis (1997:11) explains that Bordo explores how cultural constructions of femininity intersect with the Cartesian legacy of mind-over-matter and contemporary body discourses of control and mastery to produce a normalising politics of the body. Normalisation is still the dominant order of the day, even in a postmodern context, and especially with regard to women’s bodies.

Following Foucault, Bordo (1993, 2003) is also keen to point out the possibilities for resistance. To explain this she observes that the task of ‘older’ feminism was to expose the oppressiveness of femininity. It was to be expected that this would not take account of the potentially subversive appeal of decorating and reshaping the body. Instead, it has been the task of deconstruction and postmodern feminists to raise the issues of creativity and resistance to dominant social orders. Postmodernists and poststructuralists such as Judith Butler (1990) reimagined social conditioning and normalisation to assert the unstable nature of gendered subjectivity and creative agency. However, Bordo (1999) is less convinced by this newer theorising. She agrees that the ‘old’ oppressor/oppressed model of power must be replaced with a more sophisticated understanding of power and, similar to Butler, turns to Foucault’s conceptualisation of power as a network of non-centralised forces to do so. Yet, she advises feminists to keep their focus fixed on the systematic, pervasive and repressive nature of modern body cultures (Budgeon, 2003; Davis, 1997; Tischner and Malson, 2008). It is facile to ignore the domination and constraint that surround women’s bodies despite current narratives that celebrate and promote freedom and choice. Idealised constructions of female embodiment still prevail and women themselves come to discipline and survey their own bodies in their everyday lives.
In a revealing moment, Bordo (1993:31) outlines her own engagement in a weight loss programme:

I know … that although my weight loss has benefited me in a variety of ways, it has also diminished my efficacy as an alternative role model for my female students. I used to demonstrate the possibility of confidence, expressiveness, and success in a less than adequately normalised body. Today, my female students may be more likely to see me as confirmation that success comes from playing by the cultural rules … Even though my choice to diet was a conscious and ‘rational’ response to the system of cultural meanings that surround me … I should not deceive myself into thinking that my own feeling of enhanced personal comfort and power means that I am not servicing an oppressive system.

Here is evidence of the complexities associated with the intersections of culture, discourse and power. As a (now) middle-class, Western, white academic, Bordo has the necessary tools at her disposal to deconstruct femininity and the cultural rules that are inscribed on women’s bodies. Yet, the historical situated-ness of gendered bodies and the normative feminine practices of Western culture highlight the limitations of the so-called endless possibilities allegedly available in postmodern societies. Bordo (1993) illustrates that discourses of normative femininity are slowly changing our conception and experience of our bodies, directing us towards possibilities while simultaneously closing our eyes to limits and consequences.

Bordo (1993:5) attests the female body is always ‘other’: mysterious, unruly, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order. Dominant ideals of femininity and the female body are played out in beauty, dieting, and fertility regimes. Decoding the slender body uncovers deep associations with autonomy, will, discipline, conquest of desire, enhanced spirituality, purity and transcendence of the female body (Bordo, 2003:68). She identifies four significations that she argues appear in each of these regimes and which seem to hold out much promise for women:

1. the promise of transcendence of domestic femininity and admission to the privileged public world
2. the symbolic and practical control of female hunger (read: desire), continually constructed as a problem in patriarchal cultures
3. the symbolic recircumscription of woman’s limited “place” in the world
4. the tantalising (and mystifying) ideal of a perfectly managed and regulated self, within a consumer culture which has made the actual management of hunger and desire intensely problematic (Bordo, 2003:68).

In the context of this study, Bordo amongst many others, asserts that practices such as food refusal, weight loss, commitment to exercise, and an ability to tolerate bodily pain and exhaustion have become cultural metaphors for self-determination, will, and moral fortitude (see for example, Gard and Wright, 2005; Monaghan, 2008a; Saguy, 2013; Tischner and Malson, 2012; Throsby, 2008a, b; Warin, 2011).

Both Bartky and Bordo reworked Foucault for their respective analyses of women’s bodies and interaction with the social context. They theorised the efforts that women go to shape their physical appearance to modify a pre-existing female form. Further, they illustrated how these are practices that constitute femininity (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a). Bartky and Bordo argue that the slender feminine ideal is normalised as a white, middle-class and heterosexual body that ignores the structural inequalities that shape women’s lives (Gimlin, 2008a). However, they deploy Foucault’s conceptual tool-kit somewhat differently in their respective work. Arguably, Bartky’s use of the Panopticon represents a more totalising account of ‘docile bodies’ than does Bordo’s analytical use of the dynamic between social normalisation and social resistance. Notwithstanding this theoretical divergence they have been similarly critiqued for having a preoccupation with the body as constrained and defined by culture to the negation of both women’s personal agency and an analysis of the material body itself (Deveaux, 1994; Shildrick, 1997; Shilling, 2012).

Adopting Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power invokes docility and subjugation. This, in turn, gives rise to the sense that discussions of strategies employed by women to mediate and resist encroachments on their bodies and lives are minimised in Bartky’s and Bordo’s respective analyses (Deveaux, 1994, Heyes, 2006, 2007). They appear to endorse the view that
women have few opportunities free from the normalising gaze centred on appearance, body weight and size. Moreover, for Bordo (1993) this becomes a political issue as she believes it renders women’s focus on their personal appearance to the foreground and a concern with material and social inequality to the background. But as Gimlin (2008a, b) points out, women bring their embodied experiences to their weight management practices. This suggests that individual life trajectories, personal relationships and historical circumstances (ibida:188) also shape women’s beliefs and practices about weight loss. These appear as largely theoretically absent in Bartky’s and Bordo’s analyses.

What remains useful in their work for the current study is their insightful analysis of the body as construct across time and space. They have pointed to some of the implications for women of the mind/body dualism that is deeply embedded in Western cultures. Ultimately, I agree with Bartky and Bordo that the limits of the material body do impact on our embodied experiences and how we narrate those experiences: it is not so easy to go beyond dualism (Bordo, 1993:15). The impact of dominant images of femininity, masculinity, beauty and appearance cannot be underestimated. Of course, women and men differ in their understanding of and reception of these norms. Bordo (1993, 2003) in particular offers hope that understanding the power and effects of this dualism enables concrete transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it (Cregan, 2006:169). I would argue that this is especially important for feminist scholarship.

Murray (2008) provides a similar reading of Foucault to Bordo and Bartky. She points out that bodies deemed to be fat are positioned in many Western societies as greedy, excessive and out of control.

She continues:

For the “fat” woman to conform to the aesthetic ideal that lies at the core of an “arts of existence”, she needs to transform her body, and her flesh, to be perceived as living a “beautiful life”, to become normatively beautiful. Hence, she must restrain her supposedly excessive desires, she must learn to exercise control in all aspects of her daily life, she must set about employing Foucault’s “techniques of the self” (Murray, 2008:127).
Longhurst (2012) explains that for Murray (2008) the crucial question centres on choice and the conditions of possibility within which individuals can make choices. Do we actually have much choice in the face of considerable pressures to be, look and act thin?

Cressida Heyes (2006, 2007) has provided an interesting intervention into the theoretical import of Bartky’s and Bordo’s contribution to theorising women’s bodies, particularly in relation to dieting and weight loss. In an imaginatively entitled article, ‘Foucault goes to Weight Watchers’, Heyes (2006) argues their work offers a number of specific insights into the practices of dieting:

Their Foucauldian accounts show how normalisation is enacted through ever finer measurement and closer surveillance of the subject population. For example, standard height-weight tables are themselves a macro-tool for normalising the population – for taking a vast and diverse group of people and establishing a ‘normal range’ to which every individual bears some relationship. Deviation from the norm is then (falsely) read as proof of behaviours that can be pathologised, just as conformity is (falsely) taken as evidence of health and good conduct. Biopower here thus operates both at an epidemiological level and at the level of the production of a weight-based moral identity in the individual. (Heyes, 2006: 133)

Weight management organisations such as Slim Ireland, for example, urge dieters to engage in ever finer modes of self-surveillance and self-discipline through its materials, its online presence and in its weekly meetings (discussed in more detail in chapter 6). Notwithstanding this, Heyes (2006) takes both authors to task for focusing on dieting as the production of docile bodies thereby emphasising the repressive moments of dieting. In so doing, she asserts that they appropriated too much of Foucault’s technologies of power and not enough of his theorising of technologies of the self.

Heyes (2006) asks some pertinent questions: if dieting is so problematic, if women end up as recidivist dieters and if dieting causes endless distress, why does it continue to hold out much possibility for women and why does it continue to be so popular amongst women? What does dieting offer women? For Heyes (2006) dieting regimes tap into notions of the ‘care of the self’ to extend women’s capacities. These, she argues, are grounded in feminist ethics to care for oneself in the face of oppressive gender inequalities.
In this context, dieting is an enabling act of transformation and not the repressive force that seems to be prevalent in many feminist readings of dieting through a Foucauldian lens.

**Feminist Theory Contribution**

Feminists have long pointed out that the relationship between gender and bodies is well established and that it is women who tend to be more concerned about their weight (Coleman, 2010). Moreover, the contribution of Foucauldian feminist research to theorising the problematisation and normativity of weight and weight management in women’s lives is substantial. Foucault’s conceptualisation of governmentality and technologies of the self are useful to this study on narratives of slimming. Maria Tamboukou (2003, 2013) explains that narratives can carry out a two-fold function. As technologies of power, they involve the regulation of the conduct of individuals. As technologies of the self, they involve active practices of self-transformation. Through the lens of governmentality, we can assess how narrative frameworks of slimming are produced within slimming classes and their role in circumscribing the behaviour of the members. Through the lens of technologies of the self, we can explore if and how women narrate their weight management experiences in ways that might disrupt and resist the dominant narrative of weight management in the slimming class. I argue that the capacity for self-transformation that is embedded in dominant weight loss narratives is an attractive proposition for those women who engage in dieting. Self-transformation is also premised on restraint, self-control and discipline, elements that can paradoxically produce anxiety and pleasure, feelings of failure and self-learning.

I now turn to the final piece of the theoretical scaffolding for this study, the body-project thesis, which offers a way of analysing narratives of slimming that reflects on and acknowledges notions of capacity and reflexivity. Weight

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7 See Bell and McNaughton, (2007); De Souza and Ciclitira, (2005); Gill et al., (2005); Mallyon et al., (2010); Monaghan, (2008a); and Newcombe et al., (2012) for their respective analyses of men and body management practices and how men are implicated in gendered body normative behaviours.
management can be understood as a body-project. As such, it can involve practices such as curtailing appetite to expel ‘excess’ fat from bodies to wider weight management practices of dieting, exercising and self-surveillance (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a; Chernin, 1981; Gill et al., 2005; Spitzack, 1990).

**Body-Projects**

The body-project thesis invokes the idea of the body as capable of being worked on and transformed in everyday life. Gill et al. (2005:40) explain that this is a useful way of thinking about both the ‘unfinished’ nature of bodies through the life course and the pressures in affluent Western societies to ‘work on’ the body, transforming and accomplishing it as part of individual identity. Shilling (1993:3) a major proponent of this thesis observes:

> For those who have lost their faith in religious authorities and grand political narratives, and are no longer provided with a clear world view or self-identity … the increasingly reflexive ways in which people are relating to their bodies can be seen as one of the features of high modernity … it is the exterior territories, or surfaces, of the body that symbolise the self at a time when unprecedented value is placed on the youthful, trim and sensual body.

Here Shilling is pointing to the imperative that the body has assumed in consumer culture in becoming increasingly central to the modern person’s sense of self-identity. Older and apparently more clear-cut identity classifications based on social class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality seem less important in construction of self-identity in contemporary societies than conceptions of identity based on appearance, body weight, consumerism, and health status for example (Crossley, 2005; Featherstone, 1991). Synnott (1993:2) explains how the body has become the prime symbol of the self and the prime determinant of the self.

Shilling (2003) draws from the work of Giddens (1991) who similarly observes that late modernity has witnessed a decline in the grand narratives of religion and politics that once provided meaning for people’s lives. The consequences of this have been an intense shift in focus onto ourselves and our bodies as we seek to generate meaning and control in our lives
(Featherstone, 1991; Gimlin, 2006; Shilling, 2003). This has been facilitated by developments in new technologies, increased affluence and consumption and greater ‘free’ time available. We live in an increasingly complex society which people feel they have little control over and which is imbued with risk and uncertainty. Shilling (2003:104) suggests that having some control over the shape, size and appearance of one’s body affords people the opportunity to reclaim certainty in aspects of their everyday lives.

A central feature of the body-project thesis is that people create and produce desirable versions of outward forms. In so doing, people engage in reflexive examination of the body and the self. This self-scrutiny, which I argue correlates to the ‘care of the self’ reflects a shift in social conditions themselves, in terms of work and leisure, consumerism and commodification. Giddens (1991:218) suggests that historically the body was a ‘given’. But there has occurred an increasing invasion of the body by abstract systems. Now the body, like the self, becomes a site of interaction, appropriation, re-appropriation, linking reflexively organised processes and systematically ordered expert knowledge (ibid: 218). The body can/must be worked on in late modernity and is made subject to constant revision. There is a deep sense in the body-project thesis that the body itself is always in a state of becoming. Featherstone (1991) asserts that the body is charged as a vehicle of self-expression where body-projects are attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity via attention to the body (Gill et al., 2005:40).

There is a growing industry that tells us exactly what we need to do to fulfil this project. Witness the proliferation and pervasiveness of ‘make over’ programmes, self-help manuals and diet schemes which hold out the tantalising invitation: 'you too can change your body into that which you desire'. The maintenance of a positive presentation of the body seems crucial. Such positive presentations of the body and the self tend, in Western societies, to be grounded in discourses and norms focused on youth, health and beauty. Indeed, this may partially explain why high levels of concern
about things like personal weight, ageing and physical appearance appear specific to this moment in time (Frost, 2001:38). As people seek to make and remake themselves in relation to available versions of what it means to be a person, perfection is sought and constantly worked at. Thus the highly controlled body is an emblem of a safe existence in an open social environment (Frost, 2001:38). Gill (2007) underscores the body-project thesis as a postfeminist sensibility that valorises women’s agency and choice where femininity is seen as a bodily property (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a:158).

The existence of the competent, reflexive, self-policing social agent is articulated as a mainstay in late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2003). This is tied up with the debates within Irish society and elsewhere about how people negotiate perceptions of risk and risky behaviour. Much emphasis is directed towards the responsible and healthy citizen where notions of self-control and self-discipline are centre staged. As Giddens (1991:57) explains, bodily discipline is intrinsic to the competent social agent and the routine control of the body is integral to the very nature both of agency and of being accepted (trusted) by others as competent.

Body-Project Contribution
The body-project thesis has been critiqued albeit, I would argue, with the aim of expanding its usefulness. Firstly, there exists an overly voluntaristic understanding of agency. Invoking the fragile self, free from ascribed statuses, body-projects appear as constructions within consumer culture reflecting the autonomous wishes and desires of the individual. However, what must be remembered is that the body-project is itself located within the contemporary new-liberal discourse of the responsible citizen. Petersen and Lupton (1996) have illustrated the ways in which ‘good citizens’ are obliged to work on their bodies and health as a moral imperative. In a neoliberal agenda there is an unprecedented focus on health within the contemporary widespread concern with the ‘obesity epidemic’. One consequence is the considerable pressure placed on individuals to attain a normative weight
status, size and shape. Body-projects may ultimately be normative practices. Harjunen (2009) points out body-projects that involve transforming body size are only accepted as long as the changes produce a body that is socially approved. In other words, it must not transgress the boundaries of normative female bodies. Some women for instance, are considered as taking things too far. Women body-builders and other types of female athletes may be positioned as working on the body too much by developing what are perceived as masculine looking, muscular bodies. Women who engage in extreme weight loss are also positioned as taking things too far in their pursuit of particular bodies. Other women as judged by their appearance may be positioned as working too little on their bodies. Some women who are deemed not to be sufficiently involved in practices such as dieting and exercise and may be penalised for this in a number of ways (ibid:17). Fat women are particularly targeted in this way regularly (Skeggs, 2004).

Secondly, is the notion of new forms of ontological security embedded in the reflexive body-project achievable? For example, many women who ‘successfully’ lose weight find it difficult to comfortably incorporate the success into their sense of self (Frost, 2001; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, 1998, 2000). While they might be congratulated by others this may engender a fear of weight gain and wondering what people might have thought of their heavier selves. Weight loss as a body-project can be fraught with difficulties as it demands hourly, daily and weekly disciplining of the body (Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, 2000).

Another criticism with the body-project thesis refers to the question of whether the tools necessary to engage in reflexive work on the body are equally available to all? Women may have differential access to such tools, which constrains their capacities to construct new identities through body-work. For, as Pitts (2003:34) contends: ‘self-invention is an ideology that informs body-projects as much as it is a practice that constitutes them’. In this sense, McNamara (2012) explains that while the production of body and self may appear to be a uniquely individual endeavour, it is an endeavour
that is located within a specific cultural and historical context and is both produced and limited by existing power relations. Finally, feminist philosopher Budgeon (2003: 35-37) argues that there remains in the body-project thesis a privileging of mind over body and a blindness to the gendered nature of this binary. Feminists have long considered the mind / body split problematic, particularly as binaries, endemic in Western thought (Brook, 1999), tend to place women outside the privileged male spaces of mind, culture and the masculine. Further, feminists remind us that in the body-project thesis the body is almost an object of the self, something to be worked on. In other words, it appears as if it is the reflexive self that constructs the body to render it socially meaningful (Jackson and Scott, 2001). This invokes the idea of a pre-social body, only becoming meaningful through the work of the reflexive self.

For the purposes of the current study, the body-project thesis offers a way of thinking through how weight management is narrated as a quest for a better body and how the pursuit of weight loss is an example of a neo-liberal ‘identity project’. I argue that the bodily ideals recounted as necessary and attainable in weight management discourse, draw from this notion of the ‘reflexive self’ in late modernity: a self that is apparently infinitely flexible and malleable. To be a ‘successful slimmer’, Slim Ireland asks that women must be open to change and want to change. But women themselves are not mere ‘dupes’ of these processes. They exercise capacity and reflexivity in the ways in which they narrate their own weight loss stories, stories, as we will see later in this thesis, that do not always conform to the dominant narrative of weight loss as a linear quest for a better body. Of course, they do so in the context of the persistence and pervasiveness of normative standards of body weight status. Connell’s (1995:64) reframing of body-project as body-reflexive practices augments the utilisation of this concept:

Body-reflexive practices ... are not internal to the individual. They involve social relations and symbolism; they may well involve large-scale social institutions. ... Through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed relevant theories of the body management, fashioned in the main from within a social constructionist perspective emboldened by feminist Foucauldian theory and the body-project thesis. This provides a critical perspective on bodies advanced in this thesis as follows: the female body is narrated and experienced in ways that are influenced by social contexts and social processes (Howson, 2005; Sanders, 2006). There is an inherent risk that social constructionism simply reproduces the problematic binary thinking found within the mind / body dualism with its seeming lack of attention to the ‘lived in’ material body. In other words, the uncertainty of defining the substance of what the body is, serves to reignite the tension between conceptualising the body as an entity independent of society or as an entity that exists in relation to the social processes that produced it (Shilling, 2012). Turner (1992) suggests that such dualist thinking on the body may reflect different analytical interests: either a focus on representation or a focus on lived experience. This in turn, raises the question of how to move beyond accounts of objectifying clinical discourses and abstract, disembodied theorising of women’s bodies to accounts of actual bodies. I want to signal that one way to do this is through an analysis of women’s narratives. I am interested in exploring how women speak through their bodies. My study then takes on board the dilemma that feminist scholarship faces, in incorporating abstract theorising and women’s lived-in bodies through a focus on body narratives: the stories told about, and through, the lived, material, socially constructed body. A central argument of my study is that production of narratives of slimming requires close attention to be paid to the institutional settings, local contexts and personal narratives within which slimming is narrated. I now turn to the Irish context, to examine the social construction of obesity and to generate a socio-historical précis of the lives of women in Irish society.
Chapter 3: Context: Situating the Study

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the research question, central aims and objectives of this study. In so doing the rationale for the study was advanced. Specifically, I highlighted how norms of slenderness are enmeshed in narratives of femininity, morality and health that serve to underpin dominant narratives of dieting and weight management. Chapter 2 traced the theoretical contours of the approach that underpins this study. As it is now well established that dieting and related weight management practices have become normalised in many women’s lives in Western societies, it seemed instructive to investigate these in an Irish context. The task of the current chapter is to discuss the third key component of the narrative of this PhD, the study context. This involves an explication of two key contextual elements: an overview of how obesity is currently constructed in Ireland; and a socio-historical précis of the lives of women in Irish society.

I begin this chapter by examining how obesity is currently understood in Ireland. An initial impetus for this project was my increasing concern with the tenor of debates about body weight and fatness generally in Irish society and the potential impacts of these on sections of the population. While the problematisation of excess weight pre-dates what has been termed the obesity ‘epidemic’, currently dieting for weight loss and related weight management practices take place against the backdrop of this so-called epidemic. Simultaneously, many Western societies have witnessed the development of ever-wider forms of surveillance of individual populations around many issues including health care (Bordo, 1993; Clarke, 2015). Included in this section is a consideration of the international literature that has challenged the ‘obesity as epidemic’ thesis. I consider the insights gleaned from this literature for the current project.

Before I continue, let me be clear that while I do not place the terms obesity or overweight in quotes, this is not to indicate acceptance of the dominant
narrative that accepts these as material realities requiring rectification. I maintain a critical distance from these inferences. Similar to Saguy (2013) I also use the terms fat and fatness as neutral descriptors and not as derogatory terms. I also use the term corpulence. The language surrounding weight status is loaded and fatness has been pathologised. This makes it difficult to select neutral terms. However, I do not wish to contribute further to the pathologising of fatness. The social constructionist perspective that informs this thesis has meant framing weight status as a social construction. Of course, being fat or thin is a material reality. But how such realities are constructed varies over time and across societies. Finally, in a similar vein to Tischner (2009), my study does not seek to evaluate the arguments about whether being fat is healthy or unhealthy.8

The section that follows examines the contours of the changing position of women since the foundation of the Irish state in 1922. The historical and contemporary status of women cannot be ignored when investigating how women narrate their weight management experiences. In this section, I demonstrate how narratives of nationalism, familism and religiosity have framed Irish women’s lives into the 21st century. These impacted on women in ways that tended to confine them to the private sphere and to establish women’s interests as intimately enmeshed within the family and motherhood. I also examine the significant changes that have occurred in recent decades and the implications these have had for women. The final section brings together the social construction of obesity and women in Irish society to explicate how they inform my analysis of narratives of slimming in Ireland.

8 Interestingly, none of the women used the terms obesity or fat, rejecting both. They described themselves as ‘having a weight problem’ or ‘being overweight’.

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The Social Construction of Obesity

Obesity in Ireland

Obesity is considered as one of the most pressing health and social problems in contemporary Ireland, a shared understanding expressed with some regularity by public health bodies, the national media and the medical profession. The Irish Government has made tackling overweight and obesity a priority concern within national health policy. This is captured in a number of recent reports including, *Healthy Ireland – A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025* (Department of Health, 2013) and *A Consultation on the Development of an Obesity Policy and Action Plan for Ireland* (Institute of Public Health in Ireland, 2015). While the latter revealed some disagreement between stakeholders on issues such as food tax, addressing health inequalities, food poverty, and the role of alcohol, the broad consensus states that Ireland is in the ‘grip of an overweight and obesity epidemic’ (Institute of Public Health, 2015). Public health campaigns are ongoing and seek to encourage Irish people to get active, get healthy and lose weight. Underpinning such campaigns is the assumed truth that being heavy has a serious set of health, social and economic consequences that damage both the individual and society. Previously, the energy-in/energy-out approach dominated public health interventions to reduce obesity in Ireland. In recent years, the notion of the ‘obesogenic environment’ and the search for genetic causes has begun to frame interventions to encourage obesity reduction.

Defining and Measuring Obesity

The common depiction of obesity in use in Ireland by public health bodies, biomedicine and the national media draws from the World Health Organisation which states that overweight and obesity involve ‘abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health’ (WHO, 2016). Positioning the accumulation of fat on the body as pathological, this understanding of obesity persists even in the face of a lack of agreement internationally over the definition of obesity (Harjunen, 2009; Saguy and Almeling, 2008;

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What is of interest to note in this statement is the interchangeable usage of the terms overweight and obesity.
Yoshizawa, 2012). The Irish data indicates that we are a progressively heavier population than heretofore (Department of Health and Children, 2005; Heinen et al., 2014; Institute of Public Health in Ireland, 2015; IPSOS/MRBI, 2015; IUNA, 2005, 2008; Kelleher et al., 1999, 2003; Nic Gabhainn et al., 2007). The BMI index is the current measure deployed to calculate, measure and classify ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’. Initially developed in the 1830s by a Belgian mathematician named Adolphe Quetelet who worked with the life insurance industry, it was adopted by the World Health Organisation [WHO] in 1998. It is calculated by dividing weight (in kilograms) by height squared (in centimetres). Oliver (2006:18) makes an interesting observation:

Quetelet’s scheme was a harbinger of a larger wave of scientific attempts to measure and differentiate groups in society. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, scientists became enamoured with measuring skulls, brows, body proportions, and other aptitudes.

WHO began using the BMI to differentiate groups of people based on body weight. It was deployed as a standard to determine not only overweight, but also added cut-offs for categories of underweight, pre-obese, and three classes of obese. According to these widely accepted guidelines those possessing a BMI under 18.5 are considered underweight. Having a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is deemed to be within the healthy range of weight. Those with a BMI of 25 or over are considered overweight and those with a BMI greater than 30 are considered obese. Morbid obesity is defined as a BMI of over 40.

Prevalence
The most recent statistics on obesity in Ireland suggest the following:

- 37% have a normal weight, with 37% overweight and a further 23% obese
- Whilst men are more likely to be overweight than women (men: 43%, women: 31%), the proportions that are obese are more closely aligned (men: 25%, women: 22%)
Women who are overweight or obese are more likely to be trying to lose weight than men who are overweight or obese (IPSOS/MRBI, 2015).

Ireland experienced a major Famine in the 1840s. Over 1 million people died. According to the World Health Organisation, Ireland is on course to become the most obese nation in Europe by 2030 (Keaver et al., 2013). What is interesting is that in the space of less than 200 years, it would seem the weight of the Irish population has experienced a major transformation. These statistics appear to resonate with current global trends on prevalence rates. However, a recent analysis of ‘childhood obesity discourse’ in Ireland reveals that childhood obesity is not on the increase in Ireland (Share and Share, 2016). Rather, there has occurred a stabilisation of different body weight across the childhood age cohorts. This is supported by a careful review of the main statistics generated by selected Government of Ireland large scale research studies on the lives of children (GUI, 2011, 2012, 2013).

The Production of Obesity ‘Truths’
Biomedicine and the wider scientific community have dominated the research agenda and construction of obesity generally and, more particularly, the debates about the causes and consequences attached to different body weights. Many authors have shown that body weight became medicalised in Western societies from about the 19th century onwards (Foucault, 1980; Gailey, 2014; Kwan, 2009; Kwan and Graves, 2013; Share and Share, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2015). Processes of medicalisation involve the extension of medicine into areas not previously thought to be medical conditions, to diagnose and promote ‘fixes’ to treat medical problems. The Lancet (2014) reported that obesity has become a major global health challenge and that urgent global action and leadership is needed to help countries to more effectively intervene. Echoing these concerns, one leading medical anti-obesity campaigner in Ireland recently suggested that we have:

an obesity epidemic that is killing thousands of people and harming children psychologically and physically ... we’re in a disaster situation. (Dr Donal O’Shea, Irish Independent Health & Living supplement, 10 February, 2014:12-13).
What O’Shea and his colleagues in the medical community argue is that there are alarming health implications attached to being obese and/or overweight. This is illustrative of the general consensus in most Western societies that obesity/overweight is increasing, is correlated with, but more often presented as, a cause of ill-health, and continues to pose a serious burden for individual nations and governments worldwide (WHO, 2016).

Responding to these claims the main issues tackled by medical research vis-à-vis body weight are the biomedical processes associated with large bodies, the regulation of energy intake–energy expenditure and genetic factors involved in obesity. In addition, research into weight regulation is ongoing with the emphasis on successful interventions to reduce adiposity. Share and Share (2016) quote the US Department of Agriculture who claim that ultimately the ‘problem’ of obesity resides in the fact that people eat too much of the wrong things, too often, and exercise too little. Lupton (2014:40-41) suggests that these ‘truths’ tend to be accepted without ‘any suggestion that there may be a more complex and contentious background to these truths’.

**Critical Weight Studies: Challenging Obesity ‘Truths’**

An increasing body of critical scholarship has emerged which challenges the dominant obesity narrative. Such scholarship, more recently entitled critical weight studies / critical obesity studies, exists as an important counter-narrative to the ‘truth’ claims espoused by the medical profession, popular culture and national governments (Aphramor, 2010; Bacon and Aphramor, 2011; Bacon, 2008; Campos et al., 2006; Clarke, 2015; Cooper, 2010, 2016; Coveney, 2006, 2008; Evans et al., 2008; Evans and Colls, 2009; Gard and Wright, 2005; Gard, 2011; Gilman, 2008; Monaghan et al., 2010; Oliver, 2006; Rice, 2007; Rich et al., 2010; Tischner and Malson, 2010; Throsby, 2011). A key entry point for critical scholars is how the production of obesity as a modern day ‘truth’ with attendant ‘truth effects’ has occurred alongside the widespread diffusion of neo-liberal philosophy in many Western societies. The latter proposes ‘minimal government intervention, market fundamentalism, risk management, [and] individual responsibility’ (Ayo,
Murray (2005b:154, and a) suggests obesity ‘truths’ have produced a ‘negative collective knowingness’ about fatness.

There are a whole host of outcomes for individuals and societies that follow the dissemination of obesity ‘truths’. Many centre on what has been termed the ‘war on obesity’ (Monaghan, 2008a). For Herndon (2005:129-130) the ‘war on obesity’ has invoked a serious attack on fat people:

> What many doctors, public health officials and concerned journalists writing in support of the war against obesity fail to recognize, however, is that a war against obesity also means a war against fat people … Obesity is not a pathogen, not free floating, and never a virus that attacks a helpless and innocent victim. Instead, obesity is virtually always typecast as a condition brought on oneself. A war against obesity, then, cannot be a war against a faceless pathogen. Instead, obesity is a condition of human causation and therefore necessitates a war against the group of people participating in the volitional behaviours that cause it.

The ‘war on obesity’ labels fat people as irresponsible and morally questionable (Jutel, 2005; Murray, 2005, 2008; Throsby, 2009a, b). The consequences of this are profound leading to discrimination against fat people in areas such as employment; problems accessing health care; quality of life; and social stigma. Claiming a socially viable or moral self becomes increasingly difficult as a fat person (Herndon, 2008). In this context obesity has become a metaphor for perceived excesses in modernity with fat people at the centre of the ‘problem’ (Monaghan, 2013). What has also occurred is that much research and reporting of obesity continues to mask the complexity of its multifactorial nature (Campos et al., 2006; Share and Share, 2016).

Critical weight studies embrace a vast and complex critique of obesity ‘truths’ and some of these are returned to throughout the thesis. The main strands within this vast body of work coalesce around the following issues: problematising the notion of ‘epidemic’; policy and practice responses; the deployment of BMI; neglect of fundamental social factors; the political economy of the food system; discrimination and stigma against fat people; the conflation of different categories of overweight and obesity; and the extension of the clinical gaze and of surveillance of everyday life practices (Share and Share, 2016). Two issues addressed in this section are the
problematic use of the term ‘epidemic’ and the deployment of BMI. I tease these out as they are crucial to current thinking on obesity.

The first issue relates to how obesity has been positioned as an ‘epidemic’. I argue that this is one of the most significant of the ‘truth’ claims about obesity (O’Toole, 2010). The terminology labelling obesity as an ‘epidemic’ began to appear in the late 1980s (Gilman, 2008). An ‘epidemic’ commonly invokes ideas of communicable disease and contagion (Gilman, 2008). Historically, its usage has been reserved for diseases that have a pathological basis such as typhoid, influenza and cholera (Boero, 2012). As the notion of epidemic has been embedded in the lexicon of obesity, the tenuous association of corpulence with death permeates discussions of obesity (Guthman, 2011). Yet, despite all the research and evidence to date, no pathological basis for becoming fat has been found. Boero’s (2012, 2013) telling contribution to this debate is to assert that the current ‘obesity epidemic’ is not an epidemic in the common usage of the term. It is instead a postmodern epidemic. In this formulation, no discrete disease entity is required to label something as epidemic. Rather, according to Boero (2012:4-5) postmodern epidemics involve the processes whereby an ever wider range of human experiences come to be defined, experienced and treated as a medical condition.

Framing obesity as an ‘epidemic’ has rendered obesity as one of the most serious global social problems of our time amongst health professionals, the media, national governments and researchers (Gailey, 2014; Murray, 2008; Throsby, 2011). In addition, it has encouraged governments to introduce policies to regulate the weight of the entire population while simultaneously targeting certain individuals within the population (Saguy, 2013). Share and Strain (2008) point out that framing obesity in this way suggests everybody is at risk, leaving open a door to extraordinary levels of social control of people in their everyday lives (Henderson, 2015). What is also invoked is the idea that all of society should be concerned with stopping its spread and indeed even more than that, has a duty to do so (Gailey, 2014; Share and Strain, 2008).
The idea that everyone in society has a duty to respond to obesity is reflected in current policies on obesity in Ireland. Parents, for example, are assumed to have key responsibilities in this regard. In 2013, 98.2% of those who looked after families or home were women (CSO, 2013). In essence, what current policy does is to target women as mothers to play their part in tackling the obesity ‘crisis’. They must do this through exercising control over what their children eat. This approach to policy is demonstrated in the recent outcomes of the consultation on obesity in Ireland where a change of tactics is advocated in the ‘war on obesity’. The emphasis going forward will move away from having a child focus to putting the focus on maternal care and the first 1000 days of life in order to support and educate women as mothers to make good choices (Institute of Public Health, 2015). These approaches to policy indicate how gender still forms part of public policy in Ireland. Share and Share (2016) state that when it comes to children, mothers must be seen to exercise precaution and exhibit ‘good’ mothering through the management of themselves and their children in aid of the public good.

The second issue highlighted within critical weight studies is the use of the BMI index. BMI drives anti-obesity policy that seeks to regulate and reduce rates of obesity (Evans and Colls, 2009). As a measurement it remains controversial for a variety of reasons. An important one is that many, including the medical profession, have come to rely on its apparent numerical authority for medical diagnosis, deploying it to predict mortality, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and a host of other health and well-being problems. This was never the purpose of BMI. According to Bacon and Aphramor (2011) BMI should not be used as a determinant of health or as a means to categorise and pathologise individuals. It is meant to be used as a simple means of classifying sedentary (physically inactive) individuals with an average body composition. However, the duality of the Body Mass Index is that while it appears easy-to-use as a general calculation, it is limited in how accurate and pertinent the data obtained from it can be. BMI does not take into account fitness, heart rate or fat distribution (Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2006).
The categories also fail to account for varying proportions of fat, bone, cartilage and water weight. One basic problem, especially in athletes, for instance, is that muscle is denser than fat. Some professional athletes are overweight or obese according to their BMI but their proportion of body fat may be lower than others in the same weight range due to their excess muscle. In children and the elderly, differences in bone density, and in the proportion of bone to total weight, can mean the number at which these people are considered underweight should be adjusted downward. A final and significant problem with BMI is that, notwithstanding the adoption of the WHO guidelines over the past 20 years, the thresholds attached to these categorisations have changed considerably (Monaghan, 2008a; Oliver, 2006). Categorisation impacts on the actual numbers deemed to be either overweight and/or obese in any society.

My study is indebted to and located within critical weight studies.\(^{10}\) I take a social constructionist approach to the ‘obesity epidemic’. I conceptualise obesity as a ‘socially constructed and contested “problem”’ rather than as an unproblematic category, disease or aetiology’ (Keenan and Stapleton, 2010, quoted in Yoshizawa, 2012:349). I do not deny that Ireland’s population has increased in weight and size. Nor do I suggest that there are no health concerns embedded in a population that is getting bigger. However, I remain wary of the overly simplistic conceptualisations of obesity and its alleged outcomes (Lupton, 2013, 2014). Instead, I argue that the regimen of ‘truth’ which positions ‘obesity’ as an epidemic has resulted in ‘obesity’ coming to embody the characteristics of a moral panic (LeBesco, 2010). Thus, I suggest the concerns over purported dangers of fatness and hostility towards fat people are disproportionate to the risk of fatness itself and to the threat posed by other social problems (Boero, 2012:6; Cooper, 2016). The ‘obesity as epidemic’ thesis has made it incumbent to engage in ongoing surveillance of weight/body size and urges people to adopt specific

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\(^{10}\) See Gard (2011) for a useful critique of critical weight studies
practices such as dieting and weight loss to fit into current BMI measurements of appropriate weight and size.\(^{11}\)

**Women in Ireland**

This section provides a socio-historical overview of women’s lives in Irish society since the foundation of the state in 1922. History is a contested arena and a definitive socio-historical account of the lives of women is too extensive to adequately discuss in one section of one chapter alone. My approach is to elucidate general trends, important turning points and symbolic representations that inform my understanding of the place of women in Irish society (Hill, 2003). In so doing, I describe the continuities and changes in the lives of Irish women, in order to locate these within the wider social and cultural parameters of Irish society (O’Connor, P. 1998). This involves teasing out the dominant narratives which have framed women’s lives and continue to resonate today. They have had a profound effect on how women live their everyday lives. I also tease out some of the significant changes in women’s lives in recent decades which point to the emergence of new narratives of womanhood in Ireland. This provides an important backdrop to contextualise the current investigation of women’s narratives of their weight management experiences. O’ Connor, P. (1998:81) states that:

> [concepts of womanhood] … are part of the cultural tradition out of which Irish women weave the fabric of their own identity and the meaning of their lives.

Concepts of womanhood do not preclude agency amongst women in terms of defining their own concepts or resisting dominant ones. Nevertheless, identifying particular concepts enables deconstruction of the varying

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\(^{11}\) An alternative perspective on health and body weight is found within the transdisciplinary movement that is Health at Every Size® [HAES®]. Focussing on health as capacity and resource, it adopts a holistic approach to health, recognising that health varies across time and circumstance. The HAES® approach argues against reducing health status to body weight and instead promotes weight inclusivity, eating for well-being, and an end to weight and fat discrimination. It asserts that the ‘war on obesity’ has failed individuals and is based on faulty assumptions. It has three key principles: body acceptance as opposed to weight loss or weight maintenance; a reliance on internal regulatory processes, such as hunger and satiety, as opposed to encouraging cognitively-imposed dietary restriction; and active embodiment as opposed to encouraging structured exercise (see Bacon, 2010; Bacon and Aphramor, 2011, 2014 for a fuller discussion of HAES®).
discourses and narratives that have governed understandings of and practices associated with womanhood in Irish society.

Independent Ireland: Religion, Nation and Family
Following the many centuries’ long push for independence from Britain – which culminated in the Easter Rising in 1916; the War of Independence, 1919-1921 and the Civil War, 1922-1923 – the Irish Free State was officially founded in 1922. Women had played significant, complex and revolutionary roles in all of these events and in the establishment of the Irish Free State. However, they would become circumscribed by gendered narratives in post-independence Ireland in ways that perhaps had not been envisaged in the immediate years leading up to independence. As the Irish state sought to chart the course of its own destiny and identity, it revealed its bias towards a conservative rural society by minimising the impact of modern and urban values and by positioning the role of the family as the essential cornerstone of society (Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy 1999).

Inglis (1998) explains how the Catholic Church and the state had cemented their relationship in the 19th century during the period of the Great Famine in Ireland [1845-1850], upholding the family as the then guardian of morality and of nationalism. Post-famine Ireland witnessed high levels of emigration, low rates of marriage, high fertility rates and high celibacy rates (Fahey, 2014). Demographic patterns both reflected and contrasted with patterns in Western Europe. However, the domestic sphere played a crucial role in managing people’s expectations and ways of being. The Catholic Church garnered the support of women in their role as mothers to create an alliance with those whom the Church knew had a strong influence in the domestic sphere. This was important to advance the teachings of the Church and to embed a strict, Catholic social morality within Irish families, emphasising a chaste and clean way of life (Inglis, 1998).

12 See for example, Foster (2014), Gillis (2014) and McCoole (2014) for recent insightful analyses of the roles women played in the struggle for Irish independence.
This relationship between Church and state was further strengthened after independence where the Catholic Church became the state enforcer of moral regulations in most areas of social life. The powerful influence of Catholicism was unmistakeably evident in the Irish constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann, published in 1937. This written constitution laid out the rights and responsibilities of the soon to be sovereign Republic of Ireland. The Irish constitution emanated from the close relationship between the Catholic Church and its doctrine, and the Irish state and its developing political and social agenda. The Catholic Church was given specific mention [removed in 1973] in the first few pages as occupying a ‘special position’ in Irish society. In addition, interspersed throughout the constitution are references to Catholic social morality and moral behaviour. It is in the relevant articles on the family that we see the clearest overlap between the state’s emerging agenda and Catholicism:

**ARTICLE 41 1°** The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

2 1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

(Bunreacht na hÉireann)

In this brief but powerful series of constitutional statements woman and mother are used interchangeably and women’s identity as mother is positioned as intimately connected to the welfare of the Irish State. What resulted was the family being placed at the centre of Irish culture and the woman as mother, placed at the centre of the Irish family: the nation came to

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13 The Republic of Ireland officially came into existence in 1949 subsequent to the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 and covers 26 counties of the 32 counties on the island of Ireland. It is known in the English language as Ireland and in Irish as Éire. The 1948 Act ended the remaining statutory role of British rule in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. The six counties of Northern Ireland remain under British jurisdiction to this day. In this thesis, I refer to the Republic of Ireland as Ireland.
be symbolised by Irish motherhood and women’s sexual behaviour became linked with the dignity and integrity of the nation (Conlon, 2010:11). The private institution that is the family was enshrined in the constitution in a way that invoked it as a political entity, where the idea of the family was reified. Women were central to the maintenance of this entity. Marriage became the social norm or default option for women inasmuch as women were largely defined in Irish society by the roles and duties in which they engaged within the enclosure of marriage (Byrne, 2008; Wan-lih Chang, 2015:46).

Patriarchy and Catholicism were the two critical ideologies driving the new state. Patriarchy refers to the structures and practices which give rise to women’s continued disadvantage in gender relations (Byrne, 2000). Catholicism was presented as setting the Irish apart, most definitively from the English (Fahey, 2014; Smyth, 2005), and the Irish family was offered as an ‘important symbol of collective identity, unity and security’ (O’Connor, P. 1998:89). The Catholic vision of the patriarchal family as the primary unit of society developed as a central tenet of the social policies of the Irish state from then onwards (Conlon, 2010:12). As Byrne (1999:70) explains, the ‘founding fathers’ of Irish national and cultural identity deliberately constructed a national identity based on familism, religiosity, and nationalism in an effort to secure legitimacy for and adherence to the newly emerging state. Hug (1999:78) describes it thus:

> From its early days, the government of the Irish Free State showed a willingness to use the powers of the State to protect Catholic moral values. It is difficult not to notice, even at this early stage, the contradiction inherent in the clerical campaigns. The clergy were hostile to the intervention of the state in the area of morality and social support for families, considering these were the domain of the Church, but nonetheless they wanted the government to legislate precisely these areas.

The Catholic Church reinforced its influential role in Irish society and took control of key institutions of education, health and social welfare, the effects of which are still visible in modern day Ireland (Conlon, 2010). Catholic doctrine became firmly embedded in the hearts and minds of Irish people’s habitus (Inglis, 2008). A consequence of this for women was that while they were upheld as guardians of nationalism and upholders of a Catholic agenda, simultaneously, the state exaggerated their femininity, magnified
‘their relative weakness into complete helplessness, their emotionality into hysteria, and their sensitivity into a delicacy which must be protected from all contact with the world’ (Radosh, 2008 quoted in, Stokes, 2012:17). At this time, women were also prohibited from serving as jurors by a law enacted in 1927 and a Marriage Bar was introduced to force women to leave paid employment upon marriage.

In the decades following independence, women were defined in gendered ways around their roles as mothers within the family unit. Powerful social controls were put in place to encourage conformity with these ideals of femininity. Arguably, the scene was set whereby the ‘private’ choices that women made [and would continue to make] were embedded in the ‘public’ interests of the nation state (Conrad, 2004). This conservative view of society and of women has had enormous repercussions for the development of Irish law, society and identity ever since (Byrne and O’Mahony, 2012).

It would be erroneous to assume that women and men did not interrogate and attempt to resist and re-imagine gender relations in Irish society during this time. Many individual women and women’s organisations had fought hard for Irish independence and members served in the first parliaments of the Irish Free State.\textsuperscript{14} They contested these emerging concepts of womanhood and warned of the consequences of inserting Article 41.1 into the constitution, for example (Connolly and O’Toole, 2005). In everyday life, women worked on farms, they emigrated and they did not always conform to normative expectations. Women had relationships, became pregnant outside marriage and agitated for change.

Women’s Bodies
It is in the area of women’s bodies that are made visible the enduring effects of the relationship between Church and State, the discursive positioning of women and the challenges to write and realise counter-narratives of women’s lives. The female body was and is deeply enmeshed in the

\textsuperscript{14} See for example, Cumann na mBan, an Irish Women’s Revolutionary Party founded in 1914.
intertwining narratives of the nation, family and religion. It continues to be an ongoing site of contestation and struggle in Irish society. Subject to intense surveillance by the Catholic Church and the state, women’s sexual and reproductive bodies featured strongly in attempts by the post-colonial Irish nation to carve out a particular Irish identity (Barry, 2008; Condron, 1989; Conlon, 2010; Coulter, 1993; Gray and Ryan, 1997; O’Connor, P. 1998; Smyth, 2005).

Examples of this intense societal gaze on women’s bodies generally and reproductive bodies in particular were the Mother and Baby Homes and the Magdalene Laundries. The Mother and Baby homes, established in 1906, were where women pregnant outside marriage were sent, away from their communities and families, and from where their babies were generally adopted, sometimes against their wishes. The Magdalene Laundries, operated by orders of Irish nuns, were institutions that effectively incarcerated women for many nebulous reasons (alleged promiscuity; pregnancy outside marriage; low level criminal activity; ‘fallen women’) (Finnegan, 2004; Flanagan and Richardson, 1992). Inglis (2003) explains that the laundries were part of an institutional Church strategy and, I would add, state strategy for shaming and containing women who transgressed their moral rules. Thousands of women passed through them, many never to leave.15 They were operated as laundry businesses. Both the homes and the laundries document the mistrust of women by Church, state and society generally and drew from traditional constructions of gender and femininity revolving around family, motherhood and moral heterosexuality. The last Mother and Baby home was closed in the 1990s. The last Magdalene Laundry was closed in 1996.

The issues of reproductive rights and abortion have witnessed some of the fiercest battles in Irish society over control of women’s bodies. Reproductive autonomy in the form of access to safe and legal abortion has been on the social and political agenda in Ireland for decades. Post-independence,

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15 It is estimated that between 1922 and 1996, 10,015 women passed through these institutions (Finnegan, 2004).
Ireland maintained the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 that governed Ireland while under British rule and made abortion illegal and punishable (Ferriter, 2009). Women’s increased advocacy for abortion to be legalised in Ireland, combined with the thousands of women travelling to Britain every year to seek an abortion provoked a backlash towards legalising abortion in Ireland and in 1983 the 8th amendment to the Irish Constitution was enacted. This gave equal rights to the mother and the unborn child and was framed within a competing rights perspective. Meaney (1993) points out that the discursive construction of abortion in the 8th amendment was embedded in the traditional symbolic image of Irish motherhood that had served to eradicate the realities of women’s lives.

Inglis (1998) demonstrates that widespread discourses of regulation and control centring on the reproductive capacities of women’s bodies played a key role in defining women’s bodies socially and personally. The narrative of the ‘self-sacrificing Irish mother’ demarcated many women’s lives. In addition, narratives of control, shame and guilt framed the field of the corporeal in Irish society, in particularly gendered ways. The female body was considered a site of sin and subject to self-denial and penitential practices (Inglis, 2008:4). The twin goals of modesty and chastity became de rigueur for respectable women (O’Connor, B. 2005). Inglis (2014) provocatively suggests that most married women seemed to subscribe to the concept of the ideal mother put forward by the Catholic Church, acknowledging that their choices were heavily circumscribed. Within this

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16 Backstreet and illegal abortions did take place in Ireland and garnered some prosecutions. Women’s trail to England to seek abortions began in the 1930s. The passing of the Abortion Act in Britain in 1967 served to consolidate this route to safe and legal abortion for Irish women.

17 Since then a number of cases have brought forth the problems with the 8th amendment and women’s position in the gender social order (Smyth, 2005). The X case in 1992, for example, involved a 14 year-old girl, pregnant through rape and suicidal, being refused permission by the Irish state to travel to England for an abortion. During the 1990s Irish people voted to allow women to travel abroad for abortions and for abortion information to be provided in Ireland, but abortion itself was not legalised. However, more cases of equal distress followed that shone an unfavourable light on Ireland. Following much discussion, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, 2013 was passed allowing abortion under certain circumstances. The law provides for a woman’s right to an abortion if her life is at risk, including from suicide. Information on abortion services outside the state is also constitutionally protected, and is regulated by the Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State For Termination of Pregnancies) Act, 1995.
context, women’s sexual conduct was also tightly regulated. Thus, while motherhood and mothers were valorised in Irish society, how women became mothers was deemed not fit for public discussion.\footnote{18}

**Women and Social Change in Ireland**

The social, economic, cultural and political habitus of Ireland began to change from about the late 1950s onwards. Cognisant of increasing demands from feminist organisations to address gender inequality and from developments internationally, the Irish government established the First Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 and it reported in 1972. Amongst its many recommendations, access to employment and equal pay dominated. The Council for the Status of Women (now the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI)) was set up in 1973 to monitor the implementation of the report. In rapid succession: the Marriage Bar was removed in 1973; the Social Welfare Act, 1973 made provision for both unmarried mothers and deserted wives;\footnote{19} the Social Welfare Act, 1974, granted payments of Children’s Allowance to mothers and made provision for payment of an allowance to single women over 58 years and to the wives of prisoners; also in 1974 the Juries Act was deemed unconstitutional and from then on women were enabled to perform jury duty. A significant achievement was the introduction of Equal Pay legislation in 1974, something the Irish Government had previously resisted.\footnote{20} The EEC introduced a directive on same and Ireland had to comply. The Employment Equality Agency was inaugurated in 1977. The approach to women’s participation in paid employment signalled shifts in thinking in Irish society as women were now

\footnote{18} The Censorship of Publications Act (1929) reflected and reinforced these narratives of shame and guilt. These were felt in many areas across Irish society including in the literature world where a number of books by Irish women writers were banned because of alleged sexually explicit content. These include Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy (1960, 1962, 1964) and Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936).

\footnote{19} These were replaced by the One Parent Family Payment in 1997. It is also important to mention that up until 1987, a child born outside marriage was considered ‘illegitimate’ in the Irish Constitution. This was removed in the Status of Children Act, 1987.

encouraged to enter the paid labour force. This resulted in a rapid growth in women’s participation in the paid labour force.21

Women’s social position in Irish society was also undergoing much change. The Irish Women’s Movement was instrumental in advocating for change. For example, the first women’s refuge was set up in Dublin in 1974 to provide safety for women fleeing violent husbands and partners. However, it was not until 1996 that the Domestic Violence Act (amended in 2000 and 2015) introduced protective orders under the civil courts. Rape within marriage was criminalised in 1990. Up until then, a woman was considered the property of her husband upon marriage. Of course, society did not necessarily approve of rape within marriage or, paradoxically, may not even have considered non-consensual sex as rape in the context of marriage. Nevertheless, the legislation was important. Other developments included full access to contraception;22 falling fertility rates overall and an increase in lone parent families headed by women;23 the introduction of divorce;24 greater

21 Neo-liberal economic policies contributed to women’s increased participation in the paid labour force. Tax individualisation was introduced by the government in 2000. This meant that a married heterosexual couple with both partners working could now each claim tax allowances separately. A single income household could only claim one set of tax allowances and reached the higher tax rate sooner. This system was seen to reward women who engaged in paid work (Kennedy, 2001). With regard to paid employment, by 2008 there were 921,600 women in employment in Ireland (compared to 1,186,900 men) with an employment rate of 60.5%. However, during the economic crisis of the past eight years the figure dropped significantly, falling to 55.2% by 2012. In 2014 the rate increased slightly to 55.9%. The female unemployment rate was as low as 4% during Ireland’s boom years but it more than doubled during the crisis to 8.3% in 2009 and rose to a peak of 11.4% in 2013 before falling back to 9.9% in 2014 (CSO, 2013/4). However, what has arisen from this increase in women’s participation in the paid labour force is women having to occupy the dual role of carer-worker: it is still predominantly women who perform the caring tasks within family units in Irish society (Barry, 2008; Coakley, 2005). While women have been seen as central to the success of the Irish economy, the workplace itself remains largely a gendered space in terms of occupational choice and vertical position.

22 Contraception was initially legalised through legislation in Ireland in 1978 but only those who had a medical prescription could acquire legal contraception. This was amended in 1985 and condoms and other forms of contraception could be bought by anyone over 18 without a medical prescription but only in certain named places. The Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Act, 1992 continued the provision of contraceptives without prescription, allowing sale to individuals over the age of 17.

23 Fertility rates have fallen dramatically in Irish society in the past 20 years (Fahey, 2014). Much has changed with regard to non-marital births with the 2011 census revealing that 33% of births occur outside marriage (CSO, 2012). State supports, initially introduced in 1974, combined with a liberalising of attitudes towards lone parents have been instrumental in the increase. Does the stigma remain for women having children outside marriage? Certainly the form of stigma seems to have changed. In contemporary Irish society, as
equality in the law and social welfare; significant educational achievements; and taking up of key positions in the political system, in the judiciary and in the legislature (Byrne and Leonard, 1997; Colleary, 2015; Connolly, 2002; Inglis, 2008; Meaney, 1993; O’Connor, P. 1998; Share et al., 2012).

Drawing from discourses of consumerism and individualism, Irish women have, in recent decades, begun to invest much more time and money in their appearance and their bodies. An interesting PhD study by McDaid (2012), the first of its kind in an Irish context, examines how young Irish women negotiate feminine identity through a focus on appearance and body practices. McDaid (2012) observes that the religious transformation in Ireland in recent decades is of particular import in Irish women being liberated from longstanding religious associations of the female body. She proffers that this has occurred in line with the rise in consumer culture. Thus, she situates the transformation of Irish femininity (sic) from one of chastity, modesty and piety to a self-expressive, sexual and hedonistic self, within wider Western social transformations of sexual emancipation, feminism and consumerism. Inglis (2006, 2008) supports this thesis when he suggests that Irish people have opened themselves up to global influences, disseminating discourses of self-realisation and awareness of the body, beauty and appearance. According to Inglis (2006) and McDaid (2012), Irish femininity currently constitutes a dedicated realisation of desires through forms of consumption and self-fulfilment. The key point these authors make is that while traditional norms persist in Irish society, there exist the possibilities of multiple ways of expressing femininity through appearance.

Inglis (2008:160) asserts that there seems to be an increasing universal agreement that individuals in Ireland, as elsewhere, have to be free to choose who they are, what they do, how they live their lives. Things which

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24 The emergence of alternative family types to the historically dominant nuclear/extended family is notable. Blended families, lone parent families and, with the passing enactment of the Marriage Act in 2015, marriage extended to same sex couples, all make up the newer family structures in Ireland.
were once hidden in modern Ireland are now being told (Hill, 2003:218; Ryan, 2010). Sexuality, domestic violence, motherhood, divorce, care work, all areas previously confined to the private sphere and, therefore, not deemed worthy and safe for much public discussion, have now come into public view.

**Explaining Social Change**
The transformation that has occurred in Irish society has been largely evidenced and supported by the changes in women’s lives from about the 1960s onwards. Sociologists and others have analysed the profound period of change and have identified a number of reasons underpinning the developments. Many assert that the initial turning point was the ‘opening up’ of Irish society via direct foreign investment. This occurred alongside social and economic developments internationally. These included the rise of the women’s and Civil Rights movements and post-World War 2 economic growth. Within Ireland a number of specific developments occurred which hastened the social and economic changes.

The Irish Women’s Movement owing much to second wave feminism gained a foothold in the late 1960s / early 1970s and helped set the agenda for many of the subsequent changes in women’s lives and in challenging dominant narratives of womanhood (Connolly, 2002). In 1970, what was then known as the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, for example, highlighted a number of key concerns: ‘one family one house’, removal of the marriage bar, equal pay, equal access to education, legal rights and availability of contraception (Connolly and O’Toole, 2005). Connolly (2002) demonstrates that while feminism is certainly not the sole ingredient in the transformation of Irish women’s lives, it is a persistent process that has mainstreamed across Irish society. Its multiple expressions in Ireland have been a significant force for change. These range from non-mainstream women’s organisations

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25 Protectionist policies adopted by the Irish government more or less from independence onwards had not served the country well. While many post-colonial societies seek to establish themselves politically and economically on the international stage by asserting their own economic worth, Irish society could not sustain itself economically by the inward-looking narrative and practice of protectionism. People experienced poverty and unemployment and Ireland witnessed massive emigration.
advocating for running water in the 1970s, to women agitating for wider availability of contraception, through to national mobilisation around pay and working conditions.

Second wave feminism in Ireland was underpinned by liberal feminist ideals. Liberal feminism advocates for equality for women in the public and private spheres (Share et al., 2012). Share et al. (2012) point to the role that Women’s Aid continues to play in Ireland in advocating for the safety and protection of women and children experiencing domestic violence. Accessing the public sphere on an equal footing to men, and legal protections in the home, have been central to liberal feminist campaigns. In this context, women’s human rights advocacy and agency became pivotal in advocating for women’s rights in Ireland (O’Connor, M. 2008; Reilly, 2007, 2008). Radical feminism has also played its part in the changes that have occurred in women’s lives, most notably in areas of reproductive rights and the current campaign to criminalise those who buy prostitution.26

Ireland’s membership of the EEC [now EU] commencing in 1973 was similarly significant to the changing landscape of women’s lives in a number of ways. Firstly, membership accelerated the passing of many equality policies in Ireland, including policies on pay and social welfare entitlements. Secondly, it gave Irish citizens recourse to the EU to advance their cause if they felt they had received unsatisfactory treatment by the Irish state.27 Thirdly, membership also heralded the introduction of neo-liberal social and economic policies into Irish society. Since then there has been an increasing acceptance of a neo-liberal emphasis on free choice, participation in the market and individualism (O’Connor, P. 2008; Rose, 1999). The rationalist economic discourse associated with neo-liberalism positions the individual primarily as worker and secondarily as citizen (Share et al., 2012). There is much focus on individual rights in the marketplace. Individuals are

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26 This is known as the TORL (Turn Off the Red Light) Campaign and is working towards introducing the Nordic Model into Ireland.
27 For example, cases involving abortion and homosexuality have been successfully heard by the relevant EU bodies which have forced the Irish government to change its policies in these areas (see, Connolly and O’Toole, 2005 for a fuller discussion).
encouraged to join the paid labour force, and to be responsible for and in a position to make individual choices about their everyday lives. Finally, related to this is the impact of globalisation. Ireland’s EU membership opened up the country to direct foreign investment and enabled free movement of people, workers, money and ideas. This has been significant. Inglis (2008) maintains the global market has penetrated everyday life in ways that encourage Irish people to adopt individualism and focus on personal identities and personal lifestyles. In Ireland, traditional social bonds are breaking down and the ties to one’s community and family are loosening. Discourses of neo-liberalism, individualism and consumerism are shaping the make-up of Irish society today.

These have been embraced alongside ‘a realignment of the relationship between Church, state and civil society’ (Hill, 2003:5). The introduction of television to Ireland in the early 1960s reflected the beginnings of a loosening of the grip of the Catholic Church. For the first time questions were raised publicly via television about issues of sexuality and piety. These were watershed moments in Irish social history. In this regard the authority of the Catholic Church, particularly on sexual matters, has gradually diminished. Further, a gulf has emerged between formal religious practice and the activities of everyday life (Malesevic, 2010).

**Evaluating Social Change**

Evaluation of the extent of these changes in and on women’s lives has revealed tensions. Notwithstanding the recent gains for women, Ging (2009) believes that the past 15 years have seen some disturbing developments in Ireland. She locates these in a free market economics conspiring with a post-feminist culture to support a neo-liberal agenda on gender that, despite the rhetoric of choice and freedom, is highly coercive and deeply regressive.

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28 The revelations around the Catholic Church and child abuse have also served to hasten the decline in the influence of the Church in Ireland. The Ferns Report (Murphy et al., 2005) and the Report into the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009) known as the Ryan Report, amongst other reports, revealed the horrors of the physical, sexual and emotional abuse by Catholic clergy and laity that many children suffered in institutional care and other settings.
She states:

... ironic sexism and stereotypes have made a spectacular comeback in the entertainment media, with largebreasted, pouting babes in hotpants at one end of the spectrum and emotionally challenged hard men hell-bent on the adolescent pleasures of ‘Lad-land’ (cars, soccer, beer, gangsters and pornography) at the other. This repolarisation of gender identities is particularly evident in the dominance of an aggressive but allegedly ironic ‘gender war’ rhetoric, which pervades all aspects of media culture, from advertising copy to radio quizzes: women and men are pitted against one another in a bid to see, it would seem, which set of stereotypical traits is ‘better’. (Ging, 2009:53).

There seems to be a broad acceptance amongst many in Irish society that gender equality has been achieved and further, that this is grounded in progress rhetoric. However, Ging (2009) maintains that this is a myth that has served to gloss over the persistence of what she terms are substantial material inequalities between men and women.

Stokes (2014) notes that Raunch Culture has infiltrated Irish culture in recent decades, particularly since the influence of the Catholic Church began to wane and significant advances in media technology occurred. Drawing from Levy (2006) who first named the phenomenon, it refers to the culture of contrived sexualities that once existed solely in the realm of the ‘sex industry’ and pornography. Disseminated in the main through the media, Raunch Culture has reinforced archaic sexual double standards and acts as an oppressive force for Irish female sexuality (Stokes, 2014). Contemporary sexual norms grounded in ideas of individualism and consumerism have not realised the promise of sexual autonomy for women in a modern Ireland. A recent study commissioned by the NWCI (2015) indicated that over 70% of women in Ireland feel held back due to their body image concerns.

Gender inequalities endure across Irish society. Most of the low-paid workers are women and occupational segregation is an enduring feature of the workplace. Women are still the primary caregivers, over-represented in the statistics for looking after family and home and underrepresented in the upper echelons of politics, religion and employment. A related tension concerns the process of change for women. Connolly (2002) suggests that the process is not a linear progress or modernisation narrative where Irish
women are considered to have moved from being late developers to rapid developers. Rather, the changes that occurred exhibit uneven trends where gendered social relations and inequalities persist in the face of the 'modernisation' of Irish society (Connolly, 2002). In this context, O’ Connor, P. (1998:108) speculates:

…it could be argued that individual women’s creativity and agency in Irish society is frequently more effective in creating meaning within their own lives, than in actually changing the dominant discourses within which they live. This is perhaps inevitable since, up to now, women have not shaped the dominant discourses in Irish society.

What this suggests is that despite the significant changes in women’s lives and indeed the specific impact of feminism in Irish society, it is at the level of the everyday, the mundane, and the ordinary, that research might usefully turn to understand how women narrate the complexities of their lives. I argue that there is a lack of research on the cultural spaces that women occupy in Irish society and the ways in which they actively and reflexively construct their lives out of the available discursive and structural material. Weight management is one such cultural space.

Being a ‘Good’ Woman: Narratives of Continuity / Narratives of Change
Social life is intrinsically moral. Being able to present oneself as a moral self and to claim a moral space are enmeshed in social life (May, 2008). The moral status of the social actor is displayed and understood according to how s/he appears to conform to conventional norms (Goffman, 1971). Conveying respectability is important in claiming a moral self (Skeggs, 1997). Frank (2000) suggests that moral life ‘takes place in storytelling’. What this means is that individuals work out moral dilemmas and present themselves as moral actors by providing narrative accounts of their actions.

The social construction of obesity in Ireland invokes morality and the moral self. In fact, the obese body as a moral problem is pervasive within conventional obesity literature (Peterson and Lupton, 1996; Webb, 2009). Fat people are generally evaluated negatively and are called upon to account for themselves in various settings including the doctor’s surgery, the
school, the slimming class (Throsby, 2011). Obesity narratives are imbued with morality tales (Monaghan and Malson, 2013; Mycroft, 2008; Le Besco, 2011). The valorising of the slender, fit and lean body stands in stark contrast to the devaluing of that which is perceived to be outside of this sedimented norm, the fat, round and large body. In a fat-phobic society where the diffusion of obesity ‘truths’ has increased, it is increasingly difficult to claim anything other than a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1968).

Furthermore, women are now explicitly targeted in anti-obesity policy and discussions. Friedman (2015) illustrates how the focus in the ‘fight against obesity’ draws from gendered assumptions, to incorporate women as mothers to tackle the obesity ‘crisis’. Being a ‘good’ mother involves many displays of moral behaviours including making sure the family do not get fat.

This chapter has shown how claiming and holding a moral space has similarly permeated narratives of womanhood in Irish society. Historically, this was filtered through narratives of motherhood, particularly the narrative of the ‘good’ mother. This is the respectable, chaste, heterosexual woman who embodies the narrative of the self-sacrificing mother, grounded in Catholic social mores. She is ‘good’ not only because she maintains the family at all times, she also comes to symbolise the nation and act as its moral guardian. In essence, the mother / woman is at the heart of the family and the nation.29 Newer narratives of womanhood drawing on feminism, individualism and consumerism indicate that today Irish women have different avenues by which to pursue and claim a moral self, albeit also circumscribed by gendered ideals of femininity (Stokes, 2014).

Against this backdrop Gray and Ryan’s (1997) and O’Connor, P’s. (1998) theorising of how the dissonant concepts of continuity and change characterise the condition of women’s lives in Irish society since the

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29 Of course, many women did not and do not conform to this ideal representation of womanhood in Ireland. Studies of single women and lesbian women/mothers, for example, have illustrated how the identity effects of traditional conceptions of womanhood still resonate with these women as they seek to generate counter-narratives of their lives (Byrne, 2008; O’Connell, 2008, 2014).
foundation of the state is pertinent. While O'Connor, P. (2008:162) asserts that despite rapid and fundamental societal change, continuity rather than change is the dominant motif of the Irish patriarchal state to date, I argue that it may be more useful to think of them as existing on a spectrum. My study on women and weight management is located within the spaces of continuity and change and what lies in between.

**Conclusion**

I have identified and discussed two main areas that comprise the Irish context of this study: the social construction of obesity; and the changing contours of women’s lives in Irish society. I share the view espoused by O’Gallchoir (2008:18) that ‘the lives of both Irish women and Irish men remain under-researched and [therefore] insufficiently understood in many important areas’. Such areas include the ‘daily anxieties’ around everyday living that are mainly found within the private sphere (Hill, 2003). Importantly, against the backdrop of the ‘obesity epidemic’ the normativity of weight management has penetrated women’s lives in Ireland as it has elsewhere (Harjunen, 2009). In this context, I assert that there is a need for a nuanced microanalysis of the ‘politics of the ordinary’, that plethora of everyday practices that form our habitus and that are held in place by hundreds of tiny instantiations (Heyes, 2006; Throsby, 2011). In the next chapter I turn to the theoretical literature guiding the narrative inquiry framework deployed in the study.
Chapter 4: A Narrative Inquiry Framework

Introduction

Methodology is used in this study:
not in the narrow sense of “a method” or specific technique, but in the wider one of a broad approach to inquiry that brings together and ensures reasonable fit between conceptual framework, epistemological underpinnings, theory, method, substantive concerns, the analysis of data and the drawing of appropriate conclusions from this (Stanley and Temple 2008:277).

As discussed in the previous chapters, from the outset I was oriented towards developing a deeper understanding of aspects of women’s everyday lives in Irish society. Observing the dearth of published work, in particular on women’s everyday experiences of their bodies, combined with my critical stance towards anti-obesity rhetoric and my theoretical interest in normative femininity, the focus of the research came to rest on narratives of women and weight management in Ireland. Early on in the project I became attuned to the narrative landscape surrounding weight management. With this emerging understanding came the interest in narrative inquiry, a research strategy specifically designed to uncover and analyse stories (Riessman, 2008) and storied landscapes. In this, the first of two chapters on methodology and methods, the task is to delineate the theoretical contours that frame the methodological approach to this study and to link these theoretical explanations to what was done over the course of the research. In so doing, also argued in this study is that a narrative inquiry approach offers much to sociological research generally (Somers and Gibson, 1994).

Weaving insights from qualitative methodology and feminist theory, I outline the intellectual journey which led to the deployment of a narrative inquiry research strategy. In the first section I introduce the social constructionist paradigm from within which certain ontological and epistemological assumptions must follow and be taken up when adopted in a research study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 2005, 2011; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). The central tenets of qualitative approaches to social research will be outlined. I then discuss how feminist theory and practice is implicated in the current research design. This segues into the following sections which explicate the
use of narrative inquiry and in particular the methodological strategy of
analysing the relationship between narrative frameworks, narrative
environments and narrative practices.

**Social Research Paradigms**

Scholarly work on narrative cuts across nearly all theoretical approaches, from
postmodernism to rhetorical analysis, communication theory, pragmatism,
functionalism, structuralism, and hermeneutics, and it is evidenced in every field of
the human sciences (Maines, 1993:20).

Guba (1990:17) defines paradigms as a ‘basic set of beliefs that guide
action’ and with Lincoln (1994:107) as ‘basic belief systems based on
ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions’. Such
assumptions are intimately connected with what Creswell (2007:24)
describes as ‘interpretative communities’: theoretical frames to guide the
generation and analysis of data. Guba and Lincoln (1994), Lincoln and Guba
(2000) and Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) state that five major
paradigms [interpretative communities] guide social research: positivism,
post-positivism, constructivism, critical theory, and participatory approaches.
Arguably, in the 21st century transformative frameworks, pragmatism, and
queer theory must also be included in the canon of social science research
paradigms (Creswell, 2013). Although classifying paradigms (Kuhn, 1970)
can lead to over-simplifications, Somekh and Lewin (2011) remind us that,
while paradigms provide important frameworks of ideas for thinking about
research methodology, they have also been implicated in polarisation in the
social sciences. Detailed discussions of all the main paradigms can be found
elsewhere (see for example, Bryman, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Rice,
2003). For the purposes of this chapter, I will detail the paradigm selected to
guide the research strategy in this study.

**Social Constructionism**
Social constructionism is located within the paradigm of constructivism. They
are, however, conceptually different. The latter implies people construct their
reality while in contact with the external world: reality is a product of a
person’s own creation (Etherington, 2004, 2013). For social constructionism,
the construction of reality is embedded in social conventions, history and interaction with others (Gergen, 1999). In the current study, social constructionism is the preferred frame. It emerged initially to challenge the positivist paradigm that dominated the social sciences for many years. Positivism proposed that reality was external, knowable and [easily] discoverable through quantitative methods. Social constructionism, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge is interactively produced and meaning is based on shared understandings that are socially and historically contingent. Knowledge claims are thus partial as opposed to having the status of timeless truths that can be detached from the particular social context in which they are constructed (Smith, 2002). Table 4.1 illustrates the key features of the approach I have adopted.
### Table 4.1: Social Constructionism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Implications for Research Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Relativism: local and specific constructed realities</td>
<td>Researcher reports different perspectives as themes develop in the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology</strong></td>
<td>Subjectivist/interactive</td>
<td>Researcher relies on quotes as evidence; collaborates, spends time in the field with participants, and becomes an ‘insider’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td>Hermeneutical; dialectical inductive logic; uses an emergent design</td>
<td>Researcher works with particulars before generalisations, describes in detail the context of the study and continually revises questions from experiences in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Axiology</strong></td>
<td>Values and biases acknowledged</td>
<td>Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretation of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods of Data Collection</strong></td>
<td>Narrative interviews, Ethnography, Participant observation, Recording interactions, Collecting documents</td>
<td>Biographical research, Theoretical coding, Narrative analysis, Content analysis, Context analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Creswell (2013:21); Flick (2006:22); and Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011:98).

According to Burr (2003:2-5) social constructionism encompasses the following:

- a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge
- the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge and truths
- the notion that knowledge is fabricated and sustained by social processes
- that knowledge and action go together.

Realities are socially created, constituted through language, organised and maintained through narrative and make no claims to universal ‘truth’ (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999). This can be summarised as follows:

... ‘reality’ is knowledge which guides our behaviour, but we all have different views on it. We arrive at shared views of reality by sharing our knowledge through various social processes which organise and make it objective. Social activity tends to
become habitual, so that we share assumptions about how things are and behave in accordance with social conventions based on that shared knowledge (Payne, 1991:8 adapting Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

There are tensions inherent in social constructionism. For instance, Shilling (2005) argues that theoretical concerns with bodies and embodiment point to the limits of strong social constructionist approaches, particularly when it comes to studying the materiality of corporeal bodies. Do such material entities only have meaning when we speak them so? A related tension is associated with an ‘anything goes’ relativist position that arguably infuses social constructionism. The question arises: can researchers actually ‘know’ anything if everything is relative (Smith and Sparkes, 2009a, b)? These tensions cannot be resolved within the confines of this PhD. Notwithstanding this I argue narrative inquiry offers a way to avoid radical relativism. The stories that people tell combined with the re-storying that takes place during the production of the research account generates an internal coherence to emerge that is verifiable.

Applied to the current study, the theoretical insights to be gleaned from social constructionism suggest that the meanings women attach to their experiences are varied and multiple (Creswell, 2013). Such meanings and views are situated socially and historically. Thus, social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2016:29). The interpretative focus comes to rest on interaction amongst individuals and the specific contexts in which people live. In this sense, I deploy social constructionism as a ‘creative resource’ that enables an expanded way of talking and thinking about concepts (Gergen, 1999).
Qualitative Research

In using qualitative research we try to make sense of the rich complexities, contradictions and dilemmas of social life (Rich, 2002:99). My selection of qualitative methodology is embedded in social constructionism and follows Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3) where they suggest that:

... Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The label ‘qualitative research’ can be used as an umbrella term for a number of approaches to research in the social sciences (Flick, 2005, 2006, 2011). Generally, and following the ontological and epistemological assumptions of social constructionism, there is an emphasis on gathering the participants’ viewpoints on meaning-making, on immersion in everyday life and on attempting to ‘capture data on the perspective of local actors “from the inside”, through a process of deep attentiveness of empathetic understanding (verstehen)’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994:6). There is also explicit intent to describe the processes in the production of existing (mundane, institutional, or more general social) situations, milieus, and social order (Flick, 2011). A final point is that, in general in qualitative research the design is emergent (Creswell, 2013). In addition to having a passion for this type of research design I have many years of experience of researching various topics using different qualitative research techniques (Gallagher and O’ Toole, 2009; O’ Toole, Scarbrough and Kane, 2006; O’ Toole, 2013).

While Elliot (2005) demonstrates that developments in narrative inquiry over the past 20 years indicate that quantitative approaches can successfully frame this form of inquiry, I assert that in a study on the meanings of weight management experiences, qualitative approaches may be better suited to this type of research aim. I am concerned in this project, with ‘discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and with understanding their view of the world’ (Jones, 1995:2).

‘Natural’ settings for discussions on weight management can include home, work and slimming classes.

Other approaches initially considered included grounded theory, phenomenology, and discourse analysis. Some examples of various qualitative approaches to women and weight management include: participant observation (Heyes, 2006; Stinson, 2001); discourse analysis (Burns and Gavey, 2008; Throsby, 2007a,b, 2011); and depth interviewing with grounded theory (Rice, 2007). What is missing from these otherwise insightful and sophisticated research studies is that which narrative inquiry offers: a means to examine, temporality, chronology, sequencing and the ways in which people relate events in time to other events in their lives.
Based on the above, I argue that a qualitative methodology, founded on the principles of context, meaning and interpretation, offers the best framework to analyse women’s narratives of their experiences of weight management.

**Feminist Research: Theory and Practice**

Feminist researchers seek to make visible the lived experiences of women … The experience of oppression due to sexism, to which both researcher and researched are subjected, can create a unique type of insight and an ability to decipher ‘official’ explanations and grasp gender relations and their mechanisms (Fonow and Cook, 1991:1).

These insights teach us not only about gender relations, but also about society as a whole (Lentin, 1993). In selecting a qualitative research design embedded in social constructionism, I refined this further by integrating ideas and practices from feminist theory and research (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006). The normalisation of dieting for weight loss for women in particular (Cooper, 2016; Harjunen, 2009), the relentless commentary on women’s bodies in mainstream media, the concerns with the impact on women’s lives of the anti-fat cultural landscape (Boero, 2012; Gailey, 2014; Saguy, 2013) and my personal commitment to unpacking and researching gender inequality made a strong case for a feminist analytical frame to be deployed to enhance the research design. Although a contested concept (Humphries, 1997), an emancipatory narrative forms the basis of most feminist research.\(^{33}\)

Reinharz (1992), a leading scholar in this area, argued that feminist research should be considered as a perspective rather than a method as such. A feminist perspective is one that is concerned with practical, political and ethical matters when undertaking research (Maynard and Purvis, 1994).

\(^{33}\) It is not possible to simply prescribe a checklist of principles against which we can score our commitment to feminism in our work. Rather, it is imperative to observe what Olesen (2000:226) explains are the growing complexities associated with feminist epistemology and methodologies. She points to the writings from women of colour, gay/lesbian/queer theorists, postcolonial researchers, disabled women, standpoint theorists, and postmodernists all of whom have opened up taken-for-granted conceptualisations of the very grounds and process of doing feminist research as well as conceptualisations of critical key concepts such as experience, difference, and gender.
Therefore, although feminist research straddles a number of epistemological and methodological positions, what is shared is the recognition of the importance of foregrounding women’s lived experiences with the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge and challenging gender inequalities (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007:3; Richardson, 2011). I set about this study with women to contribute to this goal within feminist research.

Feminist research has as its foundation the critique of natural and social sciences as being androcentric (Blaikie, 2007). It suggests that historically women’s experiences have been both ignored and distorted. Three major traditions have emerged within feminist research and illustrate the complexities inherent in debates in the philosophy of science: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism (Anderson, 2015; Blaikie, 2007). I cannot do justice to the depth of these debates here. Rather, I will address two overlapping and interrelated themes within feminist literature that highlight key issues in adopting a narrative inquiry strategy informed by feminist research: women’s voices and positionality/reflexivity.

Women’s Voices
Debates around feminist epistemology centre on the placing of women’s voices in the research frame (Rice, 2003; Harding, 1987). Feminist standpoint theory is a theory of knowledge that emphasises that what counts as legitimate knowledge is that which emanates from women themselves (Harding, 1987, 1997, 2004, 2012; Letherby, 2003). Women are ‘experts’ in their own worlds (Rice, 2007): women are placed in the centre of the research frame. Feminist standpoint scholars seek to give voice to members of oppressed groups and to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living life ‘on the margins.’ In feminist standpoint epistemology women are to be taken seriously as knowers and women’s knowledge is translated into practice. Finally, we must apply what we learn from women’s experiences toward social change and toward the elimination of the oppression not only of women but of all marginalised groups (Brooks, 2007). Knowledge is socially situated and the ‘situated knower’ is emphasised.
where gender situates ‘knowing subjects’: knowledge reflects the particular perspectives of the subject (Anderson, 2015).

Extensive criticisms levelled at this approach are that it universalises and essentialises women’s experiences and ignores critical power relations and differences between and amongst women (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Letherby, 2003). Insights gleaned from feminist poststructuralists, from Black feminists and from queer theorists alert us to the importance of carefully teasing out the discursive and historically specific conditions within which women narrate their experiences (Burns and Gavey, 2004; Butler, 1990; Davies and Davies, 2007; Hill-Collins, 1990; Malson and Burns, 2009). In other words, we must pay attention to how women’s stories about their weight management experiences are framed discursively and located within specific historical and cultural contexts. Contemporary feminist standpoint theorists claim that these criticisms have been taken on board to acknowledge multiple and diverse realities in women’s lives where the possibility of deconstructing power relations is underscored (Harding, 2012). Stanley and Wise’s (2006:214) conceptualisation of ‘fractured foundationalism’ is a useful way to bridge the concerns expressed about feminist standpoint theory and I draw from it in this study:

Because different collectivities of people understand realities and facts from where [...] they are situated, everyday fractures of understanding and meaning – reality disjunctures – frequently arise; however, these are negotiated [...] around the shared premise that there is real meaning, facts and truth [...] a social reality to be arrived at.

This is an important addition to the approach and it enables me to occupy a position that can embrace the idea that starting with women’s stories of their experiences of weight management is a necessary and theoretically justifiable step in understanding aspects of the continued unequal positioning of women in contemporary Irish society.

Harding (2012) argues that essentialist readings of women’s lives are not necessary in taking standpoint approaches. This appears a simple but necessary statement from one of the leading proponents. It still leaves open the problem of whether women speak from the position of ‘expert’ about their
own lives. Of course, most feminist researchers attest to the value of the role of women’s experiences in the production of knowledge. The problem relates to the notion of epistemic privilege. For example, is it possible that only women can truly speak about their unequal positioning in society? After all, experiences themselves are shaped and regulated by master narratives and discursive regimes concerning women’s bodies, anti-obesity discourse and normative femininity.

I posit that gathering women’s stories of their experiences of weight management is necessary, if we are to understand the ways in which normative femininity is reproduced in taken-for-granted ways in everyday lives, in which dieting and weight loss practices play a not insignificant role. However, this is tempered by not privileging women’s stories and narratives as having some a priori expertise and from which an undistorted view of the ‘reality’ of women’s lives can emerge. I accept that ‘truth’ is always partial, situational and subjective (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). Women tell their stories about their experiences and speak the words that help produce the knowledge attained. In that sense women are agentic beings in that they choose and have capacity to tell particular stories in particular ways to particular audiences.

Feminists argue that it is simply not enough to give voice to women’s experiences. Rather, researchers also need to look for the hidden sources of oppression encircling women’s lives. I posit that an analysis of women’s stories of their weight management experiences can reveal lines of oppression and the pressures of self-surveillance around body shape and size. But I too am bounded by these narratives, and the enactment of relations of power, and lines of oppression are not always clearly visible. However, I have the benefit of using research tools and analytical frameworks to make sense of the narratives I have gathered. My responsibility is to use these wisely and ethically. As a feminist researcher, I maintain a commitment to identifying and naming power inequalities that are
grounded in gender relations but which leave open the possibility for change in women’s lives, including my own.

Positionality and Reflexivity
The related processes of positionality and reflexivity have been central to the development of feminist research strategies. Both invoke the notion that the purpose of research is always informed by one’s perspective of the world, which in turn, forms a vital part of the context in which the research takes place. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) explain that the ways in which the research is conducted, the nature of questions posed and the moral intent of the project, are expressions of positionality and will govern the ways in which researchers craft and change the research act itself (see also Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012).

Reflexivity is a process which relocates the self in research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). In feminist research on women’s stories about their bodies it is paramount to reflect on one’s own embeddedness in the discourses that surround managing women’s bodies (Longhurst, 2012). In addition, how we position ourselves in relation to the research, to the account we produce and to the reflexive processes therein, are at the heart of feminist methodologies and narrative inquiry (Etherington, 2004). These concerns relate to the importance of teasing out how the researcher shapes the process of the research and offers interpretation of the data.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000:3) point out that there are different uses of reflexivity/self-reflexivity that invite discussion on the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes as well as the involvement of the, what they term, ‘knowledge producer’. Skeggs (2002:367) takes this further when she states that reflexivity, as has been used by feminists, is about giving attention to power relationships, ethics, reciprocity, responsibility and to representation of research participants. Harding (1993) argues that throughout the research process, subjective judgements on the part of the researcher are always made. These occur during the selection of the problems to research, the
generation of hypotheses, research design, collection of data, interpretation and sorting of data, decisions to end the research and reporting the results (Hesse-Biber, and Leavy, 2007). This requires what Harding (1993) terms ‘strong objectivity’. As a challenge to claims of value neutrality within positivist research designs, both strong objectivity and self-reflexivity demand of the feminist researcher that s/he clearly delineates the values, attitudes and agenda brought to and directing the research.

Skeggs (2002, 2004) has suggested that the turn to reflexivity, while necessary, is of itself a product of its history and time and can be fraught with difficulties. Reflexivity draws on a model of the self that is of the knowing, internal, reflective self. The emphasis on this model of reflexivity in feminist research, that involves telling about the self [the researcher], can direct attention away from what Skeggs (2002) states are the more important areas in social research – research practice and the research participants. Skeggs (2002) argues that the telling of the self puts a social process such as positioning into effect. This, in turn, aids in the maintenance of differential value attached to those who have access to resources to tell of the self and those who do not. As Skeggs (2002) explains, the irony of this is that the demands to put the self into the research process was/is an attempt to expose the power, positioning and privilege of social researchers who made claims to objective truth. For me this raised a hugely significant question: what happens to research when researchers ‘tell’ their stories? I agree with Skeggs (2002) and Probyn (1993) that issues of power and privilege are not necessarily dissolved despite the contemporary concern of engaging with self-reflexivity within research practise. Pointedly, Skeggs (2002:360) observes that telling and doing are two very different forms of activity. Skeggs (2002) advises to distinguish carefully between self-narration and reflexivity with regard to research practice.

A related concern is raised by Atkinson and Delamont (2006). They ponder whether in contemporary parlance, when the autobiographical voice is so highly commodified, should not scholars write against this grain rather than
reproduce it? The difficulties to which they are alluding mirror those identified by Skeggs. Being reflexive might translate, in practice, as an uncritical and unanalysed reproduction of a self-reflexive account that, in and of itself, is a product of particular social, cultural and academic conventions. Ultimately, does this reify the personal account as being representative of the inner self? Stanley and Wise (1993:166) suggest that to address some of the inherent tensions involved in being self-reflexive:

... [t]he best alternative is that researchers should present analytic accounts of how and why we think what we know what we do about research situations and the people in them.

While I return to my own reflexive account of the research process, and my roles and decision-making therein, in the following sections and in more detail in Chapter 5, I do not claim this as a privileged account. Rather, it is an account of the research process and is itself a social action, grounded in socially shared conventions found in feminism, narrative research, qualitative research and the wider societal call to ‘account for oneself’. It is not a confessional account. What I can say with some certainty is that I reflected deeply on what I was doing at each stage of the research. My personal biography, involving a temporal and cyclical involvement in dieting for weight loss, exercise programmes and calorie restriction, engendered within anxieties of a personal and political nature. Such anxieties translated into academic questioning and scholarly enquiry about the nature, meaning and consequences of these weight management practices. An example of this in practice was talking about my story of periodical involvement in weight management including mention of actual and desired weight status and, at times, ‘wanting to be slim’ (Throsby and Gimlin, 2010). I did this at the beginning of the observations and interviews. In the case of all interviewees once I declared that I, too, had engaged in dieting for weight loss, they all stated that they appreciated my telling of this and this enabled the interview to proceed.
Narrative Inquiry

The act of storytelling extends temporally and socially what otherwise might be an individual, discrete and ephemeral transaction (Ewick and Silbey, 2003:1328).

The discussions above provide a basis for deploying narrative inquiry to understand how women frame and story their weight management experiences. My use of narrative inquiry is informed ontologically by the critique of positivism that is embedded within social constructionism, and epistemologically by the pursuit of situated knowledges, embedded within feminism (Abu Bakr, 2014). Observing that weight management is, amongst other things a storied landscape, I required an approach to enquiry that could attend to the gathering and analysis of stories while simultaneously committing to the theoretical frames guiding the study. Narrative inquiry is one such methodological approach that makes explicit the gathering and analysis of stories. It has grown rapidly as a form of social research in the social and human sciences over the past 25 years (Andrews et al., 2013; Bamberg, 2007; Clandinin, 2007; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Maynes et al., 2008; Riessman, 2008). It remains for me to plot my use of narrative inquiry to explore narratives of weight management.

What is Narrative Inquiry?
According to Chase (2011) narrative inquiry is a particular type of qualitative inquiry and ‘what distinguishes narrative inquiry is that it begins with the biographical aspect of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) famous trilogy – ‘biography, history and society’. Chase (2011:421) adds:

Narrative theorists define narrative as a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time.

Narrative inquiry is an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data. The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told (Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk, 2007:459). Narrative inquiry leads researchers to stories, where stories are analysed to understand events and experiences. Analysis of stories focuses on form (how the story is told), content (what is said in the story) and context
(wherein the story is produced and told). All three aspects are examined in the current study.

The theoretical starting point for engaging with narrative is the assertion that people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives (Bruner, 1984; Ewick and Silbey, 2003; Mason, 2004; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 2008; Sarbin, 1986). Plummer (2001:185) states that narrative is understood as ‘the most basic way humans have of apprehending the world’. Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) explain how the stories we are told, and the stories we learn to tell about ourselves, are important in terms of how we come to impose order on our experiences and make sense of actions in our lives. Sandelowski (1991) states that the turn to narrative knowing infers that individuals have an impulse to story life events into order and meaning. Somers (1994:614) elaborates the sociological case thus:

...research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emploted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives.

Somers’ approach has relevance for the current study as it simultaneously refuses the humanist tendency to assert the primacy of individual experiences and understandings, and avoids pitfalls associated with structuralist and some poststructuralist accounts which tend to proffer over-deterministic accounts of society that do not allow space for agency.

Differentiating Narrative and Story
Generally, people do not say: ‘let me tell you a narrative’ (Smith and Sparkes, 2009a:2). Narrative and story are frequently conflated and used interchangeably. But in so doing, I argue this does a disservice to narrative inquiry. Conceptual difficulties aside, it is imperative to lay down some parameters to what is being studied. Frank (1995:188) reminds us that any distinction between narratives and stories is hard to maintain because narratives only exist in particular stories and all stories are narratives. They
are intrinsically linked concepts. However, I contend that stories are related to but conceptually separate from narratives. I define story as follows: as tales/accounts that people tell about themselves, events and experiences in their lives, and as tales/accounts that are generated within institutions, cultures and societies. I define narratives as both the crafting together of these stories and the products of these stories which organise the tales of self, events and experiences into sequential form so that the significance of each can be understood in relation to the whole (Elliot, 2005; Stanley, 2008). While stories are the building blocks of narratives, narratives are embedded in discourses and ideologies. A story can be found in spoken and written texts, including interview texts, official documents and research accounts. Narrative inquirers can specifically ask for stories during interviews and/or seek them out during the analysis of data.

Key Features of Narrative Inquiry
Narrative is conceptualised as both a form of inquiry and as a method in itself. Unlike other qualitative approaches, narrative inquiry engages in more depth with temporality and allows narrators to come forward as characters in their own right (Byrne, 2014; Elliott, 2005). Despite the well-publicised theoretical and methodological diversity within narrative inquiry narrative researchers have extrapolated a number of necessary elements as being basic to the approach (Andrews et al., 2013; Clandinin, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004; Frank, 1995; Griffin and May, 2012; Maines, 2006:122; 1993; Maynes et al., 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011).
Firstly, events and experiences must be selected from the past for purposes of focus and comment. Secondly, these must be transformed into story elements though the use of plot, setting and characterisation. These confer structure, context, and meaning on the events selected and illustrate the embedded nature of stories. Thirdly, the events and experiences must be told or ordered in a temporal fashion so that questions of how something happened, and why, can be addressed (Maines, 2006; Elliot, 2005). Thus, narratives crafted from people’s stories organise episodes and events, and enable insight into the individual’s reasoning behind their actions. Time and place are particularly important. Finally, narratives are social and relational
and infused with power relations. In this sense, narratives and stories have capacity to accomplish things in that they can be strategic, functional and purposeful (Griffin and May, 2012). They can convey personal identities, preferred stories, justifications and explanations. Narratives can also mobilise people to collective actions. Smith and Sparkes (2009a:2) neatly summarise these features of narrative that are applied in the current study:

a narrative is taken to mean a complex genre that routinely contains a point and characters along with a plot connecting events that unfold sequentially over time and in space to provide an overarching explanation or consequence. It is a constructed form or template which people rely on to tell stories. [emphasis in original]

Emplotment is central to understanding narrative. In this sense, narratives are generally understood to have some form of chronology. Sequencing of events is not random due to the notion of a plot. A plot creates a meaningful connection between these events, so prior events seem to lead inevitably towards later ones. The plot is often constructed around a particular point or meaning that the narrator wishes to convey to the audience (Griffin and May, 2012:443). A broadly interpretive approach to uncovering and analysing emplotment is adopted by researchers, where language is understood as not giving direct access to what ‘really’ happened or to underlying psychological motives. Rather language is used to do things. Thus how experiences are reconstructed and interpreted once they have occurred is of central import. Importantly then, the context of narrative is crucial to understanding narrative (Griffin and May, 2012).

The Context of Narrative Construction
The stories people tell about their lives are never simply personal but are told in historically specific times and settings. This suggests that stories and narratives are social acts that emanate from cultural repertoires that are currently in circulation, and that govern how story elements link together and can be told in the first place (Maynes, et al., 2008). Narratives are conveyed in specific social and cultural contexts and are embedded in public narratives (Somers, 1994) and master narratives (Frank, 2010). The cultural conventions of telling, the motivations of the teller, the audience and the social context all influence the production of narrative (Bruner, 1984; Chase,
2011; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Conlon (2010) suggests that this idea feeds into the position that knowledge is situated and so the context of narrative production comes into focus. This, in turn, has implications for the knowledge claims that are made. People construct stories about experiences that are consistent with notions of situated knowledge. As Riessman (2008:3) attests, the process of storytelling is:

not straightforward, but invariably mediated and regulated by controlling vocabularies. Narratives are composed for particular audiences at particular moments in history, and they draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture.

How a narrative is told will depend crucially on the cultural resources available. According to Elliot (2005) there are many different established narrative forms sedimented at different depths within a culture, to which individuals can turn in order to make sense of their own experiences and communicate that to others. It is the interplay between these existing cultural discourses or public narratives and the production of new individual/ontological narratives that makes the idea of narrative construction so compelling within sociology.

Narrative frames consist of cultural frames and ideologies that prefigure some stories, insofar as group beliefs and values contain already-articulated plots (Bridger and Maines, 1998; Maines, 2006). They tend to reside in the taken-for-granted background assumptions of everyday life, resting in the realm of common sense where certain matters are depicted as simply being just the way things are. Identifying narrative frames and charting their influence requires a body of discourse over time. May (2008) and Griffin and May (2012) maintain that when we communicate our experiences to others we use narrative frameworks to structure the events that happen to us in a way that makes them easily understandable to others. These frameworks are shared cultural resources that offer a repertoire of stories and set limits on the ‘tellability’ of certain stories (Frank, 1995; Sparkes and Smith, 2009, 2013).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) integrate a narrower understanding of narrative frames in their approach to narrative inquiry. They advocate examining the
relationship between three levels of narrative production: narrative frameworks, narrative environments and narrative practices. Drawing on their earlier work, Gubrium and Holstein (1998:164) state that the many:

... sites for storying experience, provide narrative frameworks for conveying personal experience through time, for what is taken to be relevant in our lives, and why the lives under consideration developed in the way that they did.

Narrative frameworks may be more or less restrictive and managed and maintained in different ways. In this sense, they argue that stories do not exist in isolation rather they circulate in narrative environments. Narrative environments can enhance or inhibit the telling of particular stories. Chase (2011) states that narrative environments provide myriad circumstances and resources that condition but do not determine the stories that people tell and do not tell. Narrative environments can include such diverse entities as intimate relationships, local culture, occupations and organisations (ibid:123). Narrative practices refer to the mechanics of how stories are activated and ordered – how storytellers create and develop meaning through interaction with each other; how speakers struggle with each other or struggle for control over narrate meanings; how an otherwise chaotic narrative is made meaningful (Chase, 2011:423; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Hlavka et al., 2015). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) describe there being a reflexive interplay between all three levels. The coherence of a story emerges through narrative linkages to the particular ways experience is linked to other items: linkage creates a context for understanding (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009:55).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) explain that to comprehend the ‘whats’ of story production and content, and the ‘hows’ of story activation, creation, collaboration and performance of identity, require an ethnographic understanding of local contexts and interactional circumstances (Chase, 2011:422). This means immersion in a narrative environment for an extended period of time. In so doing close attention can be paid to the local contexts and interactional circumstances wherein narratives, including those of master narratives, preferred narratives and counter-narratives, of weight management are produced and co-exist. To this end,
Chase (2011) argues for the need for studies of mundane environments of everyday life.

Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) approach opens up an exciting lens (Figure 4.1) through which to explore a key aspect of everyday life for many women - their routine and cyclical involvement in weight loss practices. It provides a useful methodological framework within which to investigate the relationship between narrative frames/frameworks, narrative environments and narrative practices. In turn, this enables me to explore the questions of whether and how the stories that the women tell about their weight management experiences are embedded in particular narrative frameworks and environments.

**Figure 4.1: Narrative Inquiry: Conceptual Framework**

There has been a proliferation of narrative research studies to explore the form, content and context of narrative production. These include Ahmed...
(2013) on understanding experiences of lifestyle migration through two plot typologies; Cain (1991) on identity acquisition in Alcoholics Anonymous; Bottorff et al. (2009) on fathers’ narratives of reducing or quitting smoking; Davis (2008) on constructing the ideal breast cancer patient; May (2008) on mothers who breach social norms that constitute ‘good’ motherhood; Perrier et al. (2013) on narrative environments and the capacity of disability narratives to motivate leisure-time physical activity among individuals with spinal cord injury; Presser (2005) on ‘doing gender’ and relations of power in narrative research; and Stewart et al. (2011) on sporting autobiographies of illness and the role of metaphor. My study is located within this emerging canon of context focused research.

Critiques of Narrative Inquiry
Narrative inquiry is not without its critics. One significant charge is that narrative inquiry treats uncritically the stories that are gathered (Atkinson, 1997, 2009; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). In other words, there may be a lack of attention to historical, class and cultural contexts. Modern Western societies have been classified as biographical societies where everyone has a story which must be told (Riessman, 2012; Langellier, 2001). Atkinson and Silverman (1997) describe narrative inquiry as ‘the elevation of the experiential as the authentic’.

Atkinson (2011:227) explains:

The assumption of authenticity uncritically reflects dominant beliefs about the self and its revelation. It endorses the romantic image of the interior self – a self that is also anterior to the realm of social action. It takes insufficient account of the traditions of interpretative social science that ... stress the social origins of the gesture and the discursive production of the social self.

Atkinson (2009) takes this argument further when he suggests that narrative must not be privileged over other forms of social action and I would argue, by extension, not be privileged over other forms of communication of life experiences.

Other questions to be put to narrative inquiry include: the fluidity of the accounts, where perspectives and stories may change depending on the context of telling; the precise role of the researcher who is enmeshed in the
process and is fully implicated in the construction, selection and interpretation of the stories being told; the concentration on the narratives that people choose to tell with minimum attention to stories not told; and questions about validity, ‘truth’ and quality. I will address the specifics of these questions in the following chapter on the implementation of the research design.

Finally, narrative inquiry has been critiqued for reproducing structuralist methodology, thus rendering it unable to explain variation or context (Saukko, 2003). It has also been viewed as un-theorised and personal, and so, unable to uncover the structural preconditions of experience (Atkinson, 2009). However, Oikkonen (2013:297) makes the case that narrative inquiry makes explicit the relation between structure and context and can attend to the ‘tricky ground between structure and context’. She reminds us that as structure can privilege permanence and context can promote change, the narrative site between structure and context is characterised by unresolved tensions that a narrative inquiry strategy is well placed to tease out (Oikkonen, 2013:297). Related to this is the oft-quoted criticism that narrative inquiry stresses the importance of the individual over the social context. However, as Stanley (2008, 2013) elaborates, social structures can be made visible from a single individual’s stories as they can from wider social groups.

Is it possible to manage and address these challenges to narrative inquiry? The answer must be in the affirmative. Firstly, as Riessman (2008) observes, discursive context matters in the construction and interpretation of narratives. Adopting a feminist social constructionist position in the study enables consideration of how narrative frameworks and narrative environments set the conditions of possibilities for narrative practices. In this way, stories are not treated as uncritical accounts of experience. Secondly, women’s narratives of their weight management experiences are situated in a number of contexts of their production. Thus in addition to the elicitation of extended reflections told during the narrative
interviews, I immersed myself in one year’s observation in four weight management classes. This enabled me to move beyond interview contexts to scrutinise other critical contexts in which narratives of weight management are produced.

**Conclusion**

As the study evolved and my thinking, reading and reflection progressed I became more aware of and attuned to the conceptualisation of weight management as a storied landscape. This required a research strategy to explore the array of stories and narratives about weight loss that circulate in society and how such stories and narratives play out in women’s everyday lives. This, in turn, led me to narrative inquiry. Such a research strategy enables consideration of narrative frameworks, narrative environments and narrative practices around weight management. This thesis makes an important contribution to both narrative inquiry and the sociology of women’s lives in Irish society. In this chapter, I have focused on how a narrative inquiry strategy was developed and positioned as best suited to explore narratives of women and weight management. Similar to Smith and Sparkes (2009a:10), I have tried to ‘illuminate, but not prescribe or finalise, what this different kind of research can be’. In the next chapter, I discuss the implementation of the narrative inquiry research strategy.
Chapter 5: Research Design and Method

Introduction

How can one theorise or interpret...if there is no familiarity with what it all means to the participants themselves? (Plummer, 2001:37)

Qualitative feminist research demands transparency and reflexivity and both are critical components in the presentation of my account of the research process. Bamberg (2012) cautions narrative researchers in particular to make explicit their interpretative procedures, making clear the angles and perspectives from where meaning is being conferred and scrutinising the methods employed by the narrators in arriving at their stories. In this chapter, the ultimate research design is described and justified (Feeley, 2014). The chapter is laid out as follows. The first section restates the research questions that frame the study. The following section outlines the research strategy adopted. The remaining sections unfold the narrative of the study including implementation of the research design, data gathering, ethics, data analysis and representation. In a similar vein to Chandler (2010) the process of ‘doing’ this research was a long and steep learning curve for me.

Research Questions

The principal aim of this research study is to forge a theoretical understanding of institutional narrative resources about slimming and their impact on the women’s narratives of their weight management experiences. The central research question in this study is as follows:

How are the narratives of weight management that are generated within the slimming class implicated in women’s narratives of their weight management experiences?

34 Narrators in this study include myself, the participants and Slim Ireland.
To address this central question, three objectives were devised to take account of the complexity of weight management in women’s everyday lives, and to extend the central research question:

- to deconstruct the narratives and stories crafted and told of weight management within the slimming classes
- to identify how women narrate, make sense of and practice weight management in their everyday lives in the context of their involvement in slimming classes and related practices
- to establish the social and biographical contexts in which women narrate their practices of weight management.

The development of the research questions emanates from the discussion in the previous chapters. Let me briefly bring together the key points. Firstly, the intellectual puzzle that provides the impetus for this study is grounded in my deep concern with the dominant narratives circulating about weight and body size and the potential negative impacts they have generally in society and on particular sections of society. Secondly, a review of relevant theories of body management illustrates that women’s participation in weight management programmes is underscored by a number of theoretical concepts: governmentality, technologies of the self, and the body-project. Thirdly, the social construction of obesity in Ireland, combined with the changing position of women in Irish society, revealed a gap in research on women’s lives in Ireland. I conceptualise this as a focus on aspects of their everyday lives – the pertinent aspect being their involvement in weight management. Finally, a narrative inquiry conceptual apparatus was developed to address the research question. Similar to Denzin (1987), who carefully explicated how an alcoholic’s story can be understood as located within the narrative frameworks, cultural texts and shared experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous, I posit that women’s weight loss stories can be understood as located within the narrative frameworks, cultural texts and shared experiences of Slim Ireland (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). These, in turn, are located within dominant discourses of obesity, femininity and women’s bodies in Irish society.
I argue that to understand how women narrate their experiences of weight management it is necessary to examine the institutional settings, narrative frameworks and narrative environments within which weight management is produced. As the study progressed, I became more attuned to the conceptualisation of weight management as both a storied landscape and as a cyclical endeavour. This was significant as it brought to the forefront key concerns in narrative inquiry: plots, stories, temporality and context. Stories and narratives give an entry point into analysing what is happening in people’s personal lives and in the social world. I considered issues concerning the array of stories and narratives about weight loss that circulate in society and how such stories and narratives play out in women’s everyday lives.

Research Strategy

Chapter 4 provided an in depth discussion of narrative inquiry declaring it particularly useful to explore women’s narratives of their weight management experiences. Within the broad spectrum of narrative research, I position my study as a narrative ethnography, elaborated by Gubrium and Holstein (2009, 2010) as a method of procedure and analysis involving the close scrutiny of circumstances, their actors and actions in the process of formulating and communicating accounts. Chase (2011:422) describes such an approach as having a focus on the relationship between people’s narrative practices [the stories they tell and how they are told, the plots and storylines] and their local narrative environments where people’s narrative practices are shaped by and shape their narrative environments. Gubrium and Holstein (2009:174) state that narrative work is organisationally embedded and that ‘localised configurations of meaning and related narrative practices are mediated by organisations’ so that organisational voices and preferences can be heard. The authors suggest that organisations set the conditions of possibility for narrative production where ‘organisations have big stories to tell which set the narrative agenda for the smaller, individual stories that follow along’ (Bamberg, 2012; Gubrium and
Holstein, 2009:174; Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009). I selected two main methods to implement the narrative inquiry strategy: observations and interviews.

Ethnographic Sensibilities
Ethnographic sensibilities and attuning to how, when and what stories are told within particular narrative environments are the initial methodological dispositions required to pursue this strategy of enquiry (Chase, 2011; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Positioning weight management as a storied landscape, and the slimming class as one significant narrative environment, wherein preferred, consonant and dissonant stories and narratives of women and weight management are told and retold each week, my first decision appeared relatively straightforward: to immerse myself within slimming classes for an extended period of time in order to observe the unfolding of the stories therein.35

Ethnography is long established as a method, a theoretical orientation, a philosophical paradigm (Tedlock, 2000:455) and as a main form of qualitative enquiry (Adler and Adler, 1998; Denzin, 2011; Flick, 2011). What is usually involved is an extended period of time observing people in their ‘natural’ environments to describe and analyse their social meanings and ordinary activities. The researcher can participate directly in the setting and the activities therein, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer, 2000:6). Participation and observation are interwoven with other procedures such as interviewing, asking questions, looking at documents, ‘in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1). However, where a narrative ethnography differs from other forms of ethnography is in its explicit

35 Here I follow the long tradition of excellent ethnographic studies of slimming classes which have focussed on different aspects of peoples’ weight management experiences within the context of their participation in these classes, including: Allon (1975); Broom and Dixon (2008), Gimlin (2007, 2008a, b), Granberg (2006), Heyes (2006, 2007), Laslett and Warren (1975), Millman (1980), Monaghan (2008a), Stinson (2001) and Sussman (1956).
focus on stories and storytelling within particular narrative environments.

Further, it is recognised that:

Although it is important in studying narrative practice to ground research in the vernacular and the everyday organisation of accounts, it is equally important not to valorise what is individually conveyed as somehow unaffected by the environments in which it is embedded (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008:255).

Narrative Interviews

In-depth interviews are central data-gathering methods in much qualitative research (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Silverman, 2010). In a narrative study, in-depth interviews are used to elicit stories (Chase, 2003; Clandinin, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In this study I treat the interviews in the inquiry as both a resource and a topic. By this I mean that while the interviews provide detailed content about the women’s stories of their weight management experiences (‘whats’), they are simultaneously interactional and performative encounters which can reveal much about the ‘hows’ of storytelling. As such, the data is contextualised in terms of where, how and when the interviews occurred and the respective roles and identities of both myself and the women during the process (Seale, 2003).

One central aim in narrative interviewing is to move beyond the question-response technique found in some qualitative and much quantitative interviewing. The goal is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1986). These authors believe that given the space and time most interviewees will tell stories spontaneously even if not prompted to do so. A related point is that, where possible, repeat interviewing is desirable (Elliott, 2005). From the outset, I decided that I would conduct double interviews with each woman. Double interviewing places demands on the interviewer but more importantly the interviewees. I will return to this later in the chapter. The question remains, though, as to how many interviews are enough? Related is the valid concern that while there may be narrative continuity there may also be narrative change between interviews. How does this fit into the analysis? My decision to conduct two interviews was based on a number of reasons. The first reason concerns ethics. My sense was that talking about bodies and weight management requires some trust. While I had met all of the
interviewees on many occasions in the slimming class, one-to-one interviews demand careful and sensitive questioning. I wanted to have time with each woman to enable her to tell her stories in a respectful fashion. Therefore, I felt that I would need to meet the women on more than one occasion, subject to them agreeing to my request. This also meant I could reflect carefully on how I was conducting each interview. The second reason is related to practical concerns. Narrative interviews take time as they do not proceed according to the usual ‘rules’ of qualitative interviewing. The training I had received confirmed this (see below). The third reason is grounded in achieving internal validity of the findings. Meeting the women twice, in addition to my time spent observing in the slimming classes, enabled me to check for consistency of my emerging interpretation (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). I could also check out particular stories of experiences and if they were retold in similar or different ways.

Narrative interviewing does not involve the enactment of a set of rules as such, as the overall goal is to form dialogic relationships and greater communication equality between researchers and participants (Riessman, 2008). Initially, one has to grasp that narratives range in form and size from brief, tightly bound stories told in answer to a single question, to long narratives that build over the course of several interviews (ibid:23). Asking the right question/s to facilitate the opening up of topics, and thereby enabling respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful, is considered paramount in narrative interviewing (Riessman, 2008). There are different techniques to interviewing and styles of questioning which can, in turn, produce different sorts of accounts (Harding, 2006:11). One such method borrows from a thematic approach to interviewing but emphasises the use of narrative questioning: ask some questions, selectively follow up on specific themes or topics and allow interviewees space to talk at length. Another approach is the Biographical Narrative Interview Method [BNIM] (Wengraf, 2001). I attended a three-day course in this method with its two major exponents in Britain, Prue Chamberlyn and Tom Wengraf. The approach involves the use of a lightly structured interview
schedule that begins with one broad question to elicit narratives on the topic being investigated. Only when the interviewee signals a clear coda, an ending to the story being told, can the interviewer speak and ask further questions. Questions must be based on what has been said so far in the interview, and follow the same sequential pattern or order in which the interviewee told her story. Wengraf (2001) argues that how an individual chooses to structure her story and what she decides to include/exclude can be revealing and is crucial to this method. I used an adapted form of BNIM as an interview method for the first interview with each woman (see Appendix 1).

Unfolding the Narrative of the Study

Three methods of data collection were selected to address the research questions and conduct the narrative ethnography: observation in slimming classes, interviews, and collection of ‘documents of life’ (documents from the weight management organisation and wider documentation on dieting and losing weight generally) (Plummer, 2001). Figure 5.1 illustrates the data collection process. The issues discussed in this section are sampling and accessing settings, recording observations, interview sample and conducting interviews.

Figure 5.1: Data Collection Process

Weekly observations over one year in four slimming classes

Double in-depth interviews with 14 women from the slimming classes

Analysis of selection of material documents from *Slim Ireland*
Sampling and Negotiating Access with Slimming Organisations

Generally, observation studies choose a small number of cases, and ethnographic studies of weight management classes have followed this principle (Gimlin, 2008a; Heyes, 2006; Monaghan, 2008a). I undertook an online review of the two main weight management organisations that operate in Ireland: an international organisation – *Weight Watchers [WW]*, and an Irish organisation – *Slim Ireland*.\(^{36}\) My initial aim was to use a purposive, typical case sample (Bryman, 2016) to conduct observation in two classes from each organisation. Sample criteria were: weekly classes based in the Border, Midland and Western [BMW] region of Ireland and access to women participants (Palys, 2008).

I identified 10 *WW* classes and 10 *Slim Ireland* classes in the region. Telephone contact was made with both organisations. These initial contacts suggested a positive disposition towards the research objectives: I received verbal approval to attend their classes. I contacted both organisations one month after the initial contact to confirm attendance at their classes. At that stage *WW* referred my query to their Chief Scientific Officer in North America. She emailed me to say that due to the confidential nature of their classes I would not be granted permission to conduct my research in its classes.\(^{37}\) Heyes (2007) McNamara (2012) and Stinson (2001) managed to conduct their respective observation based studies with *Weight Watchers*. I emailed two leading academics in the area for some advice about negotiating access. One told me that she negotiated access through rekindling her membership of the organisation. After a few weeks of attendance she asked the leader could she begin observation and

\(^{36}\) *Slim Ireland* is a pseudonym.

\(^{37}\) I sent an email explaining the study in more detail and included the participant information sheet for the observations (see Appendix 3). I committed to maintain confidentially at all times. I also explained that I had received ethical approval from NUIG (see Appendix 9). We corresponded some more by email but she maintained that the policies of the organisation would not allow access for research purposes. She stated that this was an ‘ironclad’ policy to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the members. The Chief Scientific Officer stated that she understood the merits of the study but could not contravene the policies. She suggested that I contact other local organisations that may not necessarily have the same, as she put it, ‘stringent’ procedures adopted by *Weight Watchers*.
interviewing. The leader agreed. The other academic suggested a covert study. However, I had sought ethical approval on the basis of overt observation and so, had to accept the decision of Weight Watchers.

Although despondent I spoke again to the representative from Slim Ireland who indicated that they might consider my application to attend their classes for the purposes of research. My explanation of the study, the participant information sheets and consent forms were forwarded to its Managing Director. Two weeks later I received permission to attend their classes. They gave me the telephone numbers of two of their leaders who organised three classes between them in the BMW region of Ireland (see figure 5.2 below). I rang them and they stated that I would be more than welcome to come to their classes. I maintained some email contact with Slim Ireland during the course of the research and secured permission to attend a further class, leaving me with the option to attend four of their classes in total.

The research took place in the BMW region of Ireland. This is an area to the West and North West of the River Shannon, the longest river running through Ireland that roughly divides the populous and more affluent East of Ireland from the much less populous and less affluent West of Ireland. The BMW region covers a large and diverse area and comprises thirteen counties, including the six border counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth; the three western counties of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon and the four midland counties of Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath. The BMW region accounts for some 47% of the land area of Ireland, 26.5% of the population and contributes some 19% of the GDP of the country. Although the region is predominantly rural with a low population density, there is a strong and developing network of small, medium and larger sized towns. I am based in the North West of the region. This resulted in approximately 200 miles round trip travelling per week for about one year to conduct the observations. The fourth class was in my local town. Figure 5.2 illustrates the BMW region wherein my study was conducted.
While *Slim Ireland* operates men-only classes, the vast majority of the members are women, reflecting international trends (Monaghan, 2008a, b; Monaghan and Malson, 2013). *Slim Ireland* acted as an initial gatekeeper for this research study. The use of gatekeepers in research can raise particular concerns. One significant one is that gatekeepers may choose participants that they believe are suitable for the project. This raises questions around ethics, findings, and the potential for a skewed sample. However, in the case of this study the impact on all three was minimal. Three points are worth noting here. Firstly, *Slim Ireland* had no involvement in the sampling and recruitment of women to interview. Secondly, I discovered that *Slim Ireland* never contacted the leaders in question about my research prior to or during the project. Thirdly, my sample was purposeful and therefore not conducted for representational validity.
Observations
Unlike Stinson (2001), on the first night I felt armed with some knowledge about Slim Ireland and the operation of its classes. My initial observations focused on the layout of the classes. A table is placed at the top of the room, adorned with table cloths, Slim Ireland posters with various slogans, signing in booklets, a cash box, food monitoring forms and sometimes food items. The weighing scales are positioned to the right of the table and the actual reading dial is placed on the table. The person who is being weighed cannot see the dial clearly unless she tilts her head in particular ways. At every single class I attended, members never looked directly at the dial save some swift sideways glances. Instead, they generally waited until the leader revealed their weight status to them.

On my first night at each class I was invited to explain my presence. I had a prepared speech which briefly outlined the nature of my research and emphasised the confidential nature of the observations. Class leaders also mentioned this when I finished my introductions. I had to give this speech four times in each class as new members join nearly every week. In the first few weeks of observation I brought along a three-page participant information sheet which some people brought home (see Appendix 3). I was never completely sure if people read the sheets and indeed one leader commented that it was a waste of time. I then produced short leaflets which contained the NUIG logo, explained the study and provided my contact details (see Appendix 4). I brought a bundle of these to each class and left them on chairs for people to read.

During the early stages of observations, I listened and watched, took brief notes and wrote these out in more detail after class. I generally made notes in my car after the class and then reviewed these the next day at home. I moved between paying attention to one or two members to observe what

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38 My mother had attended classes with this organisation some 25 years previously and I had gone along with her a couple of times to the classes as she felt I too needed to lose weight. She had also talked much about what happened in class. Many women friends had attended such classes in the intervening years and spoken about their experiences.
they were doing in each class to trying to take in as much as I could of the many scenes that were playing out. Oft-times, it was difficult to hear when upwards of 20 women were in the group, chatting and waiting to weigh in. Many of the women eventually recognised me, which enabled me to engage them in conversations or, what have been described as, ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979). These usually took the form of them telling me a story about their weight issues from that week. I was also asked on many occasions if I had a ‘weight problem’ myself and ‘do I weigh in’? Where appropriate and where asked I told the women about my weight loss and how long it had taken me to reach my current weight.

In addition to the observations, I gathered relevant documentation about Slim Ireland including the weekly motivational talks, the ‘healthy eating’ programme it endorses, advice on exercise, the Glycaemic Index [GI] plan that it subscribes to, its fitness DVD and recipe book, weight loss stickers, the class leader manual, class advertisements and newspaper articles. I also monitored its website regularly, received its online newsletter and started following four of its leaders on twitter.

**Reflections on the Observations**

At the beginning of the research I had thought that I would use my time observing in order to recruit women to be interviewed for what I initially considered to be the main data corpus of the empirical study, the interviews. However, immersion in the theoretical and empirical literature and my conceptualisation of the slimming class as a narrative environment moved my thinking in a different direction: the slimming classes became central to the story I was exploring and writing about. This relates to the different roles I adopted during the course of the observations. Generally, researchers conducting sociological field observations adopt one or more of the following theoretical roles:

- the complete participant: is fully involved in the social setting and often observes covertly;
In the classic ethnographies of slimming classes, most of the researchers adopted the *participant as observer* role, corresponding to the *active* role as described by Adler and Adler (1987) (see, for example, Gimlin, 2008a, b; Heyes, 2006; Stinson, 2001). I took a different approach and entered the field assuming the role of *observer as participant*, corresponding to the *peripheral* role as described by Adler and Adler (1987). Such a role is not as time-intensive as the *participant as observer* role (Higginbottom et al., 2013). However, my roles evolved during the observations and I explain these in more detail in the next chapter.

After about three weeks observing I started to bring food with me to the classes as after each class I found myself increasingly hungry: there was so much talk about food that I found myself thinking about food quite a lot. Stories around food and eating are central elements of the weight loss narrative. Women are encouraged and expected to recount their food and
eating practices. Listening to these stories made me hungry. It also engendered certain anxieties about my own attitudes to food and eating. I emailed my supervisor early on and told her that I was beginning to frame the slimming class as a ‘toxic’ environment. By this I meant that the endless hours of watching and listening to leaders and members discuss the minutiae of their eating patterns, body-shape, weight gain and loss left me personally exhausted and becoming very critical of the weight industry agenda (Bordo, 2003). I highlighted some of the talk invoking body-hatred, fat phobia, and my feelings that there occurred an infantilising of the members (see Throsby and Evans, 2013, for an interesting discussion on researching fatness/anti-fatness). I met with my supervisor and my supervision team and they gently persuaded me of the import of keeping an open mind during my observations and to think critically about the feelings and emotions that were surfacing for me during the research. Of course, the slimming classes are not toxic spaces per se and are much more complex environments.

One interesting happenstance that emerged as being of significance during the course of the observations related to the motivational talks supplied by *Slim Ireland* and delivered by the class leaders during each class. One of the leaders presented me with 22 hard copies of the talks she was given by *Slim Ireland* and a further 10 that she had delivered before I had joined the classes. They proved fascinating. Theoretically I was interested in the ways in which the narrative environment shapes and is shaped by the women’s narratives. A narrative analysis of the motivational talks revealed much about the workings of the *Slim Ireland* narrative and the narrative practices associated with slimming. A narrow and defined set of storylines with specific plots were produced in the talks and delivered weekly by the leaders (O’Toole, 2010). The talks themselves became part of the overall story presented in this study.
The Interviews

Sampling

The process of sampling and recruiting participants began from the very first class I attended where I informed members that I would be conducting interviews at a later stage. Over the course of the observations, I met hundreds of women. I made notes from the many brief conversations I had with these women. After a number of weeks of attending the classes I gently approached members and asked if anyone was interested in participating in interviews with me around their experiences of weight management. At these early stages the main purposeful sampling variable considered was women who were actively involved in weight management and in attendance at the classes (Palys, 2008). I had a form prepared and I took the name, phone number and age of each woman who stated that she might be interested in doing interviews. There was no actual commitment asked for at this time but I did explain to the women that if they agreed to participate then this would involve at least two interviews. 40 women agreed to participate.

Over the next two months of observation, I included three more variables to draw my final sample: age, parenting status and length of time involved slimming. These proved significant variables in both the literature and in the stories I was hearing in the classes. From this, I devised a purposeful sample initially drawn using a convenience sampling method. This generated 30 women to be approached for interview. I telephoned each woman on my list. Eight women refused to participate in interviews citing time commitments. Three women had subsequently left the classes and I decided to exclude them. Four women originally agreed to participate but then decided against so doing, citing no particular reason. This left me with 15 women who might be included in the study. I randomly selected one woman, Nora [aged 30, not a mother] and developed a narrative interview guide and topic guide and piloted both with Nora. Upon transcription and analysis of these interviews I modified my interview guides and style appropriately and set up the remaining interviews. 14 women (2 class leaders, 12 members) were interviewed twice between February 2009 and August 2010. At the first stage of drawing the final sample, I included mothers only. This reduced the
sample number to 11, nine women members and two class leaders (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Interview Profile Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of time slimming</th>
<th>Parent Status</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Since early 20s</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Retired Farmer</td>
<td>Second Level: InterCertificate³⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grainne</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Years on and off</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Retired, Environmental activist</td>
<td>Third Level: PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Full-time at home</td>
<td>Second Level: Leaving Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niamh</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Years on and off</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Third Level: Teaching Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Some years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Factory Worker</td>
<td>Second Level: Leaving Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Years on and off</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Full-time at home</td>
<td>Second Level: InterCertificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Máire</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Years on and off</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Office Worker</td>
<td>Secretarial qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siobhan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Began at age 15</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Full-time at home</td>
<td>Second Level: Leaving Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Two Years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Care Worker</td>
<td>Care Qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Retired, Slim Ireland leader</td>
<td>Third Level: Teaching Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>White Irish</td>
<td>Weight Loss Consultant</td>
<td>Second Level: Junior Certificate Third Level: Diploma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These 11 women identified as White and Irish. All were from rural Ireland with the exception of Grainne who was from near Dublin. All were mothers. All of the women suggested that being pregnant and giving birth were major elements of the weight loss story-line. This was interesting as when the organisation was first set up, the Managing Director of *Slim Ireland* stated

³⁹ Previously known as the Intermediate Certificate, this state examination is usually taken at around age 15-16 and is now known as the Junior Certificate.
that prior to the organisation being established, women had no voice to discuss their feelings about the changes in their bodies with pregnancy and child-birth. Employment and education statuses indicated that 10 of the women emanated from, what might be termed in Ireland, the rural lower middle class. The women ranged in age from 27 – 67. All had been engaged in slimming practices for a considerable amount of time.

The second stage of drawing the final sample to be included in the study adopted a case-centred approach. This was guided by the BNIM approach to case selection. Wengraf (2012:575) explains:

Of all the cases for whom you have interviews, you would typically have a sense of which is the most interesting and rich in its potential for the Central Research Question in which you are interested. You work on that. Then you choose a contrast case, one that appears to be most dissimilar. You work on that, perhaps not precisely to the same extent.

Wengraf (2012) proposes then selecting a third case which seems not to fit with either of the first two cases. Denzin et al. (2011) similarly propose the idea of selecting cases of maximum variation to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances. My approach was to select the sample based on depth of experience rather than diversity (Glenn, 2012). I argue that it is useful to include cases that support emerging interpretations and cases that do not support the interpretations (Marshall, 1996). In addition, I was guided by the central aim of the thesis to examine how the _Slim Ireland_ narrative plays out in the women’s personal narratives. I wrote memos for all 11 women, including information on patterns, differences, and similarities between the cases. I used this data to provide context for the emerging storylines and to contextualise all the narratives.

For the study, I extracted four cases to analyse in more depth (see section on data analysis below for an explanation of how analysis proceeded). The narratives of Bernie and Maggie, the two class leaders, are included in the analysis of the slimming classes (Chapter 6). A preliminary analysis of the data had revealed that two main story-types were appearing across all nine of the members’ narratives. Accordingly, an in-depth analysis of two cases as representative of the two story-types, those of Siobhán and Niamh, are
included in the analysis of the women’s narratives (Chapter 7). Smith (2002) suggests in his own work on men and spinal cord injury that ideally, he would have presented a chapter length representation of each of the men’s lives. However, due to the confines of PhD word limits, he had to choose a different approach and presented short cameos of each of the men he interviewed. In presenting the written account of each woman’s story, I adopt a comparable tactic but I limit the analysis and discussion to two cases. As Smith (2002: 65) attests and it applies equally to my study, this is a useful way but not necessarily the way, to place narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader historical, cultural and socio-economic context.

Interviews: Context and Process
Interview context is central to the kinds of stories told and the stories collected (Chase, 2011; Elliot, 2005; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Context includes the conduct of the interviews, interview style and the positionality of the interviewer vis-à-vis the participant. An understanding of context is premised on the assertion that stories are told in particular ways for particular audiences (Riessman, 2008). The first methodological consideration I implemented was the selection of a double interview approach, discussed above (Wengraf, 2001).

Interview 1
I designed interview one to explore with women how they decided to get involved in the slimming class (see Appendix 1). The interview began with a brief introduction to the study. I thanked the women for agreeing to participate and gave them the participant information sheet (see Appendix 5) and the consent form (see Appendix 6). These expanded on the study, the recording of the interviews, the use of the data and how long I would keep and use the information gathered. Once these were co-signed I discussed the process of narrative interviewing, in particular explaining that I would try not to interrupt them when they spoke.
I opened with a modified BNIM question as follows: ‘So, can you please tell me the story of how you decided to join the slimming class and how it all developed up to now?’ At the BNIM training days I had used this question and found it yielded stories of events and experiences. At the pilot interview it flopped completely and both I and the interviewee were stumped. Nora’s reply to the question was: ‘I was overweight, I joined to lose weight’. She stopped talking. This may have been due to the surroundings wherein the interview took place, a hotel café; my novice narrative interview skills; and the difficulty Nora had in naming her attendance at slimming classes and speaking about weight loss. For the main interviews the question worked really well, and most women spent a minimum of five minutes talking without interruption, this being a cornerstone of narrative interviewing generally. While there were moments of silence, sometimes uncomfortably so, during the interviews, overall the emphasis on letting the interview develop as the woman deigned was beneficial to my study.

In practice, narrative interviewing often requires a compromise between narrative and questioning and between active listening and engaging in dialogue: there may be a blurring between such approaches and semi-structured interviewing during the course of a narrative study. To address the problems identified in the pilot interview, I designed an interview schedule which reflected my theoretical interests and the observations in the slimming classes. The themes I was attuned to looking for were concerned with the women’s history of dieting, reasons for dieting, daily/weekly regimes around exercise and food/eating, relationships, feelings about body weight/size, target weight, household responsibilities, related slimming practices, meaning of dieting/slimming, body/weight satisfaction/dissatisfaction, health. However, I did not need to use the interview schedule in each interview. I was interested in the role and meaning of the slimming class and if/how women mobilised culturally autobiographical rules and rehearsed explanations: the ‘out-of-control appetite’ storyline, for example. At the end of interview 1 I also had three more general questions that reflected my theoretical concerns. These questions were asked to obtain further insight.
into the meaning-making women attached to slimming and dieting and whether they could imagine a life without practising weight loss.

The interviews all lasted between one and two hours and were taped using a Digital Voice Recorder. They took place in a variety of settings of the women’s choosing. These included the women’s own homes, hotel cafés, restaurants and bars. The public locations impacted on the interviews as women would whisper or lower their voice if they felt others were within earshot. In all the interviews we shared tea or coffee. In the four home interviews we also had food while talking. Interviewing in the home certainly added another layer of insight into their situations as I met family members, was shown photographs and was brought into kitchens and sitting rooms where there are many references to food. At the end of the first interview I also asked the women to fill in a short exit questionnaire seeking information on employment, children, education, relationships and marriage (see Appendix 7). I ended the interview by inviting the women to bring in photographs to the next interview and we might begin that interview by looking at these. The interviews were uploaded to my laptop ready for transcription.

Interview 2
There was a four to six-week gap between interview one and two, to allow me to engage in preliminary analysis of the data and reflect on the first interview. While the first interview gave me an insight into their life-stories with regard to how issues of bodies and weight fit in to their lives, the second interview was designed as semi-structured to explore themes, but was tailored to each individual woman (see Appendix 2). The second interview was designed to prompt further discussion around key themes from the first interview and more generally from the research. Themes included fat, health

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40 I had planned a photo-elicitation element to data collection as visual images are everywhere in weight loss narratives (Banks, 2007; Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). All of the women were invited to bring photographs to Interview 2 but only three did. Harper (2002:13) defines photo-elicitation as simply inserting a photograph into a research interview. A photograph helps to stimulate conversation and discussing an image ‘can prompt talk about different things, in different ways’ (Rose 2012:305). The use of photographs will be discussed where relevant.
and well-being, perceptions of women, awareness of BMI, images of women in society, practices of slimming, the role of the slimming class. At this stage, I was also fully immersed in the literature and this influenced the themes discussed. I was also beginning to order the data.

Between the two interviews, I read and summarised each one and generated a preliminary thematic schema which highlighted themes that seemed important about form, content and context. This took time but was very useful for analysis and for my stated concern at the outset of involving the women in the presentation of their stories. I devised an interview pro forma (see Appendix 8) for each first interview and used this to construct a semi-structured second interview guide. Three of the women brought photographs with them to the second interview. In those cases, we actually began the second interview by discussing these. Very interesting stories emerged, often reflecting their difficulties in looking at themselves in photographs. I felt that this would have really enhanced the study if all of the women had chosen to use photographs, but I also understood that it was interesting that they chose not to show me photographs.

I gave each woman the interview transcript and my summary notes and invited questions/comments/reflections. Most of the women could not believe that their words had generated so many pages. Only one woman sought to change the script and asked me to leave out any references she had made to her husband and children, which I did. In retrospect, I should have sent the transcripts to the women before we met so they had more time to read them if they so wished. The women asked me to summarise what they had said. I was a bit concerned that I was fixing their narratives and that they were accepting too easily what I was telling them. However, this was also my anxiety as I sought to practice reflexivity and it was not an anxiety necessarily shared by them. Yet, four of the women cried at this stage over the stories they had told. We discussed this gently and, as ever, I explained that they could end the interview at any stage. They declined this offer. Overall, each woman shed tears at some stage during the interviews. I had
information with me about support groups but none of them wanted this information.

**Reflections on the Interviews**
A double interview approach enabled me to spend time with the women to gain greater insight into their stories about slimming. One initial reflection concerns my presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). To all the women, I had disclosed my own weight loss/gain stories and journey. They appreciated this. I wondered sometimes if they thought that was why I was doing the research: to understand better my own immersion in weight loss. However, I never publicly stated my identity as a lesbian woman. I mentioned my partner at times but in vague non-gender specific terms. The women all identified as heterosexual. I think many of the women may have surmised I was lesbian but we never discussed it. I cannot say with any certainty what impact this might have had. However, it does raise some interesting theoretical and methodological issues.

Many feminist, Black, queer and class writers have alerted us to the potential dangers of bias and how, historically the exclusion of particular social groups influenced research design and ultimately research outcome (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Letherby, 2003; McKenzie, 2012). The question is open: can a lesbian woman accurately represent the women she is researching, particularly if she does not disclose her sexual identity? I ‘shared’ many social identities and other cultural references with the women, including being from rural Ireland’s lower middle class, having a perceived ‘weight problem’, attendance at slimming classes in the past and cyclical involvement in weight loss. These certainly facilitated ease of recruitment and ease of interviewing. I reflected deeply on my reluctance to ‘come out’ during the study. I tried at all times to uphold the ethical and reflexive principles guiding the study from the outset.
Research Ethics

Consideration of ethical issues is central to the research process and I would argue particularly so when dealing with sensitive topics such as weight loss and body size (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). Olesen (2011:136) drawing from Mauthner et al. (2002) explains how feminists’ research ethics have moved beyond universalist positions in moral philosophy, to recognise relationships with participants as an ethical issue, called relational ethics. This requires careful scrutiny of aspects of the research process: informed consent, research relationships, do no harm, confidentiality, anonymity, representation and validity. I have discussed these during the course of this and the previous chapter, but here I want to outline in a little more detail how I negotiated ethical issues that emerged. I agree with Luttrell (2000:499-523) when she argues that researchers cannot and must not eliminate the tensions, contradictions and power imbalances inherent in the research process. Rather we must document the processes and choices and decisions we make so that other researchers can see for themselves some of what has been lost and some of what has been gained (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

I received ethical approval from NUIG (see Appendix 9). It was a rigorous process that required much thinking through potential ethical dilemmas, and a lot of form filling. However, as a lecturer in Social Research, teaching and researching for many years, in the main within Social Care Practice, I know that codes of ethics are, at best, guidelines that sometimes do not deal with the complexities of human interaction. I grappled with maintaining an ongoing process of openness, being truthful and honest. For instance, as relayed above, unease emerged during my early conceiving of the slimming space as ‘toxic’; my non-disclosure of my identity as a lesbian woman; and moments when the class leaders would attempt to enlist me as a ‘sidekick’ in their presentation of the Slim Ireland message. These generated very real tensions for me during this research and codes of ethics did not provide succour in times of distress.
I strove to address all ethical issues with regard to gaining what is known as informed consent and assuring confidentiality and anonymity. At the beginning the observations I brought with me detailed participation information sheets, laying out the parameters of the research. Many of the women never took these away with them and I only saw a handful read them in the class. On the advice of one of the leaders, and from talking to colleagues and my supervisor, I generated a leaflet which covered the basics of what I was doing and included my contact details. For the first four weeks of observing in each of the classes I also repeated my speech about why I was in the classes. It is interesting to note that, even with all of this information sharing, some of the women assumed I was part of *Slim Ireland* and was training to be a class leader. Others thought I was there to lose weight.

Before the interviews I presented each woman with a participant information sheet and consent form. These explained in some detail the aims of the project, the interviewee roles, my responsibilities, the holding and use of data and contact details for both the ethics office in NUIG and my supervisor. We both co-signed the consent forms and took a copy each. I assured the women about the confidential and anonymous nature of the research. I invited the women to pick an alias to be used in the study: only three did this! I took out all identifying information about the research sites and the areas generally wherein the research took place. I did not provide any remuneration or gift for participating in the study. The women were very generous in the time and interest they gave to my study and I expressed gratitude for this each time we met. The women were given every opportunity to withdraw from the interviews *at any stage*.

During Interview 2 three of the women wondered aloud about what they were telling me about their lives and what I could possibly do with this information. I explained the nature of the research and its importance from my perspective, including affording me the privilege of doing a PhD. In an interview with Máire, which was conducted in an open section in a hotel, she
saw some friends of her husband come into the foyer. We were some distance from this group. However, she immediately stopped the interview and asked could we move away. She said they might ask questions later about who she was talking to and why. I was struck by the need to move and move quickly. She had to acknowledge them and nodded over but we went to another room to finish the interview. This had the effect of unnerving Máire and interrupting the narrative flow.

Rural Ireland is a small place where people talk about each other, notice things and have a general interest in what is happening around them. Many authors have written about the tension between private and public in Irish life, and the sense that there are things to know and some people know them and use them. This was brought home to me clearly when one of the leaders told a story about seeing some of ‘her members’ in a café in a local town about 25 miles from the class. They were eating buns and covered their plates when they saw her walk in the door. In what could be perceived as a typical Irish response she looked away, but she held the information for future reference and use, one such use being to tell me about it in the class (see chapter 6).

Another issue worthy in a discussion of ethics centres on the epistemological position taken in the study. We live in what has been termed an auto/biographical society, but there is a risk that stories can be packaged to ultimately act as a means of control and consumption (Plummer, 2001). Further, how researchers choose to represent the stories they hear, and the interpretation they place on the stories, can impact greatly on the participant (Elliot, 2005). The women told me intimate stories of their lives, some told stories of shame and embarrassment about their bodies, others told stories of hurt and dismay and feeling ‘out-of-control’, and more told stories of fat hatred and fat phobia. These drew from wider narratives promulgated by Slim Ireland and wider Irish society. Some of the women found it difficult to

41 Read some of the novels of rural Ireland which capture this way of life (see, for example, Leyden, 2013; McGahern, 2002).
tell stories about their bodies and weight and remarked that they had never actually spoken about such issues to anyone before. While this may appear paradoxical, as being involved in a public slimming class required them to talk about their personal lives, in fact it became clear that they talked about such body related issues in different ways depending on the context and audience.

This raises a final question with regard to ethics which refers to the ‘status’ of the women’s accounts. Doucet and Mauthner (2008) explain that what we come to know about people and their subjectivity and identity, in narrative research, is always situated and collaborative. Moreover, what we come to know depends upon the interpretative lens through which we then [re]view these accounts. I did not seek to establish the veracity, ‘truth’ or otherwise of the women’s accounts. My interest lay in examining their stories and narratives in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which they are told (Chandler, 2010; Mills, 1940; Scott and Lyman, 1968). In other words, I am addressing the narrative environment within which certain stories and narratives are told and tellable, within which certain story-types gain prominence and within which a context of discursive confession shapes the accounts that women give (Presser, 2005). The immediate settings for the construction of the women’s narratives include the slimming class and the interview setting.

**Transcription, Data Analysis and Representation**

One of the ways that narrative inquiry differs from other qualitative research methods is in its approach to analysis: the focus is on keeping / developing a story or set of stories that make up a narrative. Attention to this stage of the research is crucial and in this section I provide a detailed account of the procedures I undertook. Riessman (2012) asserts that the research process includes a number of different levels of representation of the primary experiences under study. The first level of representation concerns the telling of the story. Here, of course, there is a difference between the story as lived and communication about the experience. The next level of representation
involves transformation of the spoken language into an initial script. This refers to transcription of the spoken word, previously recorded on tape to a written script. The following level of representation is about analysing the narrative, where form, ordering, style of presentation, inclusions and exclusions form part of the major decisions (Larsson and Sjöblom, 2010:276). What happens eventually is that the researcher generates a meta-story, re-shaping what was told, and the reader will make a further interpretation: every text is open to several different constructions and interpretations (ibid). Narrative research has to deal with different types of, sometimes ambiguous, representations of talk, text, interaction and interpretation.

Transcription
Transcription can be seen as an early stage in analysis. Hammersley (2010:558) states that:

…what we transcribe, and to some extent how we transcribe it, reflects substantive assumptions (about human beings and their social institutions) and methodological ones too (about how best to describe and explain social phenomena).

As with all stages of the research process, certain choices have to be made with regard to transcription, which best suit the aims and intentions of this study. Purcell (2011) elaborates on these choices as follows: the level of detail and which details to include; whether and how to represent, for example, accent and 'dialect'; and how to actually set out the words on the page (Hammersley, 2010). Narrative inquiry requires particularly detailed transcripts to maintain an interpretation as close to the original materials as possible. These represent a fundamental criterion of good narrative inquiry (Riessman and Speedy, 2007). Therefore, taking on board Elliot’s (2005:51) assertion that transcription is more than a trivial, mechanical task, I knew from the outset that I would require transcripts which not only [re]presented what participants said but which conveyed a sense of how they said it and an understanding of the local, immediate context of the interview. I was also constantly reflecting on the relationship between the interview data and the ethnographic data.
It is almost impossible to produce a transcript that completely captures all that occurred during an interview, including the social meaning attached to various paralinguistic features such as sighs, ‘uhms’, interruptions and so forth. While transcription is a compromise (Elliott, 2005), narrative researchers try to find a way to preserve as much of the detail as possible, including words, intonation, pauses, hesitation and body language, as it makes sense that the more detail that is preserved the more insight can be gleaned about what and how stories are told. Generally, what gets transcribed relates back to the analytic strategy employed in the study. Transcription means that the researcher is implicated in what is eventually presented. This raises the thorny question of whether the final product is a construction, a representation, a reproduction. I cannot hope to provide the definitive take on all these issues with regard to transcription. Instead, I recognise that it is a hermeneutic practice in which I am implicated.

To begin, I uploaded the first interviews from the digital recorder to my laptop. I had installed transcription software which enabled me to slow down speech during the sometimes painful task of writing out every word. The first transcription of each interview generated a verbatim script of every word including speaker turns, my interruptions and questions in full. I also included what I considered the most important paralinguistic utterances: laughs, pauses, sighs, silences. I imposed some punctuation. All identifying information was excluded and names were changed. I then generated a summary of this script for use during the second interviews. These summary scripts mainly focused on thematic, chronological and turning point moments. This gave me an overview of what was said in the interview and also on how the talk was structured. This became a crucial stage of the analysis. But as I was going to show these to the women I was constantly reflecting on how I was summarising and constructing their stories. I also engaged in an editing process of the verbatim transcripts for the explicit purpose of analysis. This involved a re-reading of the transcript while listening to the audio and a re-ordering of the data as told. I was now thinking beyond the interviews and comparing the women’s stories, examining similarities and differences.
between them, while also thinking through the narrative arc of women and slimming generated from within an analysis of the ethnographic data.

The second interviews were transcribed similarly. They also had the distinction of being semi-structured in character, guided by a topic guide, and so, themes were more easily identified. At this stage though, I felt overwhelmed by all the data I collected. I had training in the use of qualitative software. However, my commitment to developing a form of narrative analysis that relied on preserving biographical data and context without ‘fracturing’ responses, made me decide against using such software to organise the data. In retrospect, this may have been a mistake as the amount of time it took to analyse the data was much longer than expected. Transcription as outlined enabled me to attend to both the shape and the content of interviews. Going beyond this, I also aimed to explore what was going on around the interview talk, to examine the narrative environment of slimming in which both these interviews and the practice of slimming are located.

Data Analysis
To devise a strategy for analysis, I returned to the intent of this study, which is to explore how women make sense of weight management in their everyday lives in the context of their involvement in slimming classes and related practices (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). Similar to Cain (1991), Chase (2010), and Denzin (1987), and inspired by many ethnographies of slimming classes, my empirical focus was on the institutionally-sanctioned ways of understanding and storying slimming (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008:258). Analytically the focus comes to rest on an ethnographic understanding of local contexts and interactional circumstances, with attention also being paid to the content and form of the stories collected (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: vii-viii).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that qualitative researchers should consider different analytic strategies in order to explore different facets of the
data. This was a useful starting point for me to think about the form the
analysis would take. I had a significant data corpus consisting of observation
notes and memos from one year’s immersion in four weight management
classes, 32 motivational talks and other materials from *Slim Ireland* and 22
interviews with 11 women. The voluminous nature of this data meant that
settling on a suitable analysis strategy was an ongoing challenge. Choices
had to be made in order to both manage the data, and, more importantly, to
elicit analytically significant interpretations.\(^{42}\) I began by immersing myself in
the literature on narrative analysis. This literature is vast, complex,
sometimes divergent and not without controversy (see for discussion,
Andrews et al., 2008, 2013; Elliott, 2005; Murray, 2000; Plummer, 1995,
2001; Riessman, 2008).\(^{43}\)

**Forms of Analysis**

Of particular interest were narrative enquirers who modified and deployed
approaches to narratives-in-context (May, 2004; Phoenix, Smith and
Sparkes, 2010; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008; Smith, 2002; Smith and
2003, 2005). These authors demonstrate a methodological commitment to
the integration of the biographical and contextual and to the ‘hows’ and
‘whats’ of storytelling (May, 2010, 2012). This, in turn, led me to Lieblich’s et
al. (1998) model of narrative analysis as it is designed to analyse
structure/form and content and the context of narrative production.

Lieblich et al. (1998:13) explain that the variety of approaches to narrative
analysis can be broadly captured along two axes that generate a typology of
analyses: holistic-categorical and form-content (Figure 5.3). In turn, these

\(^{42}\)Although interested in form, I eschewed micro-level, conversation analysis of the women’s
talk. One study of talk and turn-taking in slimming classes had utilised this approach with
interesting results (Mycroft, 2007).

\(^{43}\)Forms of analysis include: the Listening/Reading Guide, pioneered by Carol Gilligan
(Brown and Gilligan, 1992) and developed further through the work of Doucet and Mauthner
(2008) and Mauthner and Doucet (1998) and which involves four close listenings/readings of
the data; Storying Stories, a method elaborated in Coralie McCormack’s (2000a, b, 2004)
excellent series of articles on how to move from transcript to story; and the Biographical
Narrative Interview Method [BNIM], devised by Tom Wengraf (2001).
generate a matrix of four cells, consisting of four modes of reading a narrative: holistic-form, holistic-content, categorical-form, and categorical-content.

Figure 5.3: Schema of Narrative Analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998)

A holistic focus seeks to preserve the narrative in its entirety, appreciate it as a complete entity, and understand sections of the text in the context of other parts of the analysis. A categorical analysis examines short sections of text and places them into categories for analysis (Elliot, 2005:38). In terms of the form-content axis, narrative analysis can either hone in on the structure of the plot, the genre of the narrative and use of metaphors [form], or have an explicit focus on what happened and why, similar in ways to thematic narrative analysis (ibid; Riessman, 2008). Lieblich et al. (1998) outline a strategy for each approach illustrating the overlaps between them. Interested in exploring the plotlines and structure of the story of slimming presented in both the slimming classes and in the women’s own stories, I combined analytic approaches to analyse different parts of the data corpus. This enabled comprehension of how slimmer identities are constructed within the classes and how each woman constructs her evolving weight management experiences.

I used a holistic-form approach to analyse the ethnographic data. I began by examining the detail of my observation fieldnotes, post-observation write-ups
and the texts of the hard copy motivational talks. I initially developed what Lieblich et al. (1998) term a ‘global impression’ and a sketch of the progression of the plot. I read and re-read the fieldnotes several times in an attempt to both understand and visualise the emerging story. A two-stage analysis was deployed. First, I identified a thematic focus for the development of the plot (Lieblich et al., 1998:89). Content is important here, insofar as it provides raw material for the structure. Certain themes immediately jumped out, including confessing, fat phobia, mind/body split, and self transformation. These themes were congruent with what I found in much of the literature on women and dieting (see for example, Gimlin, 2008a; Kyrölä and Harjunen, 2016; Monaghan, 2008a; Stinson, 2001).

The second phase of this stage of the analysis is to identify the dynamics of the plot which can be inferred from particular forms of speech (Lieblich et al., 1998:91). I focused on the use of recurring specific phrases and the use of terms that expressed the structural component of the narrative, including epiphanies [the light switch turning on], progress/regress [the scales don’t lie], and danger [Easter Eggs: Easter Legs]. What emerged was that the stories told within the slimming class drew from what Frank (1995) conceptualises as the quest narrative. In addition, my analysis revealed that the quest narrative is infused with elements of risk and self-transformation narratives. This narrative dominates the practice of storytelling in the slimming classes (see chapter 6).

The next stage of the analysis involved subjecting the women’s interview texts to both a categorical-content analysis and a holistic-form analysis. Here, I was explicitly interested in combining an analysis of the ‘whats’ and the ‘hows’ of storytelling. The holistic-form analysis proceeded in a similar fashion to the analysis of the observation notes and motivational talks, in that I initially developed a global impression of each woman’s story. In addition, 44 I posed the following questions to guide my analysis. What was the plot-line within each woman’s narrative? Who were the key characters in each narrative? Were there turning points and epiphanies narrated? What settings were identified?
I began to examine if the individual plot-lines converged or not, across the cases and in relation to the slimming class.

A categorical-content analysis is similar to traditional content analysis and thematic analysis, as categories of the studied topic are defined and separate utterances of the text are extracted, classified, coded and gathered into these categories (Lieblich et al., 1998:13). However, cognisant of the criticisms of this approach, suggesting that it has the potential to fracture data and generate a detached analysis of the whole experience of participants (Josselson and Lieblich, 1993; Riessman, 1990; 2008), I sought to refrain from isolating the selected data from the personal contexts from whence they emanated. The aim was to keep the story intact to preserve sequences rather than thematically coding individual segments. This is also termed a case-cantered approach. I kept my focus on the sequencing of a priori and emerging themes paying particular attention to time and place of narration. This was achieved through writing analytical memos about each interview and each case [both interviews]. I reflected on the particularities of each of the women, using the same categories and core themes that were emerging through the analysis. This enabled me to examine the thematic similarities and differences across the narratives.

Mine was a cyclic process of analysis where I continually reflected on the categories, their connections and the new themes that emerged. The whole process developed general knowledge about the core themes that make up the content of the stories collected during the interviews, to identify narrative segments and categories within its context (Smith, 2002:57). Core themes included: health, struggle, routine, motherhood, food and eating, and fat phobia. The analysis of the interviews was initially individual, thematic and temporal, examining if, how and when the women drew on the dominant quest/risk/transformation narratives to narrate their initial intentions to lose weight and later practices of slimming. These individual stories were then

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45 Riessman (2008) cautions that determining the boundaries of stories can be difficult and highly interpretative.
compared and patterns were identified. The analysis revealed (chapter 7) that women have available to them a narrow range of possible storylines and find it difficult to narrate outside of the given narratives (Warnes and Daiches, 2011).

**Representation and Writing**

In terms of presenting and illustrating the analysis, Purcell (2011) advocates the use of extended excerpts from transcribed interviews, in order to evidence interpretations of them and in the acknowledgement that ‘other readings of them are possible’ (Riessman 1990:230). I take a similar approach in this study (see also, McCormack, 2004). Accordingly, I present this thesis as a mixture of first-person and third-person accounts, writing myself into the study where appropriate. I also reference key moments during the study when the emotional and embodied impact of the research on myself and the women came to the surface. However, this is not a confessional tale (van Maanen, 1988). Instead, I have generated a ‘collective story’ (Richardson, 1990) to display an individual’s story, by narrativising the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs. Women, deemed to be overweight, or obese, or otherwise not conforming to discourses of shape and size, occupy a particularly negative social category in contemporary society. If engaged in dieting to lose weight they are also positioned along a narrow spectrum from success to failure.

The final piece of the puzzle then, refers to the decisions taken with regard to the representation of and writing up of the women’s stories/my research story [PhD]. I agree with Hunter (2010) when she reminds us that interpreting and representing another’s voice is not a simple task and needs to be done with respect and humility. Denzin’s (2009:113) astutely observed quote is useful to frame this final section whereby in the end, ‘it [writing] is a matter of storytelling and the stories we tell one another’. The different approaches to representation and writing in qualitative research generally, and narrative enquiry specifically, contend with the dilemma of what many argue is the
crisis of representation. A postmodern sensibility which emphasises multivoiced texts, multiple perspectives, and antirealist and antifoundational approaches frame this ‘crisis’ and permeates much contemporary social thought and social research (Denzin, 2009; Elliot, 2005). I locate myself broadly within this sensibility. My account is partial and is shaped by my personal history and intellectual biography but echoing Elliot (2005) I want to make this account as informative as possible to provide insight into the means and circumstances of its production.

Bold (2012) in a thoughtful piece suggests that at the very least narrative researchers/writers be clear about what environment they are writing in and for. My study is an academic discourse bounded by fairly standard sets of criteria. While there are opportunities to be creative [and one must be, in narrative research, I believe], a structure is available to work within. I decided early on to work within this structure, albeit while making a case for flexibility on word counts due to the need to use extensive quotes to illuminate the narrative. In most other ways, I am following the standard academic structure. In so doing, I commit to the expectations of an academic audience to learn in some detail how a study was conducted, and how moments in the interpretative process led to some conclusions and not others (Riessman, 2008). Academic discourse demands that questions to be addressed relate to the veracity and validity of what is presented for evaluation. I believe that these issues are also central to representation and writing in narrative inquiry research.

I agree with Ely (2007) who encourages diversity in analysis, underscores the importance of an awareness of power in research relationships, and positions narrative as providing a version of social reality rather than a transparent representation of social reality. Richardson (1990) views sociological research accounts as narratives themselves, underlining the fact

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46 They include realist tales, first-person accounts, confessional tales, impressionist tales, and fictionalised accounts amongst many more.
47 Embedded within these are further questions about reflexivity, addressed in more detail in chapter 4 but which will be referred to here as appropriate.
that researchers are situated and positioned authors with a specific perspective (Elliot, 2005:165). These ideas resonate with earlier work on the status of accounts, including the research account, by Scott and Lyman (1968; see also, Gimlin, 2012). I avoid making impossible claims about the ‘truth’ of participants’ explanations and my own analysis. Instead, my analysis considers the forms of the women’s explanations, which I relate to the social and cultural contexts in which they manifest, including the research interview. My respectful aim in this thesis is to produce a piece of academic work that has seriously engaged with questions of reflexivity, veracity and validity, with the ultimate aim to tell a ‘good’ and trustworthy story about narratives of women and weight management (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Mishler, 1990). In this project I argue that such a story is one that can be judged as: conforming to and meeting PhD standards; the ethical representation of women’s lives; and is credible and dependable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to provide a clear and reflexive account of the process involved in designing, collecting and analysing the narrative environment of the slimming class and women’s narratives of their experiences of weight management. Skeggs (1997:17) has written that a reflexive account can still only be partial ‘because it would be impossible to reduce into text and convey completely the research encounter’ and in this, as in other chapters, I have had to decide what to include and what to leave out. Collecting the data was a long and varied experience that had moments of pain and struggle alongside moments of fun and enjoyment. Reflections on researcher-researched relationships and the validity of the research account were interspersed throughout the chapter. The focus of this study is not on the establishment of truths or otherwise about weight management and dieting for weight loss. Rather, the aim is to generate a rich understanding of the meanings attached to slimming and to interrogate where those meanings emanate from. The interpretation of the meanings emanate from the analysis of the data and from the concepts derived from
the literature reviews on body management and narrative inquiry. In adapting a narrative enquiry framework, my study advances an approach that focuses on the relational aspects of storytelling and those of form, content and context. It remains to provide a convincing explanation for the outcome of the story (Beal, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2007).
Chapter 6: The Slimming Class: Findings and Discussion

‘Craving aliens come out of the blue: if only we ate when we were hungry, we’d be so good.’
[Field work notes, Class 3].

Introduction

Narratives and stories about women and weight management are firmly embedded in slimming classes. In this chapter, I present the findings and analysis of the ethnography of group slimming classes operated under the auspicious of Slim Ireland. Arguing that the slimming class is a narrative encounter, the key focus in this chapter is on the context within which particular stories of slimming and weight loss are told and retold on a weekly basis. Following Gubrium and Holstein (2009), I assert that organisations set the conditions of possibility for narrative production. In other words, organisations have big stories to tell which set the narrative agenda for the smaller, individual stories that follow along. Organisations like Slim Ireland work very hard to establish legitimate accounts of slimming and dieting which they intend as whole stories of these practices (Monaghan et al., 2010). To do this, they promote specialised ways of narrating experience, generating powerful, if ultimately delimited, frameworks of understanding of slimming and dieting (Stinson, 2001). In this chapter then, I pay close attention to the organisational embeddedness of narratives so the organisational voices and preferences can be heard (Martin, 2002).

I offer an analytical approach that focuses on the ‘tellability of embodied experiences’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Plummer, 2003; Smith and Sparkes, 2008b:217). This suggests that certain stories are allowed, enabled and encouraged to be told within a slimming class (O’Toole, 2010). These stories draw explicitly from, and constitute, the self-transformation narrative that is promoted as the exemplar of the ‘successful slimmer.’ This preferred story, constituted and disseminated in the slimming class each week, is supported by the careful use of narrative devices. Such narrative devices include sub-plots and characters. I demonstrate how this, in turn, serves to...
generate a narrative arc about women and slimming. Focussing on the context and audience for the performance of the narratives reminds us that our self-narratives must be supported and tolerated by those around us (Elliott, 2005).

The overall aim of this chapter is to carefully thread how Slim Ireland narrates slimming as a quest for a better body. In doing so, it articulates slimming as an essential intervention in the care of the self, particularly for women. Theoretically, I posit that the narrative construction of slimming generated in the slimming classes serves to play a role in circumscribing the behaviour of the members. In so doing, I consider how the slimming class is an example of governmentality in action. This chapter addresses the first sub-question previously outlined in chapter’s 1 and 5: what narratives and stories are crafted and told of weight management within slimming classes?

The remainder of this chapter is outlined as follows. I begin with a brief overview of Slim Ireland. I then provide a detailed description of the slimming classes wherein I conducted the observations. I move to discuss my entry into the field. An outline of the organisation of slimming classes and the weight loss plan promoted in the classes is presented here. I will also highlight the pleasures to be gained from participating in the classes. This will be followed by an explication of what I argue is the constitution of slimming as a quest for a better body. I will then discuss how this quest is constructed, via an analysis of the five themes that constitute the narrative arc of the successful slimmer’s story. The final section draws together the main themes from the chapter and introduces the question to be taken up in the following chapter: how do women construct and narrate their experiences of slimming within the context of their participation in Slim Ireland classes? Throughout the chapter, I include photographs I took in the classes. I sought and received permission from the class leaders to photograph the room and images therein. I did not include any images of women who attended the classes. I redacted the real trading name of Slim Ireland.
Overview of Slim Ireland

Commercial slimming classes began to appear in the UK and USA in the 1950s. They emerged as popular spaces where people gathered in a public setting and discussed their attempts to lose weight and sought advice and support and ideas from others. From the beginning they operated as profit-making enterprises (Monaghan et al., 2010). Weight loss classes then and now are premised on the idea that sustained weight loss is best achieved in groups (Allon, 1975). In the late 1960s the founder of Slim Ireland had gained three stone after giving birth to three children and was unable to lose the weight post birth. It seemed that the only person available to give advice on weight loss was the local doctor. There was a gap in the market. With the support of her husband, she began calling to her neighbours in her hometown asking if they were keen to lose weight. Reactions were mixed. According to her daughter, who subsequently took over as managing director of Slim Ireland:

It was a subject you didn't talk about in the 1960s...You got married, had children and you got fat. It was accepted that was what women did (Director, Slim Ireland).

Normative femininity, the inevitability of weight gain and fat phobic narratives are invoked in this quote. In addition, there is a sense that women in Ireland in the 1960s had no outlet to discuss body related issues. The normative expectations associated with pregnancy and motherhood silenced discussion of the subsequent changes in physical transformation.

To address her weight gain post pregnancy, the founder set up Northern Ireland's first provincial gym in 1969. When the building next door to the gym was destroyed by a bomb during the Troubles, the company moved to Dublin and they returned to the original idea of running a slimming class.48 Slim Ireland was established in 1972. Now in its fifth decade, Slim Ireland delivers weight loss programmes through what it terms are its ‘exercise and healthy eating plans’. About 50,000 people from the 32 counties of Ireland attend Slim Ireland classes every year. At the time of the research there were no

48 The Troubles refer to the period of conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted from the 1960s to the late 1990s.
male leaders and about 2% of the membership was made up of men. *Slim Ireland* is a commercial enterprise that operates on a franchise basis wherein people apply to become class leaders and then take on the organisation and running of the classes. Most leaders are current or ex-‘slimmers’ and participated in the weight loss programme of the organisation they work for at some stage in their lives. According to information gleaned from its website, *Slim Ireland* is Ireland’s longest running slimming and health organisation with hundreds of weekly meetings organised by a team of over 150 class leaders.49

An increase in disposable income during the economic boom in Ireland in the 1990s/2000s forced *Slim Ireland* to revamp its traditional classes. People had more money to spend and joined gyms and leisure centres. The necessity of keeping the physical exercise element of its classes appeared redundant.50 In recent years *Slim Ireland* branched into online slimming programmes, product development and sales, ‘slimming at home’ and ‘slimming at work classes’, as well as the regular weekly meetings. The company has devised programmes for the home and the workplace and developed a limited selection of food products, exercise DVDs and recipe books. It focuses on areas such as advice booklets, diet sheets and exercise plans. It runs an advice helpline and sends slimming tips by text message to mobile phones.

According to its website, the *Slim Ireland* programme is based on a healthy, nutritious eating plan combined with increased exercise. It states that members are encouraged to make healthy lifestyle changes and are motivated and encouraged by the leaders to achieve ‘real’ results. It responds to developments in food and eating research and argues that it combines the best scientific know-how with its ‘unique’ units system, which

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49 *Slim Ireland* is a pseudonym. I can offer supplementary information on its website details as required.
50 However, during the early weeks of my observations it was announced that an exercise segment was being reintroduced to the classes. This involved members spending almost 8 Euro on a specialist band which was to be used to exercise different parts of the body. The exercise segment did not take off in any of the classes that I attended.
measures foods in units depending on their calories, fat and fibre content. *Slim Ireland* has adopted and adapted the Glycaemic Index eating plan and unitises most types of food. In its latest literature, everything from an ice cream cone to specific brands of bread, to a pint of beer and a handful of peanuts is unitised. Further, *Slim Ireland* asserts that its system is simple to manage and effective, offering a flexible slimming programme to fit everyone’s lifestyle. It states that it offers support, helping people and motivating them to lose weight. It wants to help people understand why they are overweight, and motivate them to overcome the problem. The key elements of the *Slim Ireland* message are evident. There is a sense that it provides a public health service, individually tailored but based on scientific evidence that can tackle any ‘weight problem’ and its underlying causes.

*Slim Ireland* advertises its services in church notices, on school notice boards, in hotel foyers, in newspapers, on local and national radio, on national television, on its own website, via other websites and by word of mouth. It also runs a ‘Slimmer of the Year’ competition where leaders select their most successful member who goes forward to a national weigh-in. The person who has lost the most weight wins. S/he receives various prizes and claims the title of ‘Ireland’s most successful slimmer’. National coverage is also guaranteed and during my time spent observing in the slimming class one such winner was announced. *Slim Ireland* has tie-ins with national magazines and television programmes to promote this competition. It produces all the materials for the classes and supplies the weekly programme.
The Classes

The initial empirical focus involved one year’s observation of women’s participation and involvement in four different group slimming classes in the BMW region of Ireland. As three of the classes closed during my observation period (something I had not anticipated before commencement of the observation) I immersed myself for seven months in one of the classes. Overall, I attended 69 classes during this one year period. After telephone conversations with each of the three leaders I arranged to initially attend Class 1 only. My weekly observations began in a class in a medium-sized town in the BMW region. The class was located in a building that contained shops and other small businesses and the leader rented a room from the owners of this building. A brick clad building both externally and internally, it was located some metres from the main shopping area of the town. On a number of occasions the room was double booked or the class was delayed entry into the room and so the weigh-in took place in the hallway beside the stairwell. The class ran from 7-7.45pm but I usually arrived at 6.30pm and did not leave until just before 8pm. I attended 14 weekly classes in total, missing three due to holidays and illness. The leader then closed this class due to dwindling numbers. The layout of Class 1 is presented in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Class 1
Shortly after I began observations in the first class, I began observing in a second class, Class 2, in a small rural town about 15 miles from Class 1. This was on the same night as the first class and necessitated driving 15 minutes from one class to the next. The class took place in an old national school that was then owned and operated by the Catholic Church. The leader paid rent to a Catholic nun who would come to the class before anyone else, weigh-in, discuss her weight with the leader, and collect the rent and leave. The class began at 8.30pm every night and ran until 9.15pm. I usually arrived at 8.10pm and stayed until 9.30pm. I attended 14 weekly classes, missing two due to illness. An image from Class 2 is displayed in Figure 6.2.

**Figure 6.2: Class 2**

I began observing in Class 3 in a medium-sized town some 65 miles from my base. This class took place in a small hotel that generally catered for people visiting for the local fishing season. The leader rented a small room upstairs that was accessed from the back of the hotel. However, due to overbooking the leader had to move her class quite often to the night club area of the hotel. This class began at 7pm and finished at 8pm. I usually arrived at 6.40pm and stayed until 8.15pm. I observed in this class for seven months missing three classes due to illness and the class leader being away for two
weeks. I do not have a picture of the layout of Class 3 but it was laid out in a similar fashion to each of the other classes. The leader in this class invariably adapted the *Slim Ireland* posters each week, displaying them prominently around the room.

I began observing in Class 4 (Figure 6.3) when Classes 1 and 2 finished. This class was in my locality and so, did not involve much travel. It took place in a community resource centre at the edge of a large town. I spent 14 weeks observing in this class. The class began at 6.30pm and finished around 7.30pm. I usually arrived at 6pm and left at 8pm.

**Figure 6.3: Class 4**

The images presented above reveal something of the spaces within which the slimming classes operate. Feminist geographers have shown how women experience greater restrictions in accessing certain spaces in the public sphere (McDowell and Sharp, 1997; Scarbrough, 2008). But the slimming class, while ostensibly a public space, poses no such restrictions on women and, indeed, actively encourages women to be in this space. I characterise the slimming class as a semi-private space. Rooney (2005:334) explains that such a space ‘is a site of peculiar intimacies and coercions … self-revelations and decisive constraints’. Does space matter in the telling of stories? I argue it does. Rooney’s (2005) description is apt. Further, she argues that the semi-private room shelters strangers who have in common
the particular neediness that brings them there, where they are in close proximity to others who are also strangers for the most part. There is a certain intimacy in the slimming class that engenders sociality and storytelling.

The slimming classes took place in semi-private rooms that are not quite public. Neither were they private spaces such as that which characterises the home. Things happened in the slimming class that did not happen in the same way in the privacy of the home, nor perhaps at all in fully public spaces. For example, women subjected themselves to a public weigh-in. At home, they could take their clothes off when weighing themselves and crucially, as we will see later, they could observe the numbers on the scales themselves. This occurred differently in the slimming class.

The images also invoked the circulation of power in the slimming spaces. The layout of the room illustrated how it was similar to a traditional school room wherein there were teachers and students. This invoked the existence of a ruling authority in the space, implying that disciplinary power was at work here (Rooney, 2005). Certainly surveillance was evident in the slimming class. The class leader usually remained at the top of the room surveying all before her. This rendered her powerful in the unfolding of the Slim Ireland narrative. The position of the scales was similarly significant. Discipline was enacted around these scales as women prepared to weigh-in. Finally, the spaces encouraged the production of disciplined bodies and the public display of such bodies, as women begin to lose weight and change shape.

Researcher Roles
An ethnographic sensibility necessitates elucidating the roles that the researcher played while embedded in the research, in order to tease out the significance of the roles adopted. This requires transparency and reflexivity. During the course of fieldwork, I came to play a number of different roles. Entering the field as an observer as participant and assuming a peripheral role, I moved from being a complete outsider to adopting four other roles (Adler and Adler, 1997; Gold, 1958). I created a typology of these researcher
roles as follows: leader sidekick, subversive non-member, confidante and neutral bystander (Table 6.1).

**Table 6.1: Typology of Researcher Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leader sidekick</strong></td>
<td>• asked to pick up literature from the leader’s car; put out information on the table; help tidy up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• during motivational talk segment of the class, one leader would often refer to me by name and seek my agreement about some point or other in the talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• leader would sometimes ask me what I thought of the programme and would I explain it to new members if she was busy. I declined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subversive non-member</strong></td>
<td>• members tended to encourage subversive behaviour in each other, especially if they had not lost weight or were planning on attending an event which would require them to alter their programme. At times, it was clear that members were not interested in nor did not like what the leader was saying or doing. Many times during the observations, members would wink at me and try to involve me in banter about these and related issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidante</strong></td>
<td>• before, during, and after weigh-in, members would whisper to each other about how they thought they had got on with their weight loss during the week, about slippages, about the classes and the leaders. I was eventually included in these conversations. All 3 leaders asked me about this on a couple of occasions and wanted me to tell them what the women were saying. I politely declined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral bystander</strong></td>
<td>• my presence was simply ignored and I presumed therefore that I became an accepted presence. The class carried on as if I was part of the class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I moved between these roles and at times I felt uncomfortable in the expectations contained therein. This was particularly heightened when the leaders assumed I was a ‘leader sidekick’. I think the impact of my presence varied throughout the research. But one moment was particularly important. Maggie tended to view me as both a ‘leader sidekick’ and as a ‘neutral
bystander'.\textsuperscript{51} After about three weeks attending her classes she took me aside and presented me with the \textit{Slim Ireland} leader’s manual. This was a welcome and exciting breakthrough in my aim to understand more deeply the institutional settings within which weight loss is narrated.

The \textit{Slim Ireland} Leader’s Manual
During the early period of the fieldwork, I was taking a broad approach to data collection to develop a wide angle lens view (Germain, 1993). I began to develop a sense of the culture of the classes. Leaders receive all their equipment from the organisation including digital weighing scales, the motivational talks, and all slimming related literature. They also use \textit{Slim Ireland} posters in their classes. The agreed format and structure for the classes is delineated and expected to be repeated each week. Class leaders may deviate somewhat from message and bring in items of their choosing but they must fit with the overall \textit{Slim Ireland} narrative, and with its merchandise. Each class leader is also presented with a manual which she is expected to read and memorise.

As mentioned, an early breakthrough came when one of the leaders, Maggie, gave me her copy of the \textit{Slim Ireland} leader’s manual to photocopy. She felt it would be useful for me to get a sense of what \textit{Slim Ireland} is trying to achieve.\textsuperscript{52} The manual is a detailed document that is given to all new class leaders as they are completing their training. It:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{describes the distinctive format, methods, techniques and systems devised, developed and compiled by \textit{Slim Ireland} [pseudonym] which must be observed and implemented by you, the Franchisee in carrying on the business of operating slimming classes under the name \textit{Slim Ireland} [pseudonym] (\textit{Slim Ireland} Class Leader’s Manual, 2005:1).}
\end{quote}

The aims, philosophy and slimming plans are clearly laid out in the manual. \textit{Slim Ireland} positions itself as an organisation with an educational remit to

\textsuperscript{51} Maggie initially presented as a firm believer in the \textit{Slim Ireland} programme. As time progressed, I noticed that Maggie sometimes deviated from the script. Eventually qualifying in a health related discipline, Maggie left \textit{Slim Ireland} after my research had concluded. We kept in a little contact for a while.

\textsuperscript{52} I had received full ethical approval from NUIG and \textit{Slim Ireland} to conduct this study. This included reading and reviewing all relevant material that was made available to me for the purposes of academic research.
encourage and motivate members to achieve and maintain weight loss. In so doing, *Slim Ireland* believes that it makes a significant contribution to the generation of healthy eating and healthy lifestyles in wider society. Class leaders are encouraged to be up to date on all the latest *Slim Ireland* products and merchandise, to be dedicated and disciplined, to be supportive and entertaining and to offer empathy and sincerity in the cause of weight loss. *Slim Ireland* makes it clear to its leaders that:

> You must WALK and TALK the image of a *SLIM IRELAND* Class Leader! (*Slim Ireland* Class Leader’s Manual, 2005).

This suggests that the leaders must embody the *Slim Ireland* narrative in all its forms: be professional, watch body weight, look good, speak clearly, get the message across and keep up the number of slimmers in the classes.

The structure of the class is explained in detail in the manual. The class is divided into four class procedures moving from arrival and set up, to signing in, paying and weighing in, to delivery of the class talk, through to ‘the highlight of your class’ – the celebration of weight loss. The class leader is encouraged to dress appropriately, to show weight loss by example and to spend at least 50% of the time in direct eye contact. New members are given specific mention and the ways in which new members must be met and dealt with at their first class is emphasised. Average, acceptable, and overweight tables are provided so leaders can check off members’ weights with the tables to then suggest appropriate goal weights. The BMI approach is advocated as the best way of checking ideal healthy weights. It is accepted uncritically as a measurement of body weight. When initially deciding what weight a new member should aspire to, leaders are told to be reasonable and to not frighten members into thinking they have to lose too much. Overall, however, leaders are advised to get members to inculcate the BMI approach and to move towards the ‘correct’ weight within the BMI range as soon as possible.

The ways in which different categories of members are to be titled and dealt with is also outlined. At the time of my observations, new members became
‘regular members’ on their second week. ‘Freeslim members’ are those that have reached target weight and have 16 stamps on their attendance cards. They receive a gold feather pin and freeslim cards. If they exceed their target weight by more than three pounds they then lose their freeslim status and revert to being regular members.

A list of *Slim Ireland* slogans is provided. Leaders are told to draw from these and use them as appropriate and as necessary in both motivational talks and in poster presentations. These include the following:

- A little bit of this and a little bit of that and before you know it you’ve turned into fat
- Don’t disguise!! – Change your size!
- You have a lot to gain by your loss
- Eating to Live or Living to eat?
- To be slim and sleek – come back next week
- Don’t let your appetite rule you
- A full life is better than a full stomach
- What you eat in private shows in public.

What is termed ‘interesting information to use in classes’ is also provided. This is made up of one sentence titbits that leaders are told to incorporate into the classes. The titbits are presented as trivia to facilitate extra promotion of the *Slim Ireland* narrative where necessary. Rhodes and Brown (2005, quoting Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978) suggest that organisations try to establish stories as narrative devices. Such devices peer into ‘human desires, wishes, hopes and fears so that the best stories are those which stir people’s minds, hearts and souls and by doing so give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition’ (ibid:169). *Slim Ireland* encourages its leaders to intersperse personal stories of weight loss with ‘facts and figures’ to tap into the emotional aspects of dieting and weight loss.

Leaders must agree to attend quarterly meetings with *Slim Ireland* management. These meetings are operated in a similar way to the weekly
class meetings in that leaders must sign in, weigh in, listen to a motivational
talk and keep up to date with all plans and ways of progressing weight loss.
All three leaders in my study attended these meetings and all expressed
 trepidation when they talked about them. There was much concern raised
particularly about the weigh-ins. Two of the leaders had been chastised at
previous meetings for gaining weight. All weight gain was recorded and if the
leaders had put on weight they were sent reminders between meetings
about the importance of losing the weight as quickly as possible. The three
pounds rule also applied to leaders. Thus, if they went above their ideal
weight as set by *Slim Ireland* by three pounds or more, they could be fined or
charged more for participation as leaders. One leader explained that this
rarely happened and that when leaders exceeded the three pounds limit they
were more likely to be publicly reprimanded. This, amongst other elements,
seemed to fulfil the purpose of getting leaders to watch their own weight and
discipline themselves.

**Rhythm and Routine: the Weekly Format**

*Slim Ireland* classes have a particular rhythm and routine that is re-enacted
every week. Rhythms and routines are important aspects of everyday life
that make social life possible (see for example, Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens,
1984; and Goffman, 1967 for their theorising of the significance of rhythm
and routines in everyday life). Sociological explorations of the everyday point
to the central role of rhythm and routine in regulating social life (Kalekin-
Fishman, 2013). I argue that rhythm and routine provide comfort and
stability. More importantly, they are fundamental to the generation of
plausible weight loss narratives. The rhythm and routine of the slimming
classes is embedded in the structured operation of the weekly classes. It
must be remembered that while slimming classes are structured spaces they
are also transient spaces, in that women join, leave and re-join quite
frequently. Despite this, the structure of the class itself is continually re-
enacted each week. All members and class leaders understand this. Quite
early on in my observations I was able to delineate this structure. It is
collaboratively produced and maintained each week across the four research
sites.
Each class lasts between 50 minutes and one hour. Sometimes, when class is over, women might talk to the leader for a few minutes. But class leaders do not like to remain for too long after class and most women are happy to leave as soon as they can. I discerned an overall sequential pattern concerning the practices and organised activity in the class (see also Gimlin, 2008a; Mycroft 2007; Stinson, 2001). This pattern is briefly sketched as follows, aspects of which will be more fully teased out in the chapter.

1. A welcome exchange with the leader and with other members and some ‘small-talk’ about the weather or special events for example. Members go to the main table which contains all the *Slim Ireland* written and visual documentation and the signing in book. They sign in, pay and hand their personalised slimming card to the leader. Most members prepare for the weigh-in by removing some clothing, jewellery and shoes. There was usually banter between the women about these practices.

2. A weigh-in where each member is weighed. Just before the weigh-in, the leader asks each member how she has done this week in terms of food, eating, exercise and weight loss. The class leader notes the weight on the digital scales informs the member of her weight and records the weight loss, gain or maintenance on the personalised card. She will then engage in brief conversation with the member. This can last from 30 seconds to 5 minutes depending on whether weight is lost (30 seconds) or gained/maintained (over 30 seconds). The reception of the news is gauged by ‘good’ or ‘bad’ reactions from both the leader and the member. Sometimes the class leader will whisper the outcome. This is allowed for in the *Slim Ireland* manual. The leader may also engage in a brief, personalised motivational talk with the member, offering encouragement, performing cajolament or sharing disappointment at the recorded weight.

3. A 15–20 minute motivational talk to the whole class which is either read or summarised by the class leader. The leaders use different methods to deliver the talk. Maggie, for example, reads it out more or less verbatim and includes anecdotes from her own experiences of weight management. Bernie, on the other hand, has a summary prepared and
delivers a theatrical performance with voice intonation changes, gestures and deliberate pauses. She also inserts personal anecdotes from her own experiences of weight management.53

4. A question and answer session with the class. The timing of this varies with each leader. Maggie, for instance, usually asks if there are any questions or if members would like to share their weight loss stories. Bernie keeps some of the personalised cards and, after the talk, publicly announces the weight loss of these members and gets everyone to clap and acknowledge the ‘successes’. She then takes questions and offers answers. This stage is also presented in the *Slim Ireland* manual as one of the most important procedures during the class. Individual weight loss must be highlighted. The leaders keep several of the personalised cards during the weigh-in and then announce to the wider group who has lost weight and how much weight the most successful member has lost that week. The group claps after each card is returned. Often, the class leaders will ask a member to recount her experiences and tell a story of the week. The leaders speak in glowing terms about those who have lost the most weight. They will then announce the collective weight loss for the week and, if necessary, compare it to previous losses.

5. The class leader checks her watch and begins a closure technique, offering encouragement and support and wishing all members the ‘best of luck’. Maggie signs off every week with ‘I hope I see less of you all next week!’

**Monitoring and Self-Tracking**

The weekly meetings provide a regular form of monitoring and support in the pursuit of weight loss (Coleman, 2010). When a woman joins such a class she ostensibly ‘signs up’ to this monitoring and must proffer accounts of herself and her actions each week, particularly if she has not lost any weight.

53 The third leader, Lilly, chooses not to deliver the talks. She does a two-minute summary of them and then talks about other products she is promoting. Lilly is not included in the analysis for this PhD.
*Slim Ireland* attempts to establish order, structure, and routine around food and eating patterns, exercise and general 'well-being' in the lives of its members. At various times during the classes, members are enabled to tell snippets of their own stories. For instance, they tell the class leaders of daily and sometimes hourly eating behaviour. Members also discuss recurring health issues and illnesses. They talk about the impact of personal relationships on their cooking regimes. There is much investment placed in the leader both to hear the ‘problems’ of the member and to offer solutions.

The leader guides the direction that the class will take and enforces behavioural patterns in subtle but effective ways. The structure and layout of the class reinforces her power, and that of the space itself, to confine members to particular modes of behaviour and response. Acting as a locus for a public enunciation of self and as a setting for an in-group, the routine of attendance at class each week promotes solidarity through repetition and regularity. In turn, this serves to emotionally tie members of the in-group and bind them to the organisation.

In this context, one central practice that occurs every week is the handing out of Trackers [Food and Exercise Recording Forms, see Figure 6.4]. These are used to implore members to record every single morsel of food and drink they consume each day. These are then checked each week during weigh-in. The class might comment and offer suggestions as to how things have gone the previous week and what might be improved in the coming week. Using the Trackers, members are expected to write down everything they eat and drink including main meals and snacks. Each day is broken down into structured meal times. Women are encouraged to have a minimum daily 15 units. Members can count the number of units of food and drink they consume each day by using the companion booklet: which is given out once they join *Slim Ireland*. The plan is based on the Glycaemic Index eating plan which advises on low sugar intake. This approach was initially developed to aid in controlling diabetes, but *Slim Ireland* claims that the approach is ideal for successful weight loss. All popular types and quantities of food available
in the Irish context are unitised. Members can save up units every day by eating less and therefore consuming less units. These can then be either used at the weekend or simply saved. Members must also record all exercise taken. Exercise is entitled ‘Treat Tracker’ and here members are advised of what 30 minutes of various types of exercise is equivalent to in terms of units. Members again save units by exercising more. Interestingly, the exercise with the highest number of units is the *Slim Ireland* exercise DVD. *Slim Ireland* cautions though, that regardless of how many extra units are earned through exercise only a maximum of 14 units per week can be used on treats for women and a maximum of 16 units for men. Earned units can be used to offset the consumption of treats such as chocolate, alcohol, bread and so forth.

Attempting to control what, how and when members eat, and what exercise is taken, and to generate well-being, are deemed as appropriate forms of intervention in the members’ lives. One leader told me that she knows much more about her ‘slimmers’ than they realise. Living in nearby communities in rural Ireland, people tend to know each other or at least know of each other. She stated that what she absolutely loves about this knowledge was when women would come to her class and ‘clearly lie about what they were eating the previous week’. She may have seen them in a local cafe or restaurant and when they would see her they would cover their hand over any food they were eating. Even in this small story the leader alludes to what is perceived to be the surveillance aspect of her role as leader. But there is also a clear sense of mistrust in that she believed there was discrepancy between what people say and what people do. This was returned to many times in our one-to-one interviews and in the presentation of the motivational talks each week.
Figure 6.4: The Trackers: Food and Exercise Recording Forms

UNIT TRACKER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAY 1</th>
<th>DAY 2</th>
<th>DAY 3</th>
<th>DAY 4</th>
<th>DAY 5</th>
<th>DAY 6</th>
<th>DAY 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TREAT TRACKER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treat Tracker Categories</th>
<th>Exercised Units</th>
<th>Extra Units</th>
<th>Total Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aerobics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretching</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNIT COUNTDOWN

Example: Day 1

- Day 1
- Day 2
- Day 3
- Day 4
- Day 5
- Day 6
- Day 7

Treat Tracker Guidelines

- Circle any extra units earned through exercise for use as treats or snacks.
- For best weight loss results, only eat treats if you have earned them through exercise.
- Regardless of how many extra units you have earned through exercise, only a maximum of 16 units per week may be eaten, regardless of unit differences for men.
- Units which you earn but do not use will speed up your weight loss.

Countdown Guidelines

- It is easy to keep track of your daily intake and allow yourself a treat by using this Unit Countdown chart.
- On days when you eat treats, count the amount you have left for the day.
- Each time you eat a treat, circle the amount you have left for the next day.
- And remember, women must eat a minimum of 15 units per day, while men and teenagers must eat a minimum of 17 units per day.
The Pleasures of Class Attendance [and Dieting]
The slimming classes are complex spaces. There were moments during the observations when ambiguities and paradoxes were rendered visible. In these moments were revealed the pleasures of attending and participating in the classes. For instance, many women told me that coming to class was a night out, a chance to meet other women and have some fun. In addition, there was lots of banter each week to which they looked forward. Women would cajole each other but also offer comfort, advice and support. It would be a mistake then to assume that no pleasure is to be gained from both attending the classes and learning about and sticking to the *Slim Ireland* weight loss programme.

The weigh-in appeared to engender much trepidation and framed the early part of each class. Understanding when it would happen and what was required, women queued up to get weighed. I was struck by the sight of grown women subjecting themselves to what I perceived to be the ultimate expression of the enacting of normalisation on women’s bodies (Bordo, 1993). However, this proved too facile a reading. This was a time during the class when real elation was expressed. Before they would reach the top of the queue, women often joked with each other. Many would laugh uproariously and start taking off clothes to be sure that the scales would capture their weight loss accurately. Getting on the scales and receiving the ‘news’ was a good moment for many of the women. They had worked hard the previous week and this was ‘showing on the scales’. Women expressed pleasure and happiness at the outcome of the weigh-in but more importantly at their personal endeavours.

Women did not always stick to the ‘rules’ of the programme and at times appeared to challenge them in an overt fashion. Notwithstanding the monitoring and evaluation that is promoted, via the Trackers for example, I was told numerous times after the class and during interviews that the women would make these up just before the class or indeed neglect to fill them in, in the first place. I was fascinated by this as it revealed something of the contradictions and tensions involved in participation. Women were
repeatedly told that one of their problems was lack of control and that they needed to gain more self-control. In filling out the forms minutes before the weigh-in, they exhibited some control over the story they wanted to tell that week. There was also a moment of subversion in this act.

On one of my very first nights observing in Class 3, I noted the following:

Its later than I thought and I am anxious to get going. Bernie stops me before I go and asks me about the PhD. Bernie seems genuinely interested in my research and so we chat for about 10 minutes. I make my way downstairs and into the hotel bar as I am now really hungry. I hear lots of laughter and assume there is a match on or something. I enter the bar and I see at least 4 tables with some of the class members sitting around laughing and joking. Some have food, some are ordering food. Some are drinking alcohol. I am spotted and one of them shouts over ‘sure we’ve earned it Jackie’. I make no comment and smile. There is great craic to be had here this evening I think to myself [Field work notes, Class 3].

The women were well aware that eating fish and chips and drinking gin and [slim line] tonics straight after slim class would be frowned upon by the class leaders. But for many, this was the best part of the evening. If they had lost weight, they felt justified in breaking away from the strictness of the diet plan. Those women who did not lose weight also joined in and were invited to do so. In a variant of the above, women might save up points from during the week. Thus, they stuck to the programme for almost seven days. On class night, they felt they had ‘earned’ the right to eat what they want and to gain a measure of pleasure from this.

The classes offered an educational remit that I heard many women regularly and favourably comment on. For instance, women felt that for the most part, at least while in the class, the motivational talks were grounded in a language about food, eating, health and exercise that the members could easily understand and learn from. They asked questions about these and some took notes during the classes. The members also wanted to learn from the leaders themselves about food and diet. At the time of the observations, Maggie was training to be a holistic health care practitioner. This proved interesting as Maggie seemed to have all the latest information on health and well-being that moved beyond the Slim Ireland programme. Maggie brought in extra books on nutrition. She explained the importance of good nutrition
and metabolism. Sometimes this deviated from the *Slim Ireland* script, but the women all expressed an appreciation of the efforts Maggie would go to aid their understanding of diet and nutrition.

There is a clear structure and set of practices performed within the classes each week. Informed by the literatures on narrative inquiry and commercial slimming programmes, and my theoretical interest in feminist accounts of the enactment of normalisation on women’s bodies, I began to focus my observations more judiciously. Thus began my unpacking of the narrative of slimming embedded in the *Slim Ireland* approach to weight management.

**The Quest Narrative**

**Slimming as a Quest for a Better Body**

The notion of quest is entrenched in narrative inquiry. For example, Propp’s account of Russian folktales illustrates how the quest is used to tell a story about something. The quest folktale always includes the hero, the sought after object, the setback, the enemy, the false friend, and the true helper (Delamont, 2010). Therein there are certain plots, genres, characters, and turning points. Critical weight studies researchers have shown that weight loss is narrated as a quest within weight loss discourse (Monaghan, 2010; Throsby, 2009a). In a similar vein, I argue that the quest involves the pursuit of weight loss and an ideal/different body. My study enhances understanding of the workings of the weight loss quest narrative in two main ways. To reiterate, firstly, I unpack how it is constituted in the slimming class. Secondly, I explore how it is implicated in women’s personal narratives.

A more recent account of the quest narrative is found in Frank’s (1995) seminal text on illness narratives. According to Frank (1995), chronic illness is disruptive and threatening to a person’s sense of self-identity. In order to manage illness and reclaim a sense of coherence, Frank (1995) suggests individuals draw from three main narrative templates. Frank (1995) advances these as a typology of illness narratives, named as the restitution, chaos and quest narratives. Illness narratives function to make illness meaningful and to
explain the biographical disruption that is created in people’s lives when they experience illness (Whitehead, 2006). During any illness, all three types will be told with one type framing the narrative at particular times.

This provides a useful analytic frame for this study albeit with some modifications. I do not characterise overweight and size as illnesses, although many do. Neither do I suggest that they should be defined as illnesses. However, in the pursuit of weight loss, certain features overlap with the typology of narratives proffered by Frank (1995). In particular, I argue that the slimming class narrates weight loss from within the quest narrative template. In the quest, Frank (1995) explains that the individual’s story is foregrounded and is the subject of the narrative. The individual accepts the experience of illness as a journey in which something is quested for. Through searching, something of great value can be found. Therefore, illness is seen as a challenge and an impetus for change (Whitehead, 2006).

Frank (1995:119–120) proposes three subtypes of quest narratives (Whitehead, 2006). The first is memoir, in which events are related simply. The second is manifesto, in which illness becomes a motivator for social action or change. The third is auto-mythology, in which illness is expanded to reveal fate or destiny. Quest narratives are shared in order to communicate to others what has been sought. Thus:

quest stories meet suffering head-on: they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is to be gained through the experience (Frank, 1995:115).

Something transformative (learning or personal growth) happens through this type of illness story, even if healing is impossible. I argue that weight loss narratives generally are dominated by elements of this quest narrative, as defined by Frank (1995). These elements include biographical interruption, due to perceived suffering [becoming over weight], facing up to the challenge [subjecting oneself to the regime of weight loss] and ultimately, transformation [physical, emotional and material]. In addition, this particular version of the weight loss narrative is told and retold every week in the slimming class to emphasise its importance. My argument is that the
slimming class makes use of a quest narrative to generate a coherent weight loss story. In so doing they facilitate what Martin (2002) enunciates as frame alignment with organisational identity.

During the class the individual woman trying to lose weight is placed centre stage. As she loses weight her 'success story' becomes the potential to be everyone’s success story if the quest is followed correctly. Her story is the benchmark. Somewhat different to Frank’s (1995) conceptualisation, the quest narrative in slimming articulates that something concrete can be gained from the quest: the slim and thin body and a morally presentable self, made visible through the slim(mer) body. The quest narrative – as constructed in the slimming class through experience stories, visual materials and motivational talks – suggests a pathway for those who seek to move beyond the biographical interruption of inhabiting what they believe to be a non-normatively-sized body. Finally, the weight loss quest narrative is framed as having a linear progressive temporality. The quest is constituted in the classes through the use of a narrative arc, a device deployed to create a meaningful and understandable story.

**Narrative Arc: Unfolding the Quest**

A narrative arc involves the telling of a story in a particular way, and a specific point. It generally involves a beginning, middle and end. In fiction and films, narrative arcs are typically described as having three acts: setup, conflict and resolution (Sandelowski, 1991). To drive the structure there is an emphasis on plot and characters. The purpose of the narrative arc is to move the character from one situation to another. *Slim Ireland* places the woman who needs to lose weight as the central character. This character is supported by a number of other characters, including family, friends, and the class leader. Ultimately, she must be progressed to the state of accepting the need to lose weight and eventually to a state of losing weight. In this way, the promise of transformation is effected. *Slim Ireland* positions itself as central to the workings of this narrative arc.
Configuring a narrative arc can take many forms. For example, film writers might deploy a pyramid or a bell curve to develop the story. However, in this study, having observed the cyclical nature of slimming in women’s lives, I argue that the narrative arc is also cyclical, because there is always a sense that women who engage in weight loss may have to return to the beginning and start the weight loss journey again. In other words, built into the quest is the understanding that failure may occur. Women may [and often do] put back on weight and so the story begins again as they re-join the weight loss class. The analysis of the ethnographic data indicated that there are five dominant thematic narratives that constitute the narrative arc constructed by *Slim Ireland*. This corresponds to a three-act structure of set up, conflict and, what I suggest is, a tentative resolution (Figure 6.5).

**Figure 6.5: Narrative Arc: Slimming as Quest for a Better Body**

Confessing
The story arc is initially set up and the central problem introduced via the practices and stories of confession. From the time they sign up to the class, members are encouraged to account for themselves, their actions and behaviours: to account, in other words, for their weighted self (Spitzack, 1990). The initial narration of the weight loss quest involves members
admitting to having a weight problem. They must confess to weight related transgressions in order to atone for same. Members are expected to present themselves as understanding the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ eating, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour when it comes to exercise, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food shopping choices. Such confessing takes on the function of moral indices that are made to signify the moral character of an individual (Tischner, 2009). In this way, the neo-liberal responsible citizen, illustrated by the ‘successful slimmer’, is shaped by her willingness to narrate transgression, but with a willingness to learn, atone and lose weight (Gerber, 2009). While the leaders invite confessional stories they do so by offering a persuasive argument that, in order to lose weight, members must initially confess to what brought them here in the first place – having a weight problem. Confession fulfils a number of functions, not least of which is its function to promote self-help (Stinson, 2001). Receiving some form of secular forgiveness enables the members to move on and commit once more to the programme. *Slim Ireland* expects its members to continually examine themselves, their desires, their transgressions and their ‘failures’.

The confession has a long history in Irish society. Historians suggest that it was Irish missionaries who took the private act of penance to Europe in the 7th century (Hitchcock, 2012). Inglis (1997) explains how, subject to much denunciation from the pulpit in post independent Ireland, Irish people spent a lot of time in confession. Transgressions were ‘identified, monitored, examined and punished’ (Inglis, 1997:11). Throsby (2008c), in an interesting paper on testimony and evangelism in published weight loss biographies, draws a useful connection between the confessional narratives in such publications and the religious rhetoric that underpins such narratives. This she suggests aligns well with obesity being framed as a lack of moral power, a lack of individual will power and a lack of self-governance. Of course, what this actually does according to Throsby (2008c) is ignore the social structures and relations of power that encircle the framing of obesity. It also serves the function of constructing a narrative that people cannot do the weight loss on their own. An inspirational weight loss leader, much like the
heroes in the weight loss biographies, can fill the gap for members. In terms of the link between confession and religious rhetoric, I found that the class leaders made intermittent reference to women offering themselves up to the ‘Slim Ireland bible’ as it contained all the answers. Throsby (2008c) suggests that the 'authors' of the weight loss biographies explain that while the answer to weight loss is really very well-known, paradoxically, only they have access to the 'truth' of weight loss. Similarly, the confessional theme in Slim Ireland contains paradoxes. The main one is that weight loss is actually very understandable but only Slim Ireland holds the requisite knowledge to convey that understanding. In this sense, members are encouraged to come to classes, stick to the food and exercise regime, buy relevant Slim Ireland material and indicate willingness to participate through paying money every week.

Practices of confession were interspersed throughout the class. After initially signing up for the class, the confessional stories mainly centred on those who failed to lose weight. However, any member might have to confess something at any stage during their time engaged in slimming. During the celebration of weight loss segment confessional stories emerged but, generally, they could be spoken of and about at any time during the class. The main articulation of the confessional narrative was inspired by the leaders indicating that fallibility is always possible when it comes to weight related behaviour. For instance, the motivational talks served many functions (O'Toole, 2010), one of which was to set the parameters for confessional stories. The following is an extract from Motivational Talk 35/08:

> Just WHY did I eat that cake...or chocolate, bun, Chinese [sic], packet of nuts OR whatever??? Ever been there? I am sure there are many situations in which we find ourselves asking the same questions – why did I eat that? I didn't want to eat it. I didn't need to eat it, so why did I eat it?

Members are invited to reflect on those moments of desire and temptation. Women would often ask themselves the same questions in the slimming class. I noted how the women adopted the confessional theme in their accounting for themselves (Scott and Lyman, 1968). For example, I heard multiple stories of desire and temptation with the women lamenting what they
perceived as their apparent inability to withstand both. Indeed, women often positioned themselves as somehow being bad at slimming for having ‘given in’ to ‘sweets, chocolate, chips and wine’, as was overheard one evening. Here are two extracts from field work notes which illustrate the confession theme within the classes:

For most of the women bread seems to be one food that is discussed often. Women think of bread as both enemy and friend but it seems mainly enemy. Many conversations with Maggie [leader] begin with stories of bread: how much bread is eaten, how often it is eaten, what types of bread are eaten. There is a sense that they are confessing each week about bread, sometimes potatoes and other foods but if I heard it once, I heard it many times: ‘bread is my downfall’. [Field work notes, Class 1].

A number of women are chatting as the weigh-in begins. It is 8.30pm and the class has started about 20 minutes ago. The women are chatting amongst themselves and relaying stories about what they have been up to for the past week. One woman announces ‘I had a terrible weekend. I ate too much. I’m going to take my cardigan off and see if that helps [much laughter]. You see we went away for the weekend, me and Frank and well, you had to eat everything there and I did’. She takes her cardigan and shoes off and gets on the scales. Bernie tells her ‘it’s not good news and no weight has been lost’. Another woman close by is listening in and she tells everyone that she ‘had a big feed of colcannon today and not only that but I didn’t walk all week’. She also relays that she has been sick all week and on antibiotics. Bernie tells her that these can help put on weight and not to worry too much. I hear snippets of other stories that begin and then trail off: ‘I know I’m not taking this too seriously as I only do a little bit of what she tells us’; ‘God I had such a stressful week with the kids and everything. I never got a minute to myself to prepare and work at this’; ‘Marie, you’ll kill me in a minute when you see how I’m getting on!’ [Field work notes, Class 3].

The women exchange confessional stories and snippets of same with each other and with the leaders. It is part of the practice of slimming as narrated by Slim Ireland via its leaders and materials in use in class. The confessional storyline is one of admitting to transgression and then promising to atone by changing ‘bad’ behaviour. The class leaders, the members, their children, partners, and colleagues, represent key characters in this storyline.

Insatiable appetites
The conflict that the central character faces is slowly introduced in this second theme. This is the theme of insatiable appetites. Women, in particular, appear to have insatiable appetites which if left unchecked will generate unresolved problems. This theme draws from religious and patriarchal rhetoric that position women as possessing unregulated desires.
This dominant storyline articulated by *Slim Ireland* suggests that being overweight is a result of lack of control. In itself, this storyline is drawn from wider societal framing of women in particular as being out of control vis-à-vis eating (Bordo, 1993). This theme is promoted throughout the slimming classes and was initially observed in both the texts and performance of the motivational talks. These feature a variety of characters but tend to cohere around ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘us’ and ‘I’. The use of characters to generate a coherent narrative is presented as follows:

You are lacking in self-control and eat too much. We share that problem and can help you. Our philosophy is based on years of experience of helping loads of people just like you. I have been there but now I’m better. Stick with us and you will succeed

[Field work notes, Class 3]

In contemporary societies the responsible, healthy citizen must exhibit self-control in all aspects of his or her life, particularly around self-care and health, so as not to become a burden on the state and society (Heyes, 2006). In reaching this goal, members are continually reminded about how easy it is to get out of control, particularly when it comes to eating too much. The ‘I’ character represents both the performer of the talk – the woman class leader, and the receivers of the message – the women members. There is a shared understanding that it is women that are being spoken about, even if using the gender neutral ‘I’.

Other characters also appear in the narrative, functioning to differentiate the ‘normal’ eaters from the ‘non-normal eaters’. In relation to insatiable desires, ‘slim’ and ‘successful’ people never seem to overeat and are generally happy with their portion sizes and food choice:

Slim people are slim because they take RESPONSIBILITY for what they eat and how they live. They don’t need to be told what to do all the time. They decide for themselves how to eat and exercise. You will become slim once you decide to take responsibility for your decisions . . . Successful people are also totally FOCUSED . . . Successful people also take CONTROL . . . You have the power to control your weight not the other way around. By taking more control of your eating you take more control of your life. [Motivational talk 36/08]

Non-slim people are depicted as irresponsible, unfocused and out of control. But they are also encouraged to learn from the habits of ‘normal’ (code = slim) people.
Issues of self-blame, and making responsible moral choices around food, abound in the slim class. These are presented as ongoing conflicts and tensions that women must navigate. The notion of ‘normal’ eating is presented temporally, particularly in relation to the problem of ‘abnormal’ eating that occurs in the lead-up to and during significant events. In the following quote the class leader is enacting the motivational talk and deviates from the script. She explains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’: ‘us’ being ‘overweight’ and ‘them’ being ‘slim’. It is in the lead-up to Christmas and the class leader is encouraging the women not to eat too much:

One way to show control is to deliberately leave food on the plate. That shows control. And that’s the difference between us and them. They can eat what they like but mainly it’s because they are in much more control than us . . . We must do this as the weeks leading up to Christmas can be more dangerous than Christmas itself. [Field work notes, Class 3]

The class leader outlines some of the reasons that overweight and obese people have no control when it comes to weight management. The nebulous concepts of ‘emotional hunger’ and ‘emotional appetites’ are particularly problematic:

Eating only sorts out, cures hunger, nothing else. When did you last crave a bowl of porridge, carrots, cabbage? How do I know when it [hunger] is real? When it’s just a craving? We need to take a step back, take twenty minutes and drink water and then if we still feel hungry we can eat. Emotional hunger is uncontrollable. We say we can’t stop ourselves but we can. We need to blame ourselves . . . this started early in life by reaching for something. The biggest thing is to take responsibility. You and only you takes [sic] the food. No one else puts the food into your mouth. Take responsibility and ask yourself why you are overeating. Write it down. I see it on the scales you know [much laughter in the room]! Look I’ve seen members put their hands over a scone in a shop. I’m not eating it, you are. If you should eat it then you wouldn’t be hiding. [Field work notes Class 3].

Once again there is an allusion to the insatiable nature of women, who are constructed as overly emotional and irrational. Though the leaders are quick to point out that they are not trained psychologists, they tend to draw from a self-help genre that promotes an introspective examination of behaviour, thoughts and feelings. Members are continually asked to reflect on why they ‘eat so much’ and why they feel the need to eat so regularly. The role of the narrator is important here. She can decide what to leave in and out of the weekly talks and how to enact them before the audience of class members. She tends to use ‘we’ and ‘I’ to signal identification with the *Slim Ireland*
narrative. She also weaves aspects of her own story through the talks, to convince the audience of the merits of her message, by proffering a shared vocabulary of experience. The leader mixes the written text provided by *Slim Ireland* with her own anecdotes, to convey the message that engaging in out-of-control eating is firmly located in emotional desires and cravings that can and must be defeated. A discourse of women’s out-of-control nature is drawn on. All narratives contain elements of repetition but also paradoxes and, in this excerpt, while emotional hunger is deemed uncontrollable, we are told that we can control the hunger by simply stopping eating and trying to figure out why we might be eating. There is an attempt to limit understandings of ‘overeating’ to an emotionally fraught self in need of attention. Finally, gendered myths of secrecy and hiding one’s eating are ridiculed and disparaged.

**Fat Phobia**

Fat phobia emerges as a significant theme that drives the quest to lose weight. Saguy and Ward (2011) assert that fat phobia is similar to homophobia as the notion of fat, being fat and perceived to be fat, bring forth much hatred and vitriol evidenced in both societal and personal levels. There is a complex interplay of themes underpinning the *Slim Ireland* constitution of slimming as a quest for a better body. These range from gendered aesthetics to the pursuit of health. However, my findings revealed that rejection of fatness is positioned centre stage in the quest narrative. This was borne out by many overt expressions of fat phobia within the classes. The conflict element of the story is heightened by the refusal to acknowledge that fatness might be a legitimate identity for women. Therefore, as there is always a potential for the central character to deviate and not be in a position to continue with the quest, anti-fat messages are key. According to *Slim Ireland*, a better body is a less fat body and preferably a non-fat body. Consequently, anti-fat commentary is ever present in the *Slim Ireland* narrative. Lupton (2014) describes how the ‘pedagogy of disgust’ that permeates many of public health campaigns around diet and exercise has normative effects. Thus, deploying disgust has the effect of continually
emphasising the dangers of internal and external fatness. On one occasion, I mentioned HAES® to one of the leaders, Maggie. She was incredulous and stated quite categorically that ‘No one could ever think it is okay to be fat. No one is ever happy to be fat. No one’.

Losing weight means losing fat and losing fat is an imperative. Slim Ireland professes that immersing oneself in its programme can enable women to move beyond the limitations of what Murray (2008) identifies as the ‘fat, female subject’. Drawing from wider narratives about the ‘war on fat’, Slim Ireland sees itself as one of the generals at the forefront of this war. It positions fat negatively and views it through the lens of the healthy body. Slim Ireland does not challenge this anti-fat sentiment. Instead, it maintains that fat = ill-health and anyone who is deemed to have excess fat is presumed to be unhealthy or is storing up for ill-health.

Anti-fat attitudes were expressed in the classes by the leaders and the members, through discussion of the visual materials and via the text and performance of the motivational talks. Many women rejected the term fat and where possible avoided using it. The leaders were very careful not to call women fat. Rather they implied members were fat, referencing weight, clothes size, stomach size and overall body shape. However, one class leader did speak about fat in pejorative terms, through a rehearsed story that she told at different intervals during my seven-month observation in Class 3. She likewise repeated this story during my interview with her. In addition, the story also appeared on the Slim Ireland website as Bernie was a long standing leader who, in the 1980s, had lost a considerable amount of weight as a member of Slim Ireland, eventually becoming one of its leaders.

Bernie is delivering the motivational talk. The theme this week is ‘Change not chance will get you to this. Life is not a dress rehearsal’. Bernie mentions Una who has lost a half a stone in two weeks. She tells everyone that Una is not more special than anyone else. Una just works hard. She asks us are we living life to the full and somebody says no! ‘Well’, says Bernie, ‘weight does that, it does slow us down and leaves us open to different kinds of infections. You want to change don’t you?’ We all nod in the affirmative. ‘It will happen’ Bernie tells us. ‘You must put everything into place. One pound a week and you will all have a stone off by Easter. One pound a week for the year and that is 4 stone folks. Losing weight will change your life, your energy. Look let me. Let me tell you all something. I’ve been there, yes, I have. I know it all. You see, I’ve lost five and a half stone.'
I was always fat: a fat baby, a fat child, a fat teenager, a fat adult. By the time I was 14, I was 14 stone. But I didn’t have happy teenage years. Once in class, a nun called me a baby elephant.’ We all exclaim. Bernie continues. ‘I know what it’s like. I don’t have a halo. I face the same battles as you do. Oh yeah, I put on four pounds over Christmas and now I’ve shifted two but these other two are staying for now. I know it’s there. It’s as hard for me as for you.’ [Field work notes, Class 3].

Within this encounter Bernie is positioning herself as an ally of the members in their weight loss efforts. She reinforces this identification with constant use of the ‘I’. Drawing on the narrative device of identification, Bernie is telling the members that she too has experienced the perceived problems associated with being fat: ‘It’s as hard for me as for you.’ This enables all in the room to identify as having similar experiences, which is a useful tool in an organisation’s attempts to inscribe its narrative on its members. Bernie also introduces other characters, ‘Úna’ and an unnamed nun, to proffer a persuasive story about weight loss not being easy but ultimately, being worthwhile. It might be that Úna and the nun have similar anti-fat attitudes and that Bernie herself is trying to justify her own anti-fat stance. But being called a ‘baby elephant’ at a young age has had a significant negative impact on Bernie’s sense of self. She mentions it at various times during the classes and in our interviews. Her subsequent weight loss and life-long engagement in disciplining her body are influenced by earlier life experiences such as this encounter with the nun.

When speaking about fat, women tended to isolate parts of their bodies as being particularly problematic. Many times I heard women tell stories about their stomachs and not being able to fit into favourite clothes, or feeling bloated or wanting to hide that part of their body in particular. Women often tried to hide their stomach in the classes through wearing baggy clothes for example. I observed women folding their arms over their stomachs. *Slim Ireland* suggests that losing weight from the stomach is one of the hardest tasks in overall weight loss but that it is necessary. The class leaders zoned in on stomachs and warned women about the dangers of abdominal fat. Cooper’s (2009) account of the ‘Headless Fatty’ is relevant here. She asserts that dominant representations of fat people in photographs tend to have their heads removed, and the focus, instead, comes to rest on particular parts of
their bodies: stomachs, hips and thighs. It is as if the fat person is not a person at all. The ‘Headless Fatty’ is an object of vilification and disdain, a reminder of the perceived dangers of excess weight (Cooper, 2009).

In one encounter with one of the leaders, Maggie, I was asked if I had ever thought about the size of my own stomach. When I replied in the affirmative she produced a book for me to take home and read. It concerned issues for ‘apple shaped women’, such is my shape apparently. It told of the need to understand the stress related factors impinging on my large and, thereby problematic, stomach. In another class, Bernie chastised an older woman for not losing weight and pointed directly to the woman’s stomach as indicative of lack of commitment. I interviewed that particular woman later that year and she remembered that episode very well, expressing both embarrassment and amusement at what happened.

Overall, being fat and embracing fatness are not appreciated as valid life choices for women or men. Samantha Murray (2008:213) describes such anti-fat narratives as follows:

It is no secret that most of the discursive constructions of the ‘fat’ female body in Western society are negative, and assume a failure of will and bodily ethics. The statements that our society makes every day about fatness reinforce a ‘knowingness’ of who the fat female subject is. The fat woman is lazy, not willing to commit to change or live up to the dictates of healthy living. She is a compulsive eater, she is hyper-emotional, she is a physical and moral failure. In other words, the ‘fat’ body is a site where numerous discourses intersect, including those concerning normative feminine beauty and sexuality, health and pathology, morality, anxieties about excess, and the centrality of the individual in the project of self-governance.

Murray’s (2008) analysis is useful. The notion of ‘knowingness’ is evident in the way *Slim Ireland* positions itself as key to understanding weight management and those who seek to/must lose weight.

[Re] Gaining Control
It’s really so simple, once the light switches on, it stays on. And then you lose weight. [Field work notes, Class 4].

The fourth thematic element relates to efforts to regain control. Here is introduced the potential of resolution, where the quest for a better body can be finally reached. More importantly, the mind/body dualism is foregrounded
in this theme. Sustained weight loss is premised on regaining control once the mind overcomes the weaknesses of the body. In particular, members are encouraged to be disciplined and ever vigilant in terms of their eating and exercise patterns. Interestingly, *Slim Ireland* builds in cautionary tales inviting members to be realistic about their attempts to achieve their goals. Before women can regain control, they are once again reminded of the dangers of being out of control. A central element of the *Slim Ireland* narrative refers to the perceived dangers of consuming food in excess which, they argue, leads inexorably to bodies in excess. Members are warned that if they continue gaining weight and become fat then they are a danger to themselves. In that scenario, they may require others to step to facilitate change in their lives.

Self-control is continually evoked with reference to temporality and specific events. Class leaders emphasise the dangers of losing control through signalling of future events and the dangers lurking within. Specific events were highlighted as times of danger, but also as potential moments to show how women can regain control. These include summer holidays, New Year (both September when the children return to school and January as the beginning of a new calendar year), Halloween, Christmas, St Patrick’s Day, Lent, Easter and the Holy Communion/Confirmation season. Many of these events reference and are structured around seasonal events in the Catholic calendar and each appears to be fraught with danger and anticipation. In a talk at the end of November the class poster read ‘HAPPY NEW YEAR!’ The text and enactment of the talk explained why:

HAPPY NEW YEAR! Okay, okay, I know we are just coming into December and we still have to get ready for Christmas and get through Christmas. BUT, we in *[Slim Ireland]* believe in careful and early planning. We want you to have a HAPPY NEW YEAR, and if you truly want to be happy the first week in January, then you must start thinking about it, planning for it and working for it NOW. Christmas (and in some cases that means the whole month of December) means overindulging, overeating, over-drinking, over-partying and overdoing things like at no other time of the year . . . But as we warn: ‘unfortunately the wine waists and the beer bellies can often join the party too’. [Motivational talk 48/08]

Members were told ‘fail to prepare, prepare to fail’. This meant pre-empting weight gain by carefully controlling what is consumed in the weeks leading up to significant events. In addition, members were warned that to be ‘truly
happy’ requires lots of self-discipline. Invoking self-control and self-sacrifice as being central to weight loss, members are reminded that happiness is in their own destiny. A sub-plot of blaming the individual permeates the narrative. Another significant event in the Irish holiday calendar is Easter:

‘Easter, Easter, extra, extra, read all about it’. Yes this is probably the most dangerous weekend for any Slim Ireland slimmer or indeed any slimmer, there is chocolate everywhere. The smallest egg is 13 units. Another is 24 units. What way are you going into this Easter weekend – a flabby mind or planned? Or will you say you’re not going to eat that and be a pound down next week...eating chocolate knocks you off track...Are you going to control and say no? The trap is there for you and it’s hard to get away from it...Hide that chocolate, you do not need it to relax...Is it worth it to put on a few pounds...Come on everyone, if you have weight loss next week, you’ll feel you’ve got through it...The more you stay in control the happier you will be next week and the more you will keep your motivation [Field work notes, Class 3].

Women will achieve control if they understand the power of the mind to overcome that which the body might desire. Women, in particular are reminded not to give in to their desires. From motivational talk 29/08:

The PHYSICAL, the MENTAL, the EMOTIONAL and the SPIRITUAL issues that can turn meals into food fights and your weight loss journey into an absolute nightmare. Whether your eating habits range from starvation and deprivation to binging and purging or just grazing on unhealthy foods, the core of the problem has more to do with what’s in your head than what’s in your mouth...We cannot begin to conquer our weight problems until we change who we are inside and that means getting in touch with our emotions so we stop eating as a way to manage them.

For Slim Ireland, it is women who are being spoken to in this motivational talk (O’Toole, 2010). Women make up the bulk of the membership. Referencing what might be considered unhealthy eating habits (starvation, binging, purging), Slim Ireland draw from a self-help genre that pushes emotional healing as the solution to a perceived ‘weight problem’. Moreover, it is the mind that will do the work here. The body will follow once the mind separately works out what needs to be done. This was also depicted in one of the posters on display in the class (Figure 6.6).
Self Transformation
The final theme is perhaps the most important one, as the goal of the quest lies in personal transformation. Narratives of personal transformation permeate many normative bodily transformation practices, including dieting, cosmetic surgery, weight loss surgery and gender reassignment surgery (Davis, 1995; Gimlin, 2002; Throsby, 2008a). Embedded in this narrative is the notion of the ‘new me’: either a rediscovered or previously undiscovered, real [thin] self. Central to this construction is the idea that the pre-weight loss self and body were somehow in conflict with the real self. Throsby (2008a:119) describes this construction as the ‘true self trapped in the wrong body’.

This segment of the narrative arc draws much from the other segments. Within the confessional and self-help genre enshrined in weight loss discourse, the class leader spends a considerable amount of time cajoling and encouraging members to lose weight and to take responsibility for their eating patterns, levels of exercise and perceived lack of self-control. To what end?: personal transformation. In conveying the Slim Ireland narrative, the class leader also attempts to elicit stories of transformation, sometimes through the telling of her own story or that of other ‘successful slimmers’. I listened every week to quietly spoken stories about the slimming endeavours of the previous week. Women would speak with dismay about their inability to stick to the plan. Or, they would tell stories about how they had worked
hard, had eaten well, had exercised often, had begun the road to transformation. Members also actively monitor each other’s narratives and may prevent each other from deviating too far from what is considered relevant and acceptable: ‘How did you do it, did you drink the water? I can’t believe you ate all that.’ Class leaders would share a story about a time spent preparing for a wedding where they planned for weeks before hand about what they would eat and when. They shared such stories both in the hope of encouraging members and also drawing members in to the potential of self transformation.

Talking about weight loss and the pursuit of self transformation is important. But self transformation is also powerfully explained through the visual. To accomplish this, *Slim Ireland* makes strategic use of ‘before and after’ weight loss images. Such images circulate extensively in general weight loss discourse and in every single slimming class I attended (Figure 6.7).

**Figure 6.7: Before and After Images [redacted]**

Three photographs redacted. Original photographs by *Slim Ireland* on display in the classes.

Presenting classic weight loss ‘before and after’ stories through images and words, position weight loss as achievable and transformative. Rachel for example [top left image], has moved from being an overweight mother to a slim, feminine woman. While not an overtly sexualised image, nevertheless, Rachel poses in such a way to illustrate weight loss and to draw the viewer’s gaze towards particular parts of her body: her thighs, her stomach and her face. Many women attend slimming classes after the birth of a child. The inset image of Rachel and her small child in the top right hand side of the picture invokes a dominant storyline, that pregnancy and motherhood inevitably lead to weight gain and that weight gain does not make a healthy and happy woman. In order to recover a more appropriate self, women must lose weight as soon as possible after giving birth. We have no idea of how long after giving birth Rachel commenced her weight loss. Further, Rachel
offers clear advice to those attending the classes: stick to the plan, come to the classes. While Rachel probably received support and affirmation in her personal life as a result of her weight loss (Heyes, 2006), she has also been elevated as a symbol for success in *Slim Ireland*. Of course, what is absent from these images are the challenges involved in losing over four stone in weight. Instead, the hopes attached to transformation and imagined future bodies and selves are visually represented. The use of images is a powerful medium to construct both the self transformation theme and the quest narrative as a whole.

While the desired end result - the slim body - is narrated as the motivation to engage in slimming, the journey and the process are also imbued with significance and can reveal much about the character of *Slim Ireland* members. Micro-management, surveillance and self-discipline are required to exhibit a willingness to both accept responsibility for an undesired/undesirable body, and to seek change. Accordingly, for *Slim Ireland*, the exemplar which is promoted is the ‘successful slimmer’. The successful slimmer has adopted and internalised what I conceptualise as the ‘slimmer identity’ that is constructed and performed in the classes. The slimmer identity must cut through and supersede all other identities women have. A slimmer identity accepts that slimming is necessary, is cyclical and is potentially life-long. Further, it displays responsible citizenship and involves a quest for a better body and a moral self. Of course, it also leaves open the possibility of criticism and self-censure if women fail to meet the required standards each week. On a number of occasions I observed women leaving the classes in tears immediately after their weigh-in, as they had not met the required targets. The class leaders tried to ameliorate this news by telling the women that menstruation or antibiotics or general hormones were the reasons behind the lack of weight loss. This did not always soften the blow for the women.
Discussion

Adapting Taylor (1989:105), I contend that the power of narrative inquiry lies in its ability to detect narrative templates for orienting and acting in the world. The stories that people tell to themselves and to others are not, as Somers (1994) reminds us, ‘optional extras’, used to pass the time during moments of rest and reflection. Rather, they are a central component of social life that people experience in a ‘storied’ way (Somers 1994:614). In addition, Ewick and Silbey (1995) argue that one important function of narrative lies in its hegemonic power. This invokes the idea that narratives can contribute to the reproduction of existing structures of meaning and power. Narrative works by having well-plotted stories that cohere by relating various selectively appropriated events and details into a temporally organised whole. By arranging characters and events into stories, people are able to develop an understanding of the past, an expectation about the future, and a general understanding of how they should act. Narratives enable people to give coherence to their lives.

In this study, the Slim Ireland programme and classes constitute the narrative environment within which institutional storytelling about weight management takes place. The normative function of this narrative environment is to disseminate and sediment a coherent narrative of slimming. In this regard, Slim Ireland draws on a quest narrative template to construct slimming as a quest for a better body. The pursuit of the quest is rendered as a body-project that is ultimately cast as a positive intervention in the care of the self (Gill et al., 2005). Embedded in the quest is a hegemonic identity, the ‘slimmer identity’. Slimming is narrated as being cyclical, as being necessary, and oft-times as being life-long. Certainly, stories can shift meaning in the telling of them. For example, different and indeed new characters were introduced in different weeks during the classes. But the overall plot and point of the story remained constant. In other words, Slim Ireland pursued the same storyline each week and over the weeks. This, of course, makes the story meaningful for the audience (Anderson, 2015).
In narrating slimming as a quest, *Slim Ireland* invites particular kinds of stories to be told in the classes. These are initially presented as confessional stories that are underpinned by stories of being out of control, of having insatiable appetites, of denouncing fatness and of seeking ways to overcome the challenges these present. For example, demands are placed on members to recount to others their personal transgressions of excess and indulgence. Some stories are more tellable than others in this context. *Failure to lose weight* stories can be publicly told in the slimming class but are generally told within a frame of accountability. Stories of hunger and desire were not tolerated in the same way as confessional stories.

What is also interesting is that the quest narrative ‘creatively borrows’ from what Heyes (2006; and in an earlier study Stinson, 2001) asserts is a feminist discourse of capacity building work amongst women. This serves to make dieting appealing to women by emphasising the potential of self transformation. In this way, the *Slim Ireland* programme engages immense amounts of women’s everyday energies, alluding to the pleasures to be gained from ‘healthy’ food and eating practices and self-care (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a:170). Arguably, this fits with current neo-liberal rhetoric in Irish society, a rhetoric that invokes the idea that we have moved beyond the historical circumscribing of women’s lives by Church and state. Instead, it is argued, we now live in a society where women can freely choose to participate in a weight loss programme such as this, to exercise their autonomy as Irish citizens.

I posit that what is concealed in this rhetoric is that the quest itself is located within, and draws from, broader social and cultural discourses about women, health and femininity and notions of the responsible citizen (Gailey, 2014; Rich and Evans, 2005; Stinson, 2001; Throsby, 2009a; Tischner and Malson, 2008). In addition, feminist accounts of governmentality and bio-power, as discussed in chapter 2, are useful to analyse the workings of the quest narrative. The level of micro-management and self-surveillance embedded in the quest narrative certainly illustrates the operation of the normalising bodily
practices of bio-power in everyday life (Tischner, 2013). *Slim Ireland* requires self-government while simultaneously translating expert discourses on diet and obesity into concrete techniques for governing the dieting self (Clarke, 2015). Women are advised, monitored, weighed, cajoled and expected to account for their everyday actions around food and exercise. Weight management is presented then, as necessary and normative, by *Slim Ireland*. It is considered especially so for those defined as overweight and obese, where *Slim Ireland* draws widely from both the BMI and Glycaemic Index approaches to appropriate height/weight and food intake. It is very clear that *Slim Ireland* considers that the slimming plan it espouses serves both an individual and societal function: healthy individuals = healthier societies. To this end, *Slim Ireland* not only outlines a very specific narrative of slimming, it also implicitly offers a defence of its position on slimming to its members.

According to Lupton (1996), all food inhabits a moral space. Food and eating are positioned as moral acts in the quest narrative. Women, in particular, are narrated as having insatiable appetites where the female body has the potential to be uncontrollable (Spitzack, 1990:18). The quest narrative is underpinned by a construction of women as ‘emotional eaters’. This was referenced many times in the *Slim Ireland* motivational talks and in the stories that the class leaders told. Yet, women’s own personal stories of ‘emotional eating’ were certainly not tellable in this environment. Private exchanges between the women, out of earshot of the class leader, often highlighted the struggles and difficulties associated with the previous week’s attempts to lose weight or, at the very least, maintain weight. The weigh-in segment alone demanded this level of accountability. In the main, the women did this with reference to evaluations of their food and eating practices: ‘bad’ foods and ‘good’ foods were continually referenced (Lupton, 1996). In this way, eating ‘good’ food was a way of constructing a moral self. Within the classes, morality was interactively achieved by the class leaders and the women, such that morality was blended with their descriptions of their eating patterns for the week. This was then reinforced by the class
leaders who warned of the dangers of ‘out-of-control’ eating (Mycroft, 2008). Paradoxically sometimes ‘bad’ foods became rewards if women had worked hard to achieve a weight loss. Food choices must be accounted for and leaders persuade members to tell stories about what they have eaten and why. The quality of the eating choices made by members is measured by successful weight loss as revealed in the weekly weigh-in: staying the same weight and/or increasing weight comes to symbolise something ‘bad’ and/or immoral in the choices women make.

Boero’s (2012) model of normative pathology, which she claims is at the core of Weight Watchers, can be applied to the current analysis. The normative pathology model submits that women are more likely to have problems with food and eating than men. Drawing from this, Weight Watchers propose that the everyday experience of being a woman is grounded in notions of emotional eating and of dieting (Boero, 2012:89). Problems come to the fore when women cannot control this pathological relationship to food and thereby put on weight. Women are encouraged by Slim Ireland to see their food choices as a normal part of life that can be controlled without too much effort. As one class leader mentioned many times in the classes ‘once the light switches on, the weight comes off’.

Murray (2008) believes that beginning a diet requires an admission that one’s eating, and thus one’s self, is out of control. She states that it is the very logic of the ‘diet’ that necessarily constitutes one’s pre-diet food consumption as excessive and out of control. Every week, women are expected to recount to others their stories of transgression, excess and indulgences. Therefore, slimming illustrates aspects of the normatively prescribed work of disciplining and crafting the body in contemporary society. The collective gaze that has come to rest on sections of the population that do not seem to fit with accepted body size and weight reveals the effects of bio-power. Slimming classes represent one significant setting in which bio-power is played out as a form of constant micro-management and self-surveillance.
However, cognisant of Heyes’ (2007) critical approach to normalisation and the foreclosure of freedom it portends, I posit that while practices such as slimming are normalising, we must resist the temptation to see recidivist slimmers as mere dupes or victims of the normalising sexist ideologies and institutions that they at times inhabit. After all there are, as Coleman (2010) and Heyes (2007) suggest, moments of joy and pleasure to be gained from a sense of taking control and being active in the management of one’s body. Moreover, I agree with Rose (1996:140-141) who states:

Human beings are not the unified subjects of some coherent regime of domination that produces persons in the form in which it dreams...Techniques of relating to oneself as a subject of unique capacities worthy of respect run up against practices of relating to oneself as the target of discipline, duty and docility.

Following Heyes’ (2007) methodology, case studies of such practices are necessary to examine the narratives and stories of those who take up these techniques and use them in their own projects of self-transformation. Weight loss classes are rich sites within which to listen to women talk about and hear their stories of losing weight. But as Gimlin (2008a, b) astutely observes, women bring to these encounters their own embodied experiences and perceptions of weight and slimming.

**Conclusion**

This chapter deployed a holistic form analysis to the slimming classes (Lieblich et al, 1998). In its literature, through the organisation of the classes and via the class leader, it emerged that *Slim Ireland* cast slimming as a quest narrative, underpinned by the promise of self transformation (Frank, 1995; Heyes, 2007; Longhurst, 2012; Monaghan, 2008a, b; Stinson, 2001). Weight management is rendered meaningful in specific ways that are generated from within this quest narrative. Neo-liberal discourses circulating in wider Irish society about appropriate body size and weight; normative femininity; food and diet; and responsible citizenship, also serve to frame the emerging plotline in the slimming classes (Rose, 1999; Shilling, 2005). A powerful metanarrative of weight management is generated (Somers, 1994) that positions class participants as having a ‘weight problem’ and in need of
intervention to help regulate their bodies, lives and lifestyles. From an analysis of the slimming class, a key question emerges relating to whether the narrative resources disseminated in the slimming classes underpin women’s personal narratives of weight management. I now turn to the women’s tellings about their experiences of and meanings attached to slimming, and how they constructed these narratives.
Chapter 7: Women’s Narratives of Slimming: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Another woman who weighs in is told by Bernie to have a clean slate next week as she has put loads of weight on. This woman has found it difficult to lose weight and tells Bernie that she has a lot going on in her life. Bernie sighs and says ‘So be it. We all have a lot going on but what do we want from this class, to get bigger? I don’t think so.’ The woman tries to explain that she mostly sticks to the plans but it is hard to be ‘good all the time.’ Bernie tells her to at least ‘be good some of the time.’ The woman returns to her seat but seems despondent. She tells other women around her that she has been going through a lot with work and the children and how hard it is to lose the weight. They all nod to signal quiet agreement. [Field work notes, Class 3].

This chapter turns to an analysis of the women’s narratives of slimming. The analysis is informed by the critical weight studies’ empirical literature on women and weight management. This literature has addressed a variety of issues which includes, but is not limited to, yo-yo dieting and its consequences (Aphramor, 2005; Qazi, 2015; Qazi and Keval, 2013); weight loss and stigma/shame (Granberg, 2006, 2010; Herndon, 2005; 2008; Lupton, 2014); ‘before and after’ weight loss stories (Maor, 2013; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, 2000, 2001); motivations for weight loss (Germov and Williams, 1996a, b; Gimlin, 2008a,b); body image/appearance (Frost, 2001; Martin, 2002; Neighbors and Sobal, 2008; Sobal et al., 1999); health (Bacon, 2008; Bacon and Aphramor, 2011; LeBesco, 2009; Longhurst, 2005, 2012); and food (Boero, 2012; Cairns and Johnson, 2015a, b; Orbach, 1978, 2010). More specifically, the chapter attends to a theme alluded to within the short snippet from fieldwork notes outlined above, that of the biographical context from within which women narrate their experiences of weight loss.

The chapter is framed by the important question raised at the end of Chapter 6: do the narrative resources disseminated in the slimming classes underpin women’s personal narratives of weight management? In addressing this question, the central research question and objectives of the research are further explored. I argue that the context of the slimming classes has significant implications for the women’s own understandings of their experiences of weight management over time. In other words, the institutional setting provides a set of narrative resources, a narrative arc for
women within which weight management is made meaningful and is understood. In this sense, I maintain that women experience a sense of narrative foreclosure. The notion of narrative foreclosure specifies that a restricted set of storylines, plots and meanings are embedded in narratives of weight management. In turn, this proposes that the types of stories women can tell about their slimming experiences are limited (Phoenix, 2010a, b).

However, it is critical to examine women’s ontological narratives (Somers, 1994) to reveal more of the complexities of women’s narratives of weight management. In other words, women draw from narrative resources other than those articulated in the narrative environment of *Slim Ireland*. In this context, the specificities of their biographical context are a necessary adjunct to an understanding of their narratives. As Gimlin (2008a, 2012) and Stinson (2001) contend, women bring to their narratives of slimming their own sets of narrative resources, albeit resources that are also limited by the narrow range of stories women can tell about bodies ‘in need of correction’ (Bordo, 1993).

The chapter is laid out as follows. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of the process of developing the story types and the use of exemplars. Two dominant story types were discerned in the analysis. I then move to present and discuss these through a presentation of the narratives of Siobhán and Niamh, drawing out the biographical and social contexts within which these women construct and tell their weight management stories. In the following section, I present a critical interpretation of the two narratives / story types. Three themes are examined here: weight management as body-project; disrupting the linear quest narrative, and the morality of slimming. The final section concludes the chapter.
Developing Story Types

A case-centred approach to data presentation, deploying the notions of exemplars and exemplary significance, is used in this chapter. Using exemplars represent a specific type of collective case study, the use of which involves the extraction of unique case studies which are drawn from a collection (Cwikel, 2011:398; see chapter 5 for more detail on case selection). These are then used to present insights into an issue or theory and to highlight implications for the population from which it is drawn.

Arguably, this is a useful way to present research findings, and particularly so in narrative research (Phoenix and Smith, 2011) where the intent is to preserve complexity and attention to detail, and to link individual stories and narratives to their places within wider society (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Mishler, 1990). Sears (1992:148) describes it thus:

The test of qualitative inquiry is not the unearthing of a seemingly endless multitude of unique individuals but illuminating the lives of a few well-chosen individuals. The ideographic often provides greater insight than the nomothetic.

Riessman (2008:21) points out that the researcher does not find narratives as such but participates in their creation. This chapter exemplifies what Elliot (2005) describes as a second order telling where I re-construct two women’s narratives to present their story types, paying particular attention to the following: overall narrative/plot orientation, thematic content, and temporality.

Narratives are relational and, arguably, always partial, subject to reinterpretation. This renders narrative analysis an ethical undertaking. I am keenly aware that the narratives I present are structured to engender a coherence that is demanded of a PhD study. But, as I have argued throughout this thesis, narratives do not always cohere. As I pushed towards my emerging understanding of the normative project that characterises many weight loss programmes, I had to maintain a key awareness of the disruption and discontinuities that arose in trying to neatly categorise the women’s tellings to produce unifying story types. Narratives are never transparent representations of experience (Anim-Addo and Gunaratnam, 2012:393).54
Analysis of the written accounts of the nine women members' personal narratives of weight management revealed two dominant yet related story types (Beal, 2013; Riessman, 2008). These appeared consistently across all the narratives (Phoenix and Smith, 2011). I entitled the story types as follows: ‘episodic commitment’ (n=5); and ‘ambivalent participation’ (n=4). These are not mutually exclusive as most of the women who engaged in weight loss programmes on a cyclical basis drew from both types in their narratives. While each of the nine women’s narratives varied in terms of thematic content, the identification of an over-arching plot revealed commonalities across the women’s narratives and the narrative resources [language, phrases, examples] being drawn on to construct their narratives. This offers a useful frame to understand, in greater depth, the complexities of women’s involvement in, and understandings of weight management and related practices. In presenting two case accounts, I do not seek to homogenise, essentialise and/or delimit the women’s narratives of their experiences. Rather, I illustrate key features of each telling and of how the women put their stories together. I now turn to reveal the dynamics of the two story types through a presentation of the narratives of Siobhán and Niamh.

**Episodic Commitment: Siobhán’s Narrative**

‘Look it, I don’t mind. I have to do it again’ (Siobhán)

**Prologue**

I first met Siobhán in Class 3. I had noticed her in my first two weeks observing there as I noted that she always arrived and left on her own. Most of the other women came with at least one other friend to the classes but not Siobhán. Siobhán seemed to participate fully in the classes and, although

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54 To illustrate my reconstruction of the women’s narratives, I include relatively lengthy excerpts from the interviews to demonstrate how the emerging argument and identification of two dominant story types is located in what the women actually said during the interviews. Monaghan and Malson (2013:4) state that quoting interviewees verbatim offers rich data and an empirically grounded appreciation of their displays of perspective or moral forms (Silverman, 2001).

55 Two of the interviewees were class leaders and were thus excluded from the analysis of the women’s narratives presented in this chapter. Relevant analysis from their interviews is included in Chapter 6.
she did not always lose weight, happily approached the weigh-ins. She joined in with the banter and had conversations with some of the other women in the class.

Siobhán was one of the first women to agree to be interviewed for this study. She was 27 at the time of interview. She told me that she thought that she would have very little to say to me as having to lose weight is ‘really normal’ and there ‘isn’t a lot to say really, is there?’ However, Siobhán spoke at length and without interruption during the interviews. Both interviews were conducted in the sitting room in Siobhán’s home. She was working part-time and had two young children aged 9 and 6. I never met the children or her husband. I was invited into a private space that held photographs and mementos of her current and earlier life. This became significant as we looked at and talked about old photographs, some of which contained pictures of her with very different body sizes.

Siobhán became pregnant at 17 and gave birth when she was 18. She had her second child some three years later. She married Sean at 19 and all four lived in a house beside Sean’s family of origin. She stated that she ‘missed out’ on college but had returned to studies and completed a Diploma to work as a Special Needs Assistant in schools. Her in-laws farmed and she regularly helped out on the farm. Siobhán talked a lot about Sean and the children during the interview. At one stage early in the marriage both had been made redundant from previous jobs. She talked about finding it hard to adjust to being at home full-time. This resulted, she believed, in a ‘tendency to eat when all household jobs were completed’. Sean ate big meals that she cooked for him every evening. He could ‘get away with it’ she said, but she found herself eating as much as he did at times and found that was one of the sources of her ‘weight problem’.

56 The first interview began with a broad question inviting Siobhán to tell me about how she decided to join Slim Ireland classes. This narrative-based question resulted in approximately 7.30 minutes of interrupted talk.
Chronology
School

I suppose it was always in me head if I think, you know if I’m honest about it, since
well from my teenage years you know. Look I’ve always been a bit heavy, well
sometimes more than a bit. But I’m not, you know, obese, or anything like that.

Deploying the phrase ‘if I’m honest’ is a linguistic device to invite the listener
into what the teller intends to be a credible and plausible story. Immediately
we can see how Siobhán wants to distance herself from the negative
categorisation of being a ‘bit heavy’, that of ‘obese’. She recounted her initial
involvement with weight loss as having occurred when she was 15, while in
boarding school.

But at the time I was so unhappy there that I actually found everything wrong with
myself when I was there and I kinda thought ‘oh no, like I’m heavy’. And I wasn’t you
know … there wasn’t … I had no weight on me at all. And I just sort of went into this
mode – right I am not really going to eat in school. And it wasn’t eh the food was
horrible but don’t you know it was horrible. So we used to live. A friend of mine
[laughs] we lived on it was like mayonnaise sandwiches, mayonnaise and red sauce
sandwiches. That’s what we lived on in school. You know I remember one of the
girls, one of the older girls sayin’ to me ‘god,’ she said, ‘you’ve lost, you know you’ve
lost a lot of weight.’ And I’d say ‘oh well you know I don’t like the food and just don’t
want to be here.’ And you know she said ‘right if you don’t eat, then I won’t eat.’ And
you know this was the sort of way and she’d sit across the table from me and you
know she’d be wantin’ her big dinner and it was like right. I couldn’t, I couldn’t not
eat then so, do ya know then? So that was sort of when I started to think about my
weight and it was, it was, I felt, I realised how stupid it was because I wasn’t heavy
and it was just my way of dealin’ with being there and I thought and I probably
thought in the back of my mind right well if they see that I have some sort of a
problem here, I’m gonna be brought home.

She stated that this had been a difficult time and she did not want to be in
boarding school. Feelings of unhappiness led Siobhán to believe that
everything was wrong in her life. Looking back, she stated that, although she
felt she was really fat and heavy at the time maybe she was ‘really not that
bad’. Siobhán made much reference to being ‘good’ and ‘bad’ throughout the
two interviews. Siobhán alludes to more widespread concerns in her life and
being ‘heavy’ added to her feelings of unhappiness. Retrospectively, she
believes that she had no extra weight but this is from position of reviewing
the past. Food and eating offered the opportunity to both express and resist
the tensions she experienced in boarding school. Her description of two
hungry school girls, sitting at the dinner table, refusing to eat their ‘big dinner’
is evocative and powerful. Refusal to eat is one way to resist the demands of
school and other issues.
Siobhán was indeed brought home and left boarding school after 3 years to complete her schooling in a local school. During the interviews Siobhán was constantly moving back and forth reflecting on her present account of her past experiences. She seemed aware of the tensions in her talk. This is an important insight promoted by narrative approaches as it suggests that given the opportunity, participants will reflect on past events and experiences and actively construct and edit memories of such events and experiences. Later in the interview, Siobhán told me that she had in fact felt very heavy during her school days and that the negative ideas about herself and her body image that emerged then were difficult to shake off as an adult.

Siobhán stated that she struggled with her experience of food from then to today. But she was also acutely aware of the contradictions of how she understands her relationship with food, her body image, and her perception of her weight status. For example, discussing her time in boarding school, she expressed a clear and unprompted distancing from anorexia:

Like it wasn’t ehm I, I wasn’t anorexic, I wasn’t you know that sort of way. Like I, I, I didn’t, I’m glad I didn’t let myself go that way you know. At least this way, you know you can do an awful lot more about havin’ a few extra pounds then if you were you know had this goin’ on in your head. So I … that way I’m glad. I wouldn’t have that sort of ehm I suppose I kind of call it like an addictive personality you know it’s a sort of a very kind of a controlling thing. I wouldn’t have any … you know, I, I, I ehm food I suppose [laughs], it’s not really an addiction, it’s a comfort thing at the minute. And it’s bad habits. But at the same time it was never an obsession you know so.

Here Siobhán is re-telling a past experience in a particular way to claim a moral space. She appeared to have some tacit knowledge about anorexia. Statistically, it could be expected that a small but significant number of the young women may have experienced forms of anorexia and related food and eating difficulties (Bodywhys, 2014). She also draws on popular psychological concepts of an ‘addictive personality’ to claim a moral distancing from those deemed to be anorexic: ‘I wasn’t that sort of way’ (Gailey, 2009). For Siobhán, food may represent comfort eating but certainly not obsessive eating. There is an allusion to Cartesian dualism in the sense of needing to sort out one’s head first: ‘you know had this goin’ on in your head’.
Pregnancy and Childbirth

Siobhán maintained that she was very active as a younger woman playing various sports including walking, football and Kung Fu. In this sense, her narrative reflects the valuing of the healthy, active citizen of contemporary society (Tischner, 2013). Episodic commitment involves thinking about exercising, actually exercising, but most importantly, believing it possible to start and restart exercise programmes. However, a second significant turning point in her life, with regard to plotting her weight management story, was becoming pregnant and having children – a key element in many women’s weight management narratives (Coleman, 2010; Gailey, 2014). On her first child, she walked out of the hospital, with her new baby girl, in a pair of jeans – an achievement of which she proudly spoke. She had had a difficult pregnancy and birth, and her weight status reflected this, in that she could not put on much weight. She lived with her mother after the birth of her first daughter but eventually moved in with Sean. Having children has embodied consequences for women in terms of their body size, shape and weight. Siobhán began to ‘struggle’ with her weight both during pregnancy with, and after the birth of, her second daughter when Siobhán was 21 years old:

... and then for everything to settle back the way it was, brilliant, and of course then I thought “ahh yeah do this again no problem”. Had no complications [on this pregnancy unlike the serious health issues during first pregnancy], everything went perfectly with Sam but then the other end of it was when I had her I was 4 stone heavier, you know after havin’ her than I was before so like...I don’t know it was just em hard to accept and I didn’t realise it at first as you are so busy with the kids.

Pregnant and post pregnant women are encouraged to lose the ‘baby fat’ quickly and many women are celebrated in the media, for example, for getting to their pre-pregnant weight status in relatively quick time post childbirth.

Well I was ehm after I had my two kids I ehm found especially after having my second child, I found it hard to kind of lose the weight again and, and to get fit. I felt very unfit and I thought at such a young age I shouldn’t be, I should be able to keep up with them do you know? [laughs] Ehm I just found it ehm it was something that I just needed to do for myself. It wasn’t really about you know vanity or anything. It was more health and I suppose there’s always a bit of vanity in it but it was more just to do with, I wanted to be you know fit and healthy for them because we were kind a growing up together [laughs] you know. So, so I decided to join Slim Ireland and I had previously tried other classes as well which had worked for a while.
Siobhán is clearly thinking through the complexities of this though, as she mentions both health and what she terms vanity as reasons to lose weight. She also equates weight loss with ‘getting fit’, a dominant narrative around weight loss but one that does not necessarily hold up when scrutinised. This also invokes a health moralism: thin = fit = healthy. Finally, one central feature of motherhood for Siobhán is to keep active to keep up with the children. She recognised and made reference to this a number of times during the interviews – that she was a young mother and being so young meant she should be ‘there for the children’. On her first day at the slimming classes, Siobhán presented herself and her weight status to the class leader with this key story. Every woman presented a version of their own story to the class leader on the first night. The class leader drew from a set narrative script to respond to the variety of stories she might hear. Siobhán explained that when she discussed her own personal story with Bernie, the latter made it clear that as a young mother, she had a responsibility to her children. Further, Bernie indicated that while pregnancy and childbirth involve weight gain, most of this can be easily lost with some time and effort.

Cyclical Engagement
Throughout her 20s, Siobhán engaged in an array of weight loss practices with some success in terms of weight loss, but more often than not, weight loss maintenance proved more difficult. These practices included periods of gym membership, walking regularly, food restriction, attendance at CURVES [a fitness programme designed especially for women] and enrolment in other weight management classes. She and Sean had attended a weight hypnotherapist in Dublin and lost weight within eight weeks of seeing him. Both had regained all the weight since. Each practice was meant to establish routine and gain control of what she perceived as her ‘out-of-control eating’. Sometimes this worked but other times, due to back problems, work and the children, Siobhán found it difficult to sustain:

Well I had joined em CURVES a few years ago...I found that [emphasis] absolutely brilliant but as I said what happened when I joined after a couple of months I actually hurt my back for the first time. So then I, I couldn’t do it for eh it was, I was a good month recovering and eh it was the disc in my lower back. It sort of dislocated you know so. Then, I found it kind of hard to go back then. I know I knew the weight had crept on and I just kind of lost confidence and I just kinda got stuck in a rut and I
suppose feelin’ a bit sorry for myself so. But then that gym actually closed down [laughs] in town so it was gone then and I, I’d go to the gym an odd time in town or I’d go walking and it was just so hard to try and get back into something. And I’d actually been in Weight Watchers before. And as I said then I was working full-time, there was evenings you wouldn’t want to go and it just fell by the wayside again you know.

This particular extract from Siobhán’s narrative is illustrative of what Monaghan (2006a, 2008a) theorises are accounts. Drawing from Scott and Lyman’s (1968) seminal work on the sociology of accounts, Monaghan (2008a) defines accounts as aligning actions intended to bridge gaps between ‘(in)actions and expectations’ (p34): accounts are socially situated (p68). He develops the original typology of excuse and justification accounts to include contrition and repudiation accounts. Contrition, in particular, is interesting. It occurs when people accept responsibility and blame while typically tempering this with an offer of reparation (Monaghan, 2008a:55). Siobhán’s accounting for herself, and her perceived (in)action around her weight status, during the course of the two interviews and in the slimming classes, is neatly captured in this extract. A key part of the episodic commitment story type involves the women having to generate excuses for and be contrite about their weight status in order to recommit to a weight loss programme. Here, Siobhán invokes excuse [gym closing], justification [back problems] and contrition [lost confidence] accounts: she seeks to simultaneously explain and justify her weight status but also to apologise and atone [at some future stage] for her weight gain.

After numerous attempts to lose weight, Siobhán joined Slim Ireland. Her decision to re-join a slimming class reflected her ongoing concern with weight gain. Weight maintenance and loss are constantly referenced by Slim Ireland against significant events in a person’s life. Such events are narrated as presenting dangers vis-à-vis weight status, but also requirements to present a ‘good shape’, an acceptable body, and to display a positive health status through body size. One immediate event influencing the decision was an upcoming family wedding:

So em and also then I have a few we have a family wedding in September, and a few friends weddings, and you know, just a few different things coming up that again you just want to you know, be in good health and in good shape, and you know to
feel comfortable goin’ to things, and you know gettin’ that dress or, you know, just feeling good for yourself really.

Siobhán wanted to look good, look healthy and not feel embarrassed by her body weight in family photographs. She showed me some of the photographs from her room in which she inhabited various body sizes, representing what she felt were different versions of herself. Looking at the photographs was not easy and she asked me to keep my eyes on one that was taken early in her relationship with Sean where she was considerably thinner. This was a powerful moment during the interviews with Siobhán. There was real pain in her voice when she showed me photographs of her ‘heavier’ self/body:

Can you imagine I let me self get like that? I look so so awful.

This is not a photo-elicitation study. Although, I had invited women to bring photographs to the interviews, most declined. This interview took place in Siobhán’s house which afforded me an opportunity to mention family portraits on the wall where appropriate. Ketelle (2010) reminds us that photo-elicitation requires researchers to move away from the idea that any photograph has to represent an objective truth. But for Siobhán, the photographs did represent an objective truth: she was fat and she stated that she hated the way she looked. She constructed the images in a way that resembled how *Slim Ireland* used photographs, as a powerful medium to illustrate that there is something inadequate in a fat body. Multiple readings of photographs can always be accessed but Siobhán moved me away from discussion of the images as quickly as possible. Siobhán struggled greatly to accept the photographs of herself as a fat woman as anything other than negative. This, amongst other experiences, drove her narrative of pursuing self-transformation.

**Rejecting Fatness**

Anti-fat sentiment is typical of the episodic commitment story type. Cooper (2016), Murray (2008), and Gailey (2014) demonstrate that the fear of becoming fat is grounded in current anti-obesity discourse and hatred of all that fatness is assumed to represent. Siobhán expressed much anti-fat
sentiment throughout the interviews but this was couched in personal terms. In other words, she did not express any overt dislike or hatred of fat people per se, but she dreaded that she was fat and that others might perceive her as fat. Embodied in her everyday life, such anti-fat sentiment was visible in the clothes she wore (loose and baggy); cutting size labels from clothes; delighting in looking ‘neat’ during her pregnancy so people did not realise she had put on weight; refusing to use the word ‘fat’ in any way other than with negative connotations; and being unable to identify as ‘fat’.

I made a conscious decision not to use the term ‘fat’ in pejorative terms. The women often used the term pejoratively. Fatness and fat people are so demonised (Cooper, 2016), that it makes it very difficult to speak outside of this discourse, particularly if there appear to be no alternative ways of speaking about fat. Siobhán recounted a short story of her experiences with the word ‘fat’:

yeah when I was in America last year we were on Brooklyn Bridge and there’s a walkway and there’s a cycleway on both sides and there was marathons on it, so I got out of the way for these ones that were walking, they were running and then I was in the bicycle lane and this guy was cycling and came up to me, he was like ‘you’re on the wrong side, fat girl’, he goes and I was looking up going I’m not fat! You know, like I was just going, you know, if I’m considered fat what’s a skinny girl over there like, well we know what they are, do you know, they’re dying to be honest, you know, they’re not healthy at all. So, that was an awful thing to be told, it really, I was thinking damn you like I’m here on my holidays and for someone to do that to you, you just feel like going home you know. And like Sean didn’t even hear it and I didn’t even say it. I never told anyone that now before today but it was just, you’d be just feeling like crap after hearing you know going I’m not fat like that kind of thing...you know it’s not a nice word, it’s only a three letter word but it’s been made into such a vicious thing you know and it is a horrible thing for anyone to say.

For Siobhán, fatness and/or perceptions of being fat were difficult to manage. In this short story, her strong feelings of distress at being labelled fat are evident of a positioning of fatness as other (Tischner and Malson, 2011). The attempt to claim a moral space vis-à-vis the unhealthy skinny person, and the allusion to what a fat person might really look like and be, are reflective of the wider discourses of fatness circulating in Irish society. There is also a sense of knowing that this is a construction of fat [but it’s been made into such a vicious thing] in a particular way and that there may be other ways of knowing/narrating fat. However, Siobhán never addressed this again during the interviews. Health and extreme thinness and fatness
are juxtaposed. Paradoxes are inherent here in that to be healthy one must show one has both a non-fat and a not too skinny body. But at some level, Siobhán also rejected the idea she was fat, an identity that \textit{Slim Ireland} and many around her may have assigned her.

The Slimming Class
Siobhán maintained that she really enjoyed attending the classes. She returned to the role and benefits of the class in her weight management regime throughout the interviews:

\begin{quote}
So that's why I found it [slimming class] good because I just think at home you don't, you don't really understand, you need someone to tell you like it's obviously it's common sense that some foods are better than others but you do need someone to say 'right you do understand don't you that you can't have that but it's ok to eat this and'. I think it's definitely, no one is stupid but they're in total denial if there's not somebody telling them you know
\end{quote}

Siobhán shares \textit{Slim Ireland}'s notion that external help is required to recondition the undisciplined [fat] body to a more disciplined and acceptable state. Here is evidence of the tensions in narratives of slimming. Women who are defined as overweight must immerse themselves in a self-help genre and regain control while simultaneously subjecting themselves to techniques of normalisation (Heyes, 2006). As discussed in chapter 6, \textit{Slim Ireland} uses a tracking system to enable women to monitor what they are eating, how much they can eat each day and the types of food they should be eating. Siobhán did not write up the Trackers form every day. But similar to all the women, she carefully selected food to enable her to consume more low-point food and achieve a feeling of fullness.

Unlike previous attempts to commit to the demands of slimming classes, Siobhán felt she was making a bigger commitment to this class:

\begin{quote}
But this time round I've stayed for the meetings unless you know there was something that ok well I had no one to just take the kids or you know so. I've really only missed one meeting. And em I've been staying because I just find within that you can hear of well how well someone else did and then Bernie [class leader] would say 'well what did you do different to that person'. And they'll tell you 'well no I didn't really do anything different or I just, it's such and such a thing'. And you know and she, she'll actually get foods that if someone asks her about certain foods, she'll go during the week and she'll find out like your points value and that and you know what you mean and what your daily allowance of it you can have. And she'll come back the next week and she'll tell you things. She, she really makes it like common sense and she teaches you how to point food. So I find myself goin' around then when I'm shopping and pointing out the food and stuff and I just find listening to
\end{quote}
Bernie, she was heavy herself and that’s how she got into it like. That’s how obviously all the leaders would, they were you know, they were students before they were leaders you know so. She lost weight.

Siobhán draws from the dominant *Slim Ireland* narrative in her account of her reasons for attending and staying in the class. Weight management is ultimately common sense she believes, but it may be necessary to have someone else explain that to you regularly. She sees the effort that the class leader has put in both in sourcing the correct foods and engaging in weight loss herself. This offers a moment of identification with the leader and what she says/does: it enables the class leader to appear credible and the programme workable. All of the class leaders had previously been immersed in weight management practices. Gimlin (2008a, b) and Stinson (2001) found the class leaders in their ethnographies were similarly involved in weight loss. I argue that for organisational narratives to work, to appear credible, they require of their class leaders to share personal experiences to demonstrate that their system actually works. This encourages members to stay committed to the organisation.

The central platform, from which *Slim Ireland* constructs the quest narrative, is to encourage slimmers to confess and atone for lack of weight loss. In so doing, it positions its role to ‘forgive’ and to educate women about their knowledge gaps and motivational challenges. Siobhán tells a story about confessing:

Because there was actually one girl was there and she had only a few pound to lose and herself and Bernie used to be at logger heads every week when she’d get up on the scales and she just couldn’t lose it. And it turned out that the girl, she actually wasn’t eatin’ enough. You know she was actually nearly afraid to eat. So it’s good too like that because I’ve had weeks like that and I’d be so good and I’m thinkin’ ‘no I can’t have that, I can’t have that, eat 3 times a day, you know small amounts too’. And like I’d get up on the scales and it would have no affect and you’d be kinda goin’ and then you’d be I actually it made me think back ‘right well I didn’t’ you know and Sean ‘d be eatin’ his dinner and I wouldn’t have a dinner. I would have had you know somethin’ small like soup or you know and you naturally you need because your body needs to have enough food to burn off as well you know.

The character of the other slimmer is interesting. Siobhán indicates that this woman was almost too afraid to eat because of the potential dangers of chaotic and uncontrolled eating. Food and eating are conceived of as having a normative pathology (Boero, 2012). This underpins much of the discussion
on women, food and eating in the slimming classes. Siobhán understood that problematic eating happened to women. The story helped her identify the challenges she has faced in ‘being good’. She also reiterates the idea that eating enough food is essential to losing weight. But the practice of not having a dinner while Sean consumed his dinner, suggests the extent of restrictive practices that many women engage in to lose weight. Of course, by eating too little they may endanger their health and well-being.

Reflections and Imagined Futures
Reflecting on the first interview, Siobhán told me that she felt something had changed in her life since the interview. Apparently worried about what I intended to discuss with her, she stated that she felt ‘great’ and ‘relieved’ once the interview was over. This was an interesting finding that appeared across all of the women’s narratives. Talking about their weight status seemed to afford them an opportunity to discuss an issue that may have preoccupied their thoughts and actions but one that was given minimal hearing in the slimming classes:

I felt it was brilliant actually [Interview 1] you know, talk about suppose the kind of reasons behind why you do things and why you put them off and you just kind of realise well if you don’t do it today you might not have a tomorrow, that sort of thing.

There are two points of note here. Firstly, Siobhán used the interviews to think about her involvement in weight loss practices. She felt that in talking to me, she now needed to re-engage with the programme. The telling of her story enabled consideration of the expressive elements of dieting and not the repressive ones (Heyes, 2006). Secondly, members are expected to recount their stories of weight management in the slimming class each week and to account for any ‘failure’ to lose weight. The ‘tellability of certain stories’ was revealed as one significant feature of these narrative encounters. Taking responsibility and individual blame narratives were central to the Slim Ireland approach. This meant that a critical reflection on women and dieting was absent. At some level, the interviews gave Siobhán time to tell her version of her story and other stories that are not allowed to be heard in the classes.
Siobhán believed that her current weight status was potentially dangerous to her health and could mean not being around, or fit and healthy, for her children. She expressed a lot of anxiety about this. One of her children was, in Siobhán's words, 'ok, but … well, a bit plump'. Siobhán wanted to be a good role model for her daughters and not be seen by them to be 'overweight' and thereby unhealthy. She involved both of them in choosing so-called healthy foods and in cooking and exercising. They were aware of her weekly weigh-ins and were helping her track her everyday calorie intake. In this way, I argue, dominant obesity discourse was disseminated between mother and children through both the words and practices of weight management.

Siobhán fully expected to keep up with the programme and to achieve and maintain significant weight loss. She had joined a gym and started exercising even more than she had been previously. In this sense, a re-engagement with the programme had begun. She stated that she was really enjoying these activities. Imagined future possibilities also guided the decision:

I’m in my mid to late 20s now. If I don’t do something about it now, I never will…you know before, I just totally lost focus on it.

This was an interesting comment considering her ongoing involvement in weight management for the previous 12 years. Would this be the final attempt regardless of outcome? She liked the structure and routine of the class. Siobhán indicated scepticism about aspects of Slim Ireland’s approach to food, eating and weight loss but she also rejected the notion she was dieting and instead viewed her weight loss as a change in lifestyle. Many slimming organisations do not use the term dieting anymore as they recognise the negative tendencies for this term to invoke ideas of starving oneself. Instead a narrative that draws on contemporary notions of the ‘lifestyle change’ is deployed. Part of this involves tracking what one eats every day. While Siobhán did not fill in the Trackers (see chapter 6) on a daily basis, she constantly checked points and calories in foods she purchased and kept a daily diary of food intake based on the Slim Ireland literature. Siobhán’s story concludes as follows:
I don’t really know I suppose, I’ve been on and off it so long, its, I suppose it’s just to keep going... I fell off the wagon [laughs] so many times doing it too, but it’s just to get up and do it again and do it for yourself because if you’re doing it for anyone else or to be like anyone else you won’t do it, it’s you know all for yourself, your doing and just if you never change size, it’s just for your own, your well-being and your own frame of mind.

In this extract, Siobhán draws together a number of different themes to frame her narrative. There is an allusion to an addiction narrative (*been on and off it so long, fell off the wagon*); an individualism narrative, emphasising fortitude (*get up and do it again; it’s you know all for yourself ... your own well-being, your own frame of mind*); and resignation (*I suppose it’s just to keep going*). These offer Siobhán the opportunity to sum up her own story and offer insight into how she constructs her ongoing commitment to weight loss. She fully expects to remain in this cyclical pattern of weight loss – maintenance – weight gain – practicing weight management weight loss.

Summary of Siobhán’s Narrative of Slimming
Siobhán’s narrative of slimming moves through four key phases. This temporality is framed by the story type of episodic commitment.

- Her initial involvement began at age 15, while in school. She started to ‘use’ food to signal some level of resistance to the unhappiness she feels at being at the school. She made an oblique reference to other unnamed, unhappy life events.

- She moved very quickly to the next phase through becoming pregnant at 17. This represented a key biographical disruption to her general life-plan and informed her weight management narrative going forward. The first pregnancy was marked by illness and she did not put on any weight. Siobhán was ‘proud’ to leave the hospital able to wear a pair of jeans.

- A second baby followed at age 21. This represented a more serious intervention in her weight management narrative as she put on four stone in weight.

- From then, until I meet her at age 27, her involvement in weight management was intermittent but ongoing. Body weight status was ever-present in her everyday life. She lost weight each time she
began a weight loss programme but thus far had been unable to maintain any weight loss. However, she expressed faith and hope that her membership of *Slim Ireland* and involvement in related practices would eventually engender sustained weight loss.

**Ambivalent Participation: Niamh’s Narrative**

‘Well it’s just, you know, God, here we go again’ (Niamh).

**Prologue**

I met Niamh in Class 2. She had introduced herself in the first class I attended. Immediately after I presented myself to that first class, she sought me out to ask me about the study. She told me she had a great interest in researching weight loss and food and eating and had wondered if that was the point of my being there. I explained the purpose of the research and she agreed to participate in the interview stage which was not scheduled for another seven weeks. During the classes Niamh asked many questions of the class leader. Some of these were points of clarity, others outright questioning of the *Slim Ireland* narrative. She seemed friendly with the leader and they exchanged books and recipes. However, Niamh expressed much anxiety leading up to and during the weigh-in segment of the class. She left the class abruptly some weeks, particularly when she had not lost any weight. She rarely engaged in banter with the other women during the class. Sometimes she arrived with a friend, other times on her own. She knew a few women in the class.

Both interviews took place in her home but not inside the house. Instead, we sat at a picnic table just outside the back door, not visible to the main road. Although agreeing to participate in the interviews, Niamh became a reluctant interviewee during the course of the interviews. She stated that the whole weight management ‘thing’ was not that difficult to grasp and struggled with the open ended nature of narrative interviewing. This required a shift to semi-structured interviewing during the interviews. Weight management is a difficult topic to discuss and Niamh mentioned this many times.
Over the course of the two interviews, Niamh’s reflexive account of both her involvement in weight management, and her participation in the study, invoked pain and upset – a central component of the ambivalent participation story type. In conjunction with this, there was a sense of hopelessness about the enduring nature of weight management. The cyclical involvement with weight loss practices was visible but the backstage stories of the struggles inherent were more difficult to render visible. Niamh’s narrative also represents a re-storying within the main story, in that in the second interview she offered an editorial for the many words she had spoken during the first interview. Before the second interview was properly arranged, Niamh texted me to state that she had ‘got over’ the shock of talking so much in the first interview and was ready to meet again. I return to this in the narrative that follows.

Niamh’s narrative is framed by her assertion made at the beginning of the interview that: ‘my weight has become unacceptable’. Niamh was 45, married with 3 children, and working outside the home. University educated, she came from a rural, farming background. Before having children, she had travelled and worked abroad. Her children were young teenagers. She described her life as being incredibly busy. She identified as a full-time worker. Niamh stated that she was generally easy-going and fairly relaxed. She stated that she hated being indoors but loved the outdoors.

Chronology

Childhood

Niamh’s weight management narrative does not follow the same trajectory as Siobhán’s. Growing up, there was an awareness of weight in Niamh’s home but she stated that it had not carried that much significance. She stated that one of her sisters had a ‘slight weight problem’. Her father, she said, was a ‘bit overweight’. Her mother had a ‘normal weight’. Throughout her narrative telling, body weight centred on the category of ‘normal’. Seeking and maintaining a ‘normal’ weight was a cornerstone of her weight management experiences. However, there was a degree of uncertainty in Niamh’s
narrative about precise definition and positioning of overweight people using this type of characterisation.

From the outset, she stated that she needed to lose two stone in weight. This was the target identified for her by the class leader, on the first night that she joined the class and participated in the weigh-in. According to the BMI, Niamh would have been considered overweight and/or obese. This was a categorisation she firmly rejected. Expanding on this she stated:

normal is just that. Not too heavy, ok maybe not too thin but just ok. You have to try to keep a normal weight. I don’t have a normal weight now, no coz I have to lose two stone. But, I, I’m not, you know, obese or anything. So, I don’t know whether it’s something you inherit or something, a tendency to put weight on.

Here Niamh alludes to the debate on genetics and weight gain. The relationship between genetics and body weight has gained currency in the ‘obesity as epidemic’ discourse (Monaghan et al., 2010). Mentioning it reflects Niamh’s search for solutions to her ‘weight problem’ that dominated her narrative. Further, it is illustrative of one aspect of ambivalent participation story type: a constant questioning of practices of weight management. Niamh returned to the issue of ‘normal’ weight many times during the interviews. For example, reflecting on her weight when she was growing up, she stated:

Em, well I would have been just a normal weight and eh whatever and I just didn’t think about it you see. I wasn’t plagued by weight stuff. Em I presume my weight would have been normal for my age, I would have been fairly active, involved in a lot of sports and things like that you know. I never thought about weight when I didn’t have it on so it wasn’t an issue so em… I suppose when you’re going to weight loss classes and when you’re trying to keep your weight under control, you do so much thinking about it and then it’s hard to think of a time you didn’t think about it.

Niamh stated that her teenage years were not ‘plagued’ by weight concerns, mainly because she felt she was very sporty and active at that time in her life. The term ‘plague’ is revealing. It alludes to the related notions of ‘epidemic’ and disease (Boero, 2013; Monaghan et al. 2010). It also draws from the idea that weight gain is inevitably problematic, and is based on and leads to inactivity. Niamh’s contention that thinking about body weight and weight loss, was dependent on whether she was engaged in a weight loss programme, is also interesting. Slim Ireland narrated weight management as
lifelong, demanding constant reflection and self-surveillance while paradoxically, elevating its potential to achieve a desired outcome. Niamh suggests a different analysis. She believed that only when she attended at classes was weight management brought to the fore. At other times, she did not think about it much. This is contradicted later in her narrative when she talked about once she began to position herself as having a ‘weight problem’, her body weight, shape and size came more to the fore in her everyday life.

**Pregnancy and Childbirth**

In her early 30s, Niamh became pregnant and had three children in quick succession. She described the impact this had on her body and how it spurred her towards a slimming class:

> Oh, I don't know why, why does someone ever decide for the first time to go to Weight Watchers, I don't know. I suppose after you've had children, you probably put on a bit of weight and you lose it and you put on a bit and you lose it and that. … em, I think I probably started putting on weight after I had children. Eh and each time, I would have, I would have tried to lose it I suppose to get back into my clothes and then, em, put on a bit and lose it and maybe that, then…its em…i can’t seem to keep it off now

Initially, Niamh relayed her account in the third person: ‘after you’ve had children’. There is a slight distancing of herself from this position. But then she moves to the first person to offer her personal account of the beginnings of her pursuit of weight loss. This was a feature of Niamh’s talk during the interviews, a constant moving back and forth between first and third persons to create a distance between subject and object. Niamh had put on weight both during and after each pregnancy. She stated that she made huge efforts to lose this ‘excess’ weight immediately after giving birth. Thus began immersion in weight management practices. Similar to Siobhán, Niamh believed that having children was a significant turning point in her weight loss narrative. Unlike Siobhán, this was the first time Niamh had engaged in weight loss practices.
Cyclical Engagement

Over the past 13 years, Niamh had been involved in a variety of weight loss practices. These included, food restriction; slimming classes; exercising; and attending a gym. Her decision to re-join the current slimming class was explained as follows:

Eh, once again my weight had rocketed, beyond something that was acceptable. And I decided to em join the weight loss class. Em, it's something that I've done a number of times over the past 10 years or so. I join and em, I lose a certain amount of weight and I get to a stage where I'm comfortable with my weight and then I stop going and then gradually over probably a period of a year the weight builds up again, and gets to the stage where it's not acceptable again and I have to re-join a class. So I've probably in the last 10 years, I may have, I may have gone 7 or 8 times, to a weight loss class.

Niamh draws on narratives of acceptability associated with both normative femininity (Hayfield et al, 2013; Lupton, 1996) and normative body size (Harjunen, 2009; Murray, 2005). She displays an awareness of the cyclical nature of weight management and the challenges in maintaining weight loss.

A narrative of acceptability suffused the interviews. The challenges in achieving a measure of acceptability emerged as a key element of ambivalent participation. Eliciting a story about what was unacceptable provided an interesting example of how difficult it was for her and how difficult it is for many women to tell difficult stories:

An unacceptable level is when you're no longer fitting into em, to me it's when you're no longer fitting into any of your clothes and em, I would be, I imagine like a, comfortable size for me would be 12, 14 and then I can bear a 14, 16 and then I know when I'm getting into 16, 18 that the weight is going on again. And once I have to buy a size 20 that's it, to me that's it that's the … that, then I know it's just time to do something about it again. Which is ridiculous I know but em that's how, that's usually it's just, it's not something that eh I see, I'm going up a pound, I'm going up a pound. I just, it's just literally as, as … em, as the clothes, the size of the clothes I am buying becomes unacceptable to me that's when I decide to do something about it … How do I know … Well like I say, just when I know, when I reach, when I reach a new size, if I have to buy, when I go to buy clothes and if I'm gone 18, 20, I just, I just know that my weight has gone out of control again and that I just need to go, I need to do something about it. And every time, I hope I'll get off the, the treadmill and that this time I'll do it and that it'll be em that I'll be able to sustain it. But em, it just gradually creeps back up.

Niamh struggled to tell what might be termed a ‘typical’ story about a recalled event of going shopping and having to buy bigger size clothes. However, what emerged here was what Riessman (1990) termed a ‘habitual narrative’, that is one that suggests a general course of events rather than a specific instance. For Niamh, buying clothes held much significance. Having to buy
bigger clothes generally meant she had gained weight. Weight gain came to symbolise being unacceptable. Once this occurred she had to, once again, immerse herself in weight loss practices. In this context, Niamh rejected the notion of the ‘successful slimmer’, as narrated by *Slim Ireland*. Self transformation is only partially visible in the ambivalent participation story type. Instead there was an understanding that weight loss was full of uncertainty in terms of the process and potential outcomes. Cyclical engagement is revealed as an ambivalent pursuit rather than a linear quest for a better body. Niamh describes this phenomenon as the ‘*treadmill*’.

Niamh referenced specific embodied moments in her narrative. As mentioned, at the time of interview, she felt she was 2 stones overweight. She described her stomach as a ‘*spare tyre*’. She talked about wearing tracksuits to hide her bulges as wearing loose clothes disguised her bigger body. Niamh recalled sitting behind the desk at work in order to deflect anyone from staring at her ‘*middle section*’. Concealment of what she perceived as her fat stomach was an ongoing but necessary task. The challenges this presented for Niamh in her everyday life were difficult for her to talk about.

**Food and Eating**

The literature on women and body management practices points to food and eating as being particularly symbolic for women (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a, b; Gailey, 2014; Gimlin, 2008a, b; Heyes, 2006; Probyn, 2000). In the current study, food and eating were central to all of the women’s personal narratives. They were talked about more frequently within the ambivalent participation story type. Niamh discussed food and eating throughout both interviews:

> I just know that I could keep it [weight] under control you know? I, I wish I could develop a long em, long term way of eating that would keep the weight under control instead of the, this thing, because even when I go to classes and even when it works I know that it’s only going to work for a short time which is kind of a bit of a negative attitude. If I could just identify what [laughs] triggers me to over eat, I’d em, I’d have no problem keeping it off but I can’t.
Niamh drew from the out-of-control element of the dominant weight loss narrative to explain her weight gain. She appeared to resign herself to the inevitability of failure to maintain weight loss, a significant plotline in this story type (Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, 2001). Her mentioning of the term ‘triggers’ was interesting, as Slim Ireland provided a stock of knowledge about weight loss which referenced triggers constantly. Niamh researched weight loss extensively. Her professional work gave her access to libraries and her personal story of long-term weight concerns led her to delve into the topic in some detail. However, this did not appease her sense of failure and resignation:

Typical day for me is fine. Breakfast is fine, lunch is fine, dinner is fine. My problems are the evening when I munch or pick up things or, you know finish off leftovers. I’d eat a lot of fruit which em, triggers em, I don’t know what it triggers, insulin? I’m, I’m not sure, this could be wrong triggers the sugar rush, triggers like insulin in your body which can trigger now that’s probably wrong but it was just something I was reading in an article. It was to do with low GI and high GI foods. Well ideally you’re supposed to keep your fruit under control you know and I would actually eat a lot of fruit. So like I say, it’s not that I eat, it’s not that, it’s when I say I over eat, it’s not that I sit down to a huge plate of food and I finish it all off. It’s not, it’s that I em seem to pick and pick up bits and pieces and you know, eh kinda munching. And like I say, when I’m out of the house I’m fine.

Food restriction and a tacit understanding of how food works in and on the body are embedded in weight loss discourse, although the latter is often underpinned with scientific misunderstanding and obfuscation (Coveney, 2008; Gard, 2011). Niamh’s numerous mentioning of ‘triggers’ suggested a familiarity with the literature on food and eating but also a seeking out of answers that simply were not there. Many times she stated that she ate very little, if anything, during the day but would load up with food in the evenings. She recognised that such eating patterns may not have been conducive to weight loss but felt somewhat ‘helpless’. Probing this some more she revealed that, while she and her husband shared cooking and cleaning duties, Niamh much preferred the outdoors. She stated that at times ‘I don’t even like particularly being in the kitchen’:

So, eh food is something you get it, prepare it, cook it but it’s not something that I would spend an awful lot of time em preparing or cooking or that I would particularly enjoy. You know, I do it. It has to be done but no I don’t like it.
For Niamh, too much time spent indoors might mean eating more. She understood the importance of food and eating but, paradoxically, viewed it as a perfunctory exercise that had to be got through. May (2004) argues that many women as mothers wish to claim the identity of ‘being a good mother’. Preparing and cooking food is deeply embedded in this identity. Women must simultaneously perform [hetero-] normativity through food related care work while accounting for their own food related feminine practices. However, Niamh did not particularly enjoy care related food tasks and seemed to struggle with performing this aspect of her identity as mother. Yet, she stated that one of her favourite moments was when the children had friends over and they organised picnics outside the house where the picnic table was ‘loaded up with all sorts of food’. These moments were full of pleasure for her and she stated that she loved to relax with all the family during these times. Niamh felt that her family were fully supportive of her attending the slimming classes although she said they knew that this would mean changes in what food was bought and eaten in the house, albeit, she was careful to point out, changes that would not last.

Niamh also mentioned that when she was relaxed and happy she ate more, put on weight, and then had to face the challenges this presented. She also stated that when she was busy and trying to complete all her daily tasks, she ate in an unhealthy fashion:

And some days I do that, I just think, oh I couldn’t give a toss. I just eat what I want. Yeah, but I don’t feel good after I eat what I want. Usually, I have eaten too much of a mixture of things and I feel kind of bloated and full and I think, oh god this is not a good feeling and this is not the way I want to feel … Sandwiches actually are dreadful. I could live on sandwiches. You know they are dreadful. But you don’t be. It’s like quickly put a sandwich together and run out of the door and drop somebody or pick somebody up, and you don’t even notice you’ve eaten it. Eh, and then I’ll go back to drinking the water and the fruit and you know and eh. I actually feel better when I eat healthy, and when I eat healthy, and when I’m eating right, I actually feel better in myself. I know I won’t feel good after I’ve eaten say a Chinese dinner [sic] after I’ve eaten it, em, but I don’t, I can’t conjure up that feeling just before I’m about to eat it. You know. So, if I could I’d have no problem. It’s like my memory knocks that bit to the back of my mind.

This extract illustrates how food and eating held many contradictions and tensions: duty and pleasure; gain and loss; care and control. It also alludes to the aforementioned theory of mind/body dualism. Niamh wanted to be
able to sit down and eat what she wanted, when she wanted. She wanted to
eat well and eat healthy. Desire and health seemed to be positioned
differently on a spectrum. Her corporeal desires and need to eat were in
 conflict. Until she regained control over her body, until she could ‘conjure up
that feeling’, her body would always usurp her ‘good’ intentions, these being
located in her mind. Thus, despite all her research on food and eating, all the
many times she had attended slimming classes, all the weight related
practices she had immersed herself in, Niamh remained puzzled as to why
she had not yet found a solution to her ‘weight problem’. Niamh stated:

And it is, it is working em, it is working a bit better. But, em, I just, it isn’t working full
stop for me you know. I just keep hoping that I’ll, I’ll em discover some way of eating
that doesn’t, that my weight doesn’t go up and down but I haven’t so far.

She quietly believed that the answers lay in conquering her food and eating
habits.

The Slimming Class
Niamh liked the classes and the class leader very much and felt she learnt a
lot about nutrition and food. The leader in question, Maggie, had had some
training in nutrition and brought this knowledge into her classes every week.
Niamh accepted what the leader said about avoiding low-fat foods and fizzy
drinks and instead choosing more healthy options and to just eat less. Niamh
felt that she herself was armed with much knowledge about the machinations
of weight loss and food and eating: ‘I know exactly what I should be doing. I
could give the classes’. When she first arrived in Class 2 she stated she felt
a sense of déjà vu. But she also felt this class was beginning to work for her.
However, attending the slimming class represented an imaginary line vis-à-
vis unacceptable weight gain, over which she had crossed. Having reached
what she believed to be a level of unacceptability, Niamh described the
significance of the class as follows:

What’s it like going every week? I don’t mind going to em the slimming classes
during the winter time, its fine. I find it’s a cut-off point. Em if you, if you’ve, if you’ve
been having a week where, where you’re kind of it’s a good week or a bad week or
something like that, you go to the slimming classes and you weigh in and you kind of
em, em, it’s like you wipe the slate clean and you start again. So you, so then you
come out of the class, or for me like, come out of the class and okay you’ll start
again and at least you’ll be kind of, you’ll be in that frame of mind and hopefully
you’ll have listened to the talk and you might have picked up a few tips, and 3, 4, 5
days will be good and then towards 5, 6, 7 days you’re kind of, it’s kind of hard to
keep going and you’re slipping back and you’re slipping back into old habits and
maybe eating a bit too much and maybe snacking a bit again and then I find when I actually go the classes again, okay you’re either up or you’re down or whatever but again it’s that’s the end of that week and put that week to bed and then start a new week and hopefully try again you know?

Unlike Siobhán, Niamh did not claim a moral identity around being ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Instead, the week between classes was described as being ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The slimming classes were a space for atonement, a space where some level of forgiveness could be granted and a space where Niamh felt she could face up to weight gain. Standing on the scales at the end of a busy week in front of a class full of people enabled Niamh to ‘wipe the slate clean’. She recognised that she could simply stand on the scales at home and assess her weight but the class afforded her public sanction and absolution and she therefore felt she would be more likely to respond to the demands of weight management. *Slim Ireland*, similar to most weight management organisations, sought to extend control into women’s everyday lives. Much like Foucault’s Panopticon, this involved increased self-surveillance through the monitoring of food, eating and exercise. Returning to class every week to account for oneself and atone for any indiscretions with regard to food, eating and weight gain, indicated that at some level, the extension of surveillance into women’s everyday lives succeeded.

At this stage, Niamh believed that what worked for her, however temporarily, were the slimming classes. Coming to the classes helped keep her weight under control. An interesting reflection, considering the ambivalence she expressed towards weight loss practices both within and outside the classes. Over the past 13 years, she was never more than two years absent from a class and knew many of the women who attended as they all had signed up for related classes over the years. While this provided a social outlet for many, including Niamh, there was a certain resignation when they would meet each other again. Niamh was acutely aware of the recurring experience of signing up for slimming classes:

Because I just, I know that when I’m actually going, em that I’ll get it under control you know. I also think that the whole thing is self-defeating because each time that I go back I will have put on slightly, I will weigh in slightly heavier so I often think that if I’d never, ever, ever gone to the first one maybe I would have stayed at the weight. I’m actually, yeah I probably am. I probably do regret actually ever going to the first
one. Because when I actually look at the weight that I was when I went to the first one, it wasn’t so bad at all you know but I would never go back to a class at less that I weigh in when I left it.

This was a huge moment for Niamh and she cried when she said it. We stopped the interview and sat in silence for a few minutes processing this realisation. In other words, attending the slimming classes may have had the complete opposite effect of what many perceive is their remit: instead of alleviating Niamh’s ‘weight problem’, in fact it was made much worse by being there. This was also crucial to the ambivalent participation story type as it highlighted the temporal nature of slimming: cyclical; possibly never-ending; full of uncertainties.

Reflections and Imagined Futures
As mentioned in Niamh’s prologue, she was a reluctant interviewee. This was evident from the moment she agreed to participate. When I arrived at her house for the second interview, she immediately wanted to see the interview transcript for interview 1. I had offered all the women the opportunity to read my transcript of their first interview. They were invited to change anything they wanted. While skimming through the transcript Niamh could not believe that she had said so much, as she again stated that she found it really hard to talk about her weight. Even with friends she mentioned that, while they might casually chat about body size generally, the ‘nitty gritty’ of body weight and size was simply too painful to discuss. Ultimately she believed weight loss was ‘not rocket science’ but she continually returned to what she perceived as her failure to realise her weight maintenance goal:

Eh, I don’t know if I actually said it to you at the end of the first interview but when I actually put it into words, em, the whole, em when you asked me how long was I losing weight and how long had I been losing weight and how long had I been attending classes and, when I actually put it into words, I didn’t actually realise, em how long I had been at the weight or I never had put it into words before, and it was a bit strange putting it into words. Do you know, it’s something that you just kind of, eh, you deal with, and eh I never thought about it much before and it was a bit strange, thinking about it.

What is the status of this account? Had Niamh ever spoken about weight management in this way heretofore? What was she drawing from to reflect on the interviews this way? She stated that before the first interview she had been thinking about weight so much that she felt she had ‘overthought it’ and
may have said things that were not accurate. Indeed, when she examined the transcript, she asked me to take certain things out. In sociological research narrative interviews are not therapeutic exchanges but they do afford people the opportunity to re-story their experiences. Niamh did this over the course of the two interviews. An example of this occurred during a brief discussion about the value or otherwise of the *Slim Ireland* materials distributed in the classes. Niamh stated that these materials, and indeed those supplied by WW, are all the same: she could ‘write the book’. I enquired had she ever thought about writing a book:

No, I am not going to write the book. No, I have thought about writing books, but it certainly won’t be on weight loss. No, in fact when this interview is over today, I intend never to think about it again for a long time.

After all she had spoken about it was difficult to imagine that Niamh might stop thinking about weight management for a long time. This reflects the ambivalence present in accounting for weight.

Cyclical involvement in weight loss practices lay ahead for Niamh. She looked to her future involvement with much less hope than Siobhán. She was cognisant of the paradox therein. Niamh concludes her narrative:

> It [watching weight] is always there and it’s a constant cycle. And you know the awful thing is, there’s such failure involved, you know every time. Like every time you lose it, with me anyway, you know. Every time I lose it I put it back on.

Here, we see evidence of despair in Niamh’s narrative. She clearly recognises that cyclical attendance has not provided the solutions she has sought. What is also significant is how the *Slim Ireland* narrative does not neatly align with the personal narratives in the ways it intends. While failure can be part of the quest, it is not positioned as the end point. However, for Niamh and the ambivalent story type generally, failure is, in fact, endemic in weight management.

**Summary of Niamh’s Narrative of Slimming**

Niamh’s narrative of slimming has a cyclical temporality. This is framed by the story type of ambivalent participation.

- Her initial involvement begins in her 30s. She had three children in quick succession and gains weight during and after each
pregnancy. Thus began almost 13 years of cyclical engagement with weight management practices, including slimming classes, gym membership, and exercise regimes.

- Niamh’s weight fluctuates. She gains and loses ‘the same’ 2 to 3 stone in weight during this time. Weight gain is narrated as being unacceptable. Reaching a level of unacceptability necessitates a return to a slimming class.
- Niamh researches weight management extensively. She keeps up to date with as much information as possible. Notwithstanding her knowledge, she believes that the insight she needs to enable her to control her desires for food and eating is beyond her comprehension.
- Body weight status moves to the background and the foreground depending on life circumstances. Ultimately, slimming is narrated as being enmeshed with failure. Niamh is not sure if membership of Slim Ireland or any future classes she will attend hold out much hope. She expects to join more classes though.

**Discussion**

An analysis of women’s narratives of their experiences of weight management is framed by the theoretical assumption that women in particular, are caught in a nexus of cultural values about appearance, femininity, health and individual responsibility (Tischner, 2009). Much of the critical and feminist research on the general area of women and body management focuses on the experiences of particular categories of women including, fat women (Gailey, 2014; Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013; Webb, 2009); women with ‘eating disorders’ (Burns and Gavey, 2004; Eckermann, 2009; Gailey, 2009; Gremillion, 2003; Saukko, 2008); and women who have undergone weight loss surgery (Temple Newhook et al., 2015; Throsby, 2008a, b, 2009a, b, 2011; Young and Burrows, 2013). The current study takes as its focus the narratives of women who ordinarily do not identify as fat, do not have an ‘eating disorder’, and have not had weight loss surgery.
Instead, they can be categorised as involved in the more pervasive and mundane practices of weight management, practices often taken for granted and minimally analysed in an Irish context. In this study, the women narrate their stories from within the narrative environment of a commercial slimming programme.

In this section, I bring together the analyses of the women’s narratives of slimming that draws from the theoretical frames presented in Chapter 2. The approach taken in this study highlights the usefulness of deploying a narrative inquiry methodology, to illuminate how women make sense of their lives in the context of their involvement in a normalising practice that is weight management. Returning to the main research question articulated in the thesis, I argue that personal narratives are cultural productions generated interactively through normatively structured performances and interactions (Ewick and Silbey, 1995:211). They are also valid articulations of individual and collective experiences that are drawn from wider cultural narratives (Errante, 2004). An analysis of the women’s narratives revealed two dominant story types, episodic commitment and ambivalent participation.

Across both story types, although women accepted they were immersed in weight loss, they narrated their weight management practices as ‘not dieting’. They preferred terms such as ‘watching what I eat’ or ‘eating healthily’. In addition, they completely refused to identify as ‘obese’, preferring the term, overweight. Refusing the label of ‘obese’ was significant as it suggested some form of narrative resistance to dominant weight loss narratives (Cordell and Ronai, 1999). Similarly, the women never discussed BMI and what it might mean as a measurement. In these ways, I argue that the women attempted to create some distance between how Slim Ireland, and indeed Irish society, might negatively define their weight status, and how they self-defined (De Brún et al., 2014). While all the women drew from aspects of both story types, the exemplars revealed the richness of women’s narratives and the importance of attending to such richness when analysing women’s participation in commercial weight loss programmes. Three themes
are discussed to advance the analysis: body-projects, disrupting the linear quest narrative, and the morality of slimming.

**Weight Management as Body-Project**

Successfully losing weight was the outcome of the story the women wished to tell about themselves. A common theme in the women’s narratives, which draws on the normalising project that is dieting, was that they must lose weight, that their weight was/is an ongoing ‘problem’. Further, they felt that they could not lose weight without both the assistance provided, and discipline demanded of them, by attendance at the classes. In other words, they felt they needed to gain more control over their bodies, their eating and exercise habits and their lives but, paradoxically, they felt this could only be achieved by submitting to the instructions of another. As I met with them they were immersed in a disciplined and routinised set of daily practices to facilitate weight loss. Decisions about food, eating and exercise were reflected on and managed on a daily basis.

As outlined in chapter 2, the normalising project that Foucault conceptualises through governmentality and bio-power, renders the production of ‘docile bodies’ as innately possible, in the context of commercial slimming classes (Bordo, 1993; Heyes, 2006). To reiterate Bordo’s (1993) commentary on dieting, she describes it as the ultimate form of ‘correction’. Many studies of dieting take this assumption and follow it through to position dieting as repressive and dangerous for women (Cooper, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 1996). Indeed, it must be remembered that the normativity of weight loss amongst women makes it very difficult to envisage speaking outside of hegemonic narratives.

However, through the lens of Foucault’s later work on technologies of the self, we see the possibilities for weight management to offer capabilities and pleasures for women, however limited. Such possibilities were threaded through both story types. My argument is that as weight management developed as an important body-project *over time* in their everyday lives, it necessitated a reflexive working on their bodies both within and outside the
slimming classes (Gill, et al., 2005; Gimlin, 2006; Shilling, 2012). In this way, their involvement in weight loss was a continual process of knowing and learning about the changes in their bodies, relationships to food and the capabilities of their bodies (McNamara, 2012). There were some pleasures to be gained from immersing themselves in what they perceived to be disciplined eating and exercising regimes. Although the women’s narratives revealed how they subjected themselves to the intense surveillance of normalising practices on the female body, which might indicate a complicity in their own oppression (Spivak, 1995), they also revealed moments of subversion and critical reflection on these normative practices. Therefore, in line with Gremillion’s (2009:246) assertion, I argue that the women’s narratives indicate that effective forms of resistance will not emerge from or occupy a space ‘outside’ of the status quo. Instead, any resistance to powerful normalising constructs will most likely occur from within such constructs.

Disrupting the Linear Quest Narrative
Darmon (2012) argues that commercial weight-loss groups engage in institutional socialisation and deploy specific modes of surveillance aimed at controlling participants’ attitudes and behaviours. In Chapter 6, I elaborated on how Slim Ireland constructs slimming as a quest for a better body, underpinned by the promise of self-transformation. It achieves this through the generation of a narrative arc, a story board of what slimming is. Drawing from ‘truth’ claims that circulate widely in Irish society, Slim Ireland positioned slimming as a necessity for many women, most especially those defined as overweight and obese. Such ‘truth’ claims emanate from within anti-obesity rhetoric and neo-liberal conceptualisations of the responsible, healthy citizen. Ultimately, I argue that Slim Ireland sought to enact techniques of power and surveillance to shape its members’ practices and narratives (Clarke, 2015; Heyes, 2006).

The presentation of the two exemplar narratives, those of Siobhán and Niamh, reveal a more complex account of the meanings of the mundane practices of weight management for women. Cyclical engagement, a
common pattern across both types, discerned a more erratic pattern in the pursuit of weight loss than that promulgated by *Slim Ireland* (Clarke, 2015; Coleman, 2010; Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain, 2012). Heyes (2006) demonstrates that women’s participation and immersion in a weight loss programme must acknowledge the multiple temporalities of dieting and the capabilities that dieting can promote. The argument developed in this chapter is that there are many temporalities involved at once in dieting (Coleman, 2010). Therefore, I argue that the temporal dimension of slimming is central to an understanding of the ways in which women give meaning to their experiences. Further, this illustrates how narrative foreclosure can be staved off and disrupted.

The emergence of the two story types revealed that the linear temporality embedded in the quest narrative, as constituted by *Slim Ireland*, was disrupted in the personal narratives of the women, albeit in different ways. In the episodic commitment story type, the temporality of slimming was framed by ongoing and episodic immersion in weight management practices. There was greater acceptance of this cyclical pattern although it tended to veer off in different directions. In the ambivalent participation story type, there was much less acceptance of the cyclical pattern. Instead a dissonant narrative emerged that undercut the quest narrative. This involved the recognition of, and frustration with, the cyclical and seemingly never-ending nature of weight management. This gave rise to a questioning of the ‘successful slimmer’ whereby the struggles involved to become a successful slimmer were challenged. Past ‘failures’ were a constant reminder of the struggle involved in trying to lose and maintain weight. In turn, this suggests a pushing back against the quest narrative. While bodily transformation is a key motivation for weight loss, there is recognition of the many uncertainties and doubts attached to the pathway to weight loss.

The findings also suggest that women do not simply internalise and translate the *Slim Ireland* narrative into their everyday narratives. Certainly, in telling aspects of the *Slim Ireland* narrative, they demonstrated that they acquired
an appropriate understanding of the necessity and trajectory of weight management. Further, the tellability of particular stories in the slimming class relegated more complex stories to the background. However, in the context of the interviews, more complex and difficult stories were told. These included stories of failure; of body shame; and of the difficult relationships with food. Food issues, for example, were narrated as being much more complex than the simplistic narrative disseminated in the slimming class. In the episodic commitment story type, Siobhán talked about her chaotic eating habits in school, during pregnancy and when she was minding the small children at home every day. In the ambivalent participation story type, Niamh explained how food was tolerated but that many times food and eating were chores to be worked through. There were very few moments of real pleasure for Niamh, to be gained from food and eating. Therefore, the narratives about weight management told and re-told in the slimming classes each week were potentially restrictive, and only managed a superficial representation of the deeper and wider dimensions of women’s participation in weight management practices. I argue that by disrupting the quest narrative, the ‘truth’ claims drawn on by Slim Ireland about the temporalities and necessity of weight loss, are partially contested in the women’s narratives.

Morality of Slimming: On Being a ‘Good’ Woman

Across both story types, there was a profound sense of the necessity of having to account for a problematic body, a body defined by its appearance, shape and weight. Throsby (2009c:201-202) describes how the failure to lose weight is seen as ‘evidence of a moral failure of individual responsibility to care appropriately for the self, and by extension, to be a good citizen’ (see also Beasley and Bacchi, 2002 on the ‘good’ citizen). Failure to lose weight and maintain weight loss was foregrounded in all the women’s narratives. This made it very difficult to narrate weight gain in alternative ways, as society effectively sanctions fatness as failure (Saguy, 2013).

The necessity of accounting for oneself was illustrated in the women’s narrating of the place of the slimming class in their lives. They all mentioned
the inevitability of attending the classes. The women believed that the only way they could stay on track with weight management was through submitting themselves to the moral evaluation of another: the class leader. Webb (2009:867) explains, in her study of moral work in the obesity clinic, that 'the obese individual is required to regain moral standing by making an effort to become thin and displaying self-control'. The slimming class is similarly a space where moral work is undertaken (Mycroft, 2008). The moral character in the Slim Ireland narrative was the ‘successful slimmer’ as she embodied the ‘slimmer identity’ through the achievement of a normative body weight status. The class leader played a central role here as she was the only visible live person in the classes who had successfully and in the long-term, lost weight and, crucially, maintained this weight loss (Heyes, 2006).57 She was the successful slimmer. Therefore, she was legitimately positioned to demand of women that they account for themselves. For Siobhán and Niamh, immersing themselves in the Slim Ireland programme displayed effort and fortitude. The slimming class offered them the space wherein to publicly display and regain their moral standing. Conversely, if they did not lose weight, it became a space of sanction and disappointment, evident in Niamh’s leaving of the class immediately post weigh-in, in the weeks she ‘failed’ to lose weight.

Unlike in the slimming classes, I did not ask women to account for their weight status. Nor did I make any moral judgements on their body management practices. However, as Monaghan (2008a) has shown, people defined as overweight and obese have to almost continually account for and explain their actions both to themselves and others. A study on single women in Ireland, found that to be single remains an unacceptable and discreditable social identity in contemporary Irish society (Byrne, 2000). Single women are aware of this discreditable status and work hard to manage it in their everyday lives (Byrne, 2000). In a similar vein, the women

57 Other successful slimmers appeared in the before and after images, scattered throughout the slimming space.
in my study were acutely aware of the construction of fat women as having a
discreditable status in contemporary Ireland. They too worked hard to
manage this in their everyday lives. This was evident in how Siobhán and
Niamh sought to claim a moral space for themselves through distancing
themselves from that which might label them negatively. Siobhán rejected
the idea that she was fat when called such on Brooklyn Bridge. For Niamh,
morality revolved around acceptability in that, at times, her body weight was
deemed completely unacceptable, whereas at other times in her life, she had
a more acceptable body weight. Reconciling these tensions proved difficult.

Much of the critical research on women and weight management illustrates
in Monaghan, 2008a) developed the concept to refer to the preoccupation
with health that characterises contemporary neoliberal societies. Health has
become a metaphor for a good life. Healthism is related to moral worth and is
bound up with the ethical self, the 'good' citizen who engages in self-care for
the good of herself and society (Monaghan, 2008a). Health is seen then as
an intrinsic good (Gailey, 2014). Women defined as overweight and obese
are seen to occupy a deviant position, one that appears to reject health and,
by implication, the moral duty to be healthy.

In chapter 6, I discussed how *Slim Ireland* made reference to health and
taking responsibility for health, and also how it conflated health with
appearance (Tischner, 2013). There were powerful messages about
women’s appearance, sometimes expressed directly, sometimes delivered
under the guise of health. All of the women in the study felt they were
reasonably healthy and did not express any major health concerns. This
suggests another layer of disruption to the dominant narrative of weight loss
that circulates in wider society. In other words, while *Slim Ireland* and society
generally, position overweight and obesity as ultimately unhealthy and
requiring rectification, the women signalled different reasons for their
immersion in weight management. Appearance concerns and not health
concerns dominated their narratives (Bacon and Aphramor, 2011). Thus, the
women felt their moral worth was defined in terms of the appearance of the weight, size, and shape of their bodies. Siobhán found it difficult to look at photographs of herself when heavier. Niamh sat behind the desk to hide her large stomach. Both chose clothes that rendered their bigger bodies less visible. Some studies have suggested that issues of health are more prominent in older women’s (age 55 +) weight loss narratives (Gimlin, 2007, 2008a, b). The mean age for my study was 43 years. This suggests that even in middle age, appearance concerns continue to pervade women’s body weight narratives. My study reveals how newer concepts of femininity continue to draw from current normative expectations of what women’s bodies should look like: slim, thin, healthy and fit.

When health was mentioned by the women, it was done so in relation to their role as mothers. In a familistic society like Ireland, being a ‘good mother’ is an enduring narrative (Byrne and O’Mahony, 2012). This requires of women to manage their own weight and health but also that of the family. Women still perform most of the homecare tasks in Irish society including planning and cooking the meals. Slim Ireland recognised this and developed meal plans to ‘suit’ the family. Siobhán spoke of her desire to remain healthy and to be a role model for her daughters. When she was heavy she felt this undermined her role as a ‘good’ mother. She commented on the weight of her daughters and the concerns she had for one of them who was ‘plump’. Niamh shared the cooking duties with her husband but stated that generally she hated cooking and the demands placed on her to organise family meals. Paradoxically, she stated she enjoyed summer time when she could feed a large group outdoors. There were tensions across both story types about the expectations made of them as mothers. However, there was minimal questioning of such tensions. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how current anti-obesity policy in Ireland is targeting women as mothers. While this did not directly find its way into the women’s narratives, they were aware that they had responsibilities to themselves and their families to maintain ‘healthy’ body weights.
Conclusion

Women’s narratives of weight management are shaped by organisational narratives, their individual life trajectories and the social and cultural context of Irish society. All of the women have grown up in an Ireland that has experienced much social change (see Chapter 3). Over the past 50 years, the circumscription of women’s lives by the Catholic Church and state has been challenged in a variety of areas, not least of which is the historical control of women’s bodies. New concepts of womanhood, grounded in feminism, individualism and consumerism, have emerged, from within which women can narrate very different lives to previous generations of Irish women. Women have greater choices in the areas of education and employment. More women than ever are in the paid labour force. Divorce and contraception have been legalised. Notwithstanding these changes, women in Ireland, as in many Western societies, continue to have to account for themselves in particularly gendered ways. Moreover, much of this is drawn from contemporary moral concerns about women’s bodies – what they look like; and how much they weigh. This has a historical resonance in how Irish society engendered considerable control over women’s bodies. This chapter has shown how the women’s narratives are structured in ways that both align with and speak outside the dominant narrative of slimming as a quest for a better body. The two case studies also illustrate the precarious and oft-times contradictory meanings of slimming for women. I now turn to the final chapter to conclude the thesis.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

A sociology of stories should be ... more interested in inspecting the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, and their role in the political process (Plummer, 1995:19).

Introduction

An oft-expressed sentiment, heard many times during the course of observation in the slimming classes, is captured in the following exchange between Sue, a member, and the class leader. The exchange takes place during the weigh-in:

Leader: Well Sue, were you good this week?
Sue: I tried to be good. I really did. I tried real hard this week.
Leader: Well, let's see then. The scales never lie Sue. Remember that. You must try to be good every week (Field work notes, Class 3)

The weighing scales engendered much trepidation in women as they stood on them every week, eyes staring straight ahead, avoiding the numbers on the scales. An inanimate object became reified as a barometer of women’s ‘good’ behaviour and, it seems, had the extra ability to detect any lies that might be told! As I reflect on those moments, in the slimming classes, where women had to somehow show themselves to be ‘good’, I continue to be struck by the powerful messages this communicates to women, and about women. As indicated in this snippet from Sue’s narrative above, ‘being good’ is a thread running through narratives of slimming. It is also a thread running through narratives of womanhood in Ireland: women must be good mothers, good wives, good carers, and good cooks. I argue ‘being good’ is grounded in the idea of the good citizen. Beasley and Bacchi (2002) remind us that citizenship, with its connections to notions of ‘the good’ and the ‘good society’, has a central position in Western political discourse, including, of course, in Irish political discourse. Historically, in Ireland, women’s ‘citizenship’ was closely monitored in the ‘private’ and ‘domestic’ space, evident in a century of laws prohibiting the choice to work and in the regulation of fertility for example. Arguably, women’s ‘private’ lives were in fact, ‘public’ property, whereby the ‘good’ of the nation was located in the
regulation of women’s everyday lives (Conrad, 2004). The targeting of women as mothers in current anti-obesity policy indicates that the private/public nexus surrounding women’s everyday lives in Irish society has re-emerged, albeit in a different format.

The particular impetus guiding this study was my deep concern with the dominant social and cultural representations of weight management for women as normative, necessary and desirable, and how these are constituted in an Irish context. Positioning women and weight management as aspects of women’s everyday lives, I argue that these are under researched areas in Irish society. Moreover, the pervasiveness of anti-obesity discourse indicates that very few people escape its evaluative gaze. Achieving a normative body weight has been centre-staged in Western societies, including Ireland. This is grounded in ideas of health and well-being; responsible citizenship; and the pathologising of those deemed to be ‘overweight’ and ‘obese’. A careful reading of national and international literature revealed that the pursuit/attainment of a normatively defined body weight has become one central determinant of social acceptability for women, where the normative status of the ‘thin’ body is such that it is positioned both as the ‘natural’ body size and shape, and as a self-evident goal for women. However, the pursuit/attainment of a normatively defined thin body requires intense periods of body work for many women. In the case of slimming, such body work is a cyclical process which may have to be re-engaged with throughout the lifetime, as slimming is overwhelmingly characterised by periods of weight loss, weight maintenance and weight gain (Monaghan, 2008a, b). Taking a different approach to previous work on women and slimming, I focused my study on narratives of slimming, women and weight management that circulate in Irish society. I wanted to explore how these play out in the lives of women, immersed in everyday, mundane practices of weight management. By locating the study in slimming classes, I set out to observe first hand, the meanings attached to the body work that is involved in slimming, and the stories and narratives that circulate about women and weight management.
The overall purpose of this final chapter is to synthesise the thesis, to assess how the main aims and research questions were addressed, and to consider the contributions of my study. It also serves to point to future directions for research in this area. To begin, I restate the research questions that framed the study. I then provide a brief summary of the thesis to tease out how the research questions were answered and objectives met. This is further developed through a discussion of the two main arguments that emanated from the analysis of the literature and the empirical data. I then provide my reflections on the study, and identify the merits and limitations of this study. Finally, I conclude the thesis through a drawing together of the implications of the findings and suggestions for future research.

**Aims and Research Questions**

The principal aim of this research study as set out in Chapter 1 was to forge a theoretical understanding of institutional narrative resources about slimming and their impact on the women’s narratives of their weight management experiences. The central research question, outlined in Chapter 1, was contextualised further in Chapters 2, 3 and 4:

How are the narratives of weight management that are generated within the slimming class implicated in women’s narratives of their weight management experiences?

To address this central question, three objectives were devised to take account of the complexity of weight management in women’s everyday lives, and to extend the central research question:

- to deconstruct the narratives and stories crafted and told of weight management within the slimming classes
- to identify how women narrate, make sense of and practice weight management in their everyday lives in the context of their involvement in slimming classes and related practices.
• to establish the social and biographical contexts in which women narrate their practices of weight management.

Chapter 5 discussed in detail how the narrative research strategy was implemented to address the research questions. Chapters 6 and 7 formed the empirical core of the thesis. Chapter 6 provided an analysis of the slimming classes wherein I carried out my observations. I generated an in-depth account of the institutional narrative resources about weight management produced and disseminated in the classes. Chapter 7 turned to the women's ontological narratives, charting their personal stories of slimming, and teased out the biographical and temporal nature of their slimming narratives.

**Summary of Thesis**

Women's participation in the variety of body management practices that centre on body size and body weight has been subject to much theoretical investigation. The feminist expansion of Foucault's work provided the main theoretical lens through which to better understand the narrative frameworks and narrative environments that are involved in the production of weight management. Accordingly, the tensions between Foucault's repressive and enabling understandings of power and of governmentality highlighted the usefulness of his conceptual toolkit. In particular, the concepts of 'docile bodies', normalisation, and technologies of the self, proved helpful in initially thinking through the reasons why women engage in practices such as dieting and exercising (Bordo 1993). Foucault argued that the reasons that individuals engage in activities like dieting and exercising are related to the ways in which these activities help them to develop norms and competencies (Balfe, 2007).

A central concern framing the theorising of weight management practices refers to the production of normative femininity. Toerien et al. (2005) explain how feminist critics of normative femininity have long pointed to the ways in which women are socially required to expend time, energy, and money
transforming their bodies to better fit the feminine ideal. But much of this work of producing acceptable femininity is mundane and taken-for-granted. Arguably, slimming is one of the ‘more mundane, everyday body management practices (such as dieting and body image concerns)’ involved in the production of normative femininity (Riley et al., 2008:7).

In Ireland, the narrative nexus surrounding women’s lives, once dominated by Catholicism and the State and centred on the family, has certainly shifted in recent decades. While there are remnants of Catholic influence at all levels in Irish society, including at public events and in people’s everyday lives, there has been a decline in the authority, influence and status of the institution of the Catholic Church (Malesevic, 2010). Simultaneously, the state, and wider society generally, has embraced a neo-liberal approach to health and well-being, emphasising responsible citizenship and individualism (Share and Share, 2016). Neo-liberal theorists posit that the increasing importance of the ‘biographical project of the self’ carries with it a powerful (and new) form of governance (Griffin et al., 2009; Rose, 1999). The authentic and fully-realised self is subject to continual (self-) surveillance, transformation and improvement, in a process that has long formed a central element of normative femininity. In the neo-liberal social order there is an imperative on individual subjects to construct and display themselves as distinctive, authentic selves, discerning consumers, and as ethical subjects. If one behaves in ways that are taken to be excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible or undisciplined, then this is constituted as a moral failure of the self. Neo-liberal ideals of self-control and exhibiting control in all facets of one’s life, including eating, exercising and having a socially defined body weight, are enmeshed in weight management narratives (Cairns and Johnson, 2015a, b; Guthman and Dupuis, 2006).

Within this context, I gathered Irish women’s narratives of their experiences and practices of weight management as they participated in weekly slimming classes. However, as narratives and stories are never told in a vacuum, the argument I developed in this study, is that the narrative resources in
circulation about women and weight management must be identified and deconstructed to assess how they are implicated in women’s personal narratives. Inspired by the methodological tenets advanced by Chase (2011) and Gubrium and Holstein (2009) (see Figure 4.1), I asserted that these narrative resources are generated and reside in, particular narrative frameworks and narrative environments. Slimming classes were identified as a key narrative environment within which narratives of slimming are constructed and disseminated. Deploying an innovative narrative inquiry methodological framework, the form, content and context of the narrative production of weight management were explored, both within the slimming classes and in the women’s narratives.

Two key arguments emerge from the research, centring on what I submit is the narrative production of weight management. Firstly, *Slim Ireland* generates a set of narrative resources that narrates slimming as a quest, involving a linear, progressive temporality, and as a significant body-project in the lives of women. A seemingly coherent set of stories and a coherent identity are embedded in the quest. Frank (1995) explains that uncovering general storylines makes it possible to see what underlies the plot and the story tensions therein. In turn, this invokes the idea of the ‘tellability’ of stories. ‘Tellable stories’ are those that support the dominant plot. Secondly, the women’s personal narratives reveal a more complex, ambiguous and paradoxical experience of slimming than that which is narrated in the slimming classes. This serves to disrupt the quest narrative embedded in the slimming classes.

The Narrative Production of Weight Management

**Weight Management as Quest**

*Slim Ireland* drew from neo-liberal narratives to situate normative body weight status as fundamental to responsible and moral citizenship. Further, by adopting an orthodox position on the ‘obesity as epidemic’ narrative which links weight loss to health, normative femininity, and improved quality of life, it promoted its role to transform and reform recalcitrant bodies and selves. Weight loss was narrated as a ‘journey’ (Heyes, 2007; Monaghan, 2008a;
Stinson, 2001). Certain narrative conventions make possible the narration of weight loss as journey. These conventions are located in a quest narrative which emerged as the dominant narrative form in which *Slim Ireland* told its story.

All quests begin with a call (Ahmed, 2013; Frank, 1995). In this study, the call was also comprehended as turning points. These ranged from wanting to be slimmer to fit into clothes, to attending significant life events, to the foregrounding of body dissatisfaction, and to ill-health. The quest narrative involves a linear progress temporality. For *Slim Ireland*, this invoked the idea that weight loss has an endpoint which can be reached when women’s current ‘unacceptable’ body status is transformed via weight loss to a more ‘acceptable’ body status. In between these points, women were supported to understand that something positive could be gained from the experience of attending weekly slimming classes, constantly monitoring food intake and exercise regimes. Notwithstanding the allusion to endpoint, *Slim Ireland* also appealed to the temporal argument that for most women, weight management is a life-long struggle. Moreover, the women were continually reminded that weight maintenance is vital to the success of the quest.

*Slim Ireland* encouraged its members to tell their own stories, during the weigh-in and motivational talk segments of the class. However, the findings illustrated that only certain stories were tellable in the weight loss progress narrative. Thus, stories of struggle, loneliness, hunger, desire and disillusionment were relegated to the background. Women had a small amount of time with the class leaders during the weigh-in to tell other types of stories. However, the class leaders effectively shut down stories that did not fit with the narrative.

Identity was central to the *Slim Ireland* narrative of weight management as a quest. For narrative inquiry, identity is not something an individual ‘has’ inside them and which emerges from their mind. Rather, identities are constructed within social relations primarily through talk (Smith et al., 2016).
Slim Ireland attempted to mobilise and generate a coherent identity for women involved in its weight loss programme. In particular, through its materials, practices and talk in the classes, it constructed and disseminated the ‘slimmer identity’. The prevailing plot-line then centres on accounting for and atoning for past ‘sins’ and adopting the ‘slimmer identity’. Strategic characters were useful to support the ‘slimmer identity’. These included the women in the visual images on display and the class leaders. A further aspect of the ‘slimmer identity’ was that the body was understood as a malleable object that could be honed through constant vigilance and hard work. As illustrated in Chapter 6, women were encouraged to immerse themselves in the Slim Ireland programme and track their eating and exercise patterns hourly, daily and weekly. When they stood on the weighing scales every week, the class leader assessed how much body work they had engaged in and whether the ‘slimmer identity’ required further reinforcement in the classes. In this way, Slim Ireland supported the idea that ‘we have become responsible for the design of our own bodies’ (Giddens 1991:102). The implication drawn was that the quest for a better body is a necessary body-project in women’s lives.

Body-projects are deemed central to a person’s sense of self-identity in modern societies. Shilling’s (1993) comment is apposite: the exterior surfaces of the body come to symbolise the self. Accordingly, the exterior surface of the fat body, the overweight body, and the obese body seems to speak to a version of the self which is lazy, morally questionable, and representative of irresponsible citizenship, as wellbeing is apparently sacrificed for food (Throsby, 2009c). In this context, I argue that Slim Ireland explicitly positioned weight management as an essential body-project for women who attend its classes, and indeed for those who do not.

The body-project thesis has been critiqued particularly around its valorising of the mind/body dualism. In other words, the argument is made that body-project thesis simply restates the idea that the individual can exert her/his will over the body (Budgeon, 2003; Gimlin, 2006). Slim Ireland carefully deploys
the mind/body split in their narration of weight management. There was a relentlessnes in how many times phrases, such as ‘mind over matter’ or ‘it’s only a matter of switching on the light bulb’, featured in the preferred story of weight loss told by Slim Ireland. Further, the emphasis on individualising body-projects was such, that the social and cultural context of women’s lives was relatively ignored. As Gimlin (2006) observes, the body-project thesis provides a means for bringing the body into line with notions of a moral, ‘healthy’ self. For Slim Ireland, the self must embody the ‘slimmer identity’ and perform this identity accordingly in order to lose weight.

Weight Management as Non-Linear
What narrative inquiry offers is a way to understand people’s capacity to story their own lives in ways that complicate dominant narratives. This became evident during the observations, informal exchanges with the women in the classes, and more particularly, in the context of the one-to-one interviews. The women in this study have had a long and varied history of engagement in the pursuit of normative body weight through participation in slimming classes and related practices. This has had a profound impact on how they live their lives in Irish society. Weight management was narrated as a significant body-project in their everyday lives. Initially, what I found striking was that in talking about their weight management experiences the women drew upon a very limited range of narrative resources to narrate slimming as a life-long struggle. They all integrated aspects of this dominant narrative into their own stories. Further, as they were immersed in the slimming class environment, they were subject to the specific modes of surveillance (Darmon, 2012). As Chapter 7 illustrated, they proffered a narrative of slimming as an imperative for self-improvement and as morally congruent with the demands of contemporary, neo-liberal society. Furthermore, their personal narratives were oriented towards accounting for and claiming a moral self and demonstrating that they were ‘good’ women both within and outside the classes. Ultimately, successfully losing weight was the outcome of the story they wished to tell.
However, the personal narratives revealed that the form and content of the stories that women tell must be understood from within the wider context of their telling. The slimming class was one such context which generated a set of narrative resources for the women to narrate their personal weight loss stories. But the women’s narratives were also contextualised within their life experiences, their position as women within Irish society, and their status as mothers. Therefore, their telling of personal weight loss stories outside of the weekly telling in the class, opened up possibilities for an understanding of weight management that goes beyond the hegemonic narrative disseminated in the slimming classes (Maor, 2013). In turn, this evidenced how the women managed to disrupt the linear quest narrative.

Two dominant story types emerged as significant across all the women’s narratives: the episodic commitment story type and the ambivalent participation story type. Both story types illustrate how women had capacity to narrate slimming in more complex and ambiguous ways than the quest narrative supported. Disruption and breaks are what make a story tellable and re-tellable. The evidence of a narrative dialectic between women’s conflicting personal stories over time and Slim Ireland’s coherent quest narrative indicated some disturbances to the expected order of things. While the women’s stories were filtered through the repetitive and constant exposure to the quest narrative, the analysis of their stories revealed fissures. When the women had an opportunity to become talkative, new stories, beyond the quest narrative began to circulate. Consequently, the narrative production of weight management is more complex than that which is generated within the slimming classes. In this context, the narrative inquiry approach adopted in this study, enabled moving beyond the theoretical understanding of dieting and weight loss as a straightforward account of the totalising effects of governmentality. Table 8.1 is a summary of the main findings and how they addressed the research objectives.
Table 8.1: Summary of Key Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objectives</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To deconstruct the narratives and stories, crafted and told of weight management within slimming classes</td>
<td>Weight management is narrated as a Body-Project: <em>Quest for a Better Body</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Narrative Arc of Slimming: 5 elements</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confessing, Insatiable appetites, Fat phobia, [Re] Gaining control, Self-transformation</td>
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<td>drawing from</td>
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<td>Responsibilise citizenship, Health, Mobilisation of gender norms, Individual blame</td>
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<tr>
<td>To establish how women narrate, make sense of and practice weight management in their everyday lives in the context of their involvement in slimming classes and related practices</td>
<td><em>Episodic Commitment</em></td>
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<td>• necessity of slimming</td>
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<td>• seeking control</td>
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<td>• need for external help</td>
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<td>• recovery stories</td>
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<td>• disciplining the body</td>
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<td>• anti-fat sentiment</td>
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<td>• chaotic eating habits</td>
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<td>• emotional eating</td>
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<td>• normative</td>
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<td>• acceptance</td>
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<td><em>Ambivalent Participation</em></td>
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<td>• unsure about weight watching</td>
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<td>• health and aesthetics</td>
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<td>• slimming as struggle</td>
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<td>• anti-fat sentiment</td>
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<td>• food is tolerated</td>
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<td>• eating as chore</td>
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<td>• cyclical</td>
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<td>• weight management as failure</td>
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<td>• reject ‘obesity’ label</td>
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<td>• reject notion of dieting</td>
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<tr>
<td>To identify the social and biographical contexts in which women narrate their practices of weight management</td>
<td><em>Social Contexts:</em> Gender, Motherhood, White Irish, Rural, Catholic</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Biographical Contexts:</em> Slimming classes; ‘Out-of-control’ eating; Having children; Immersion in slimming narrative</td>
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</table>

Reflections on the Research

Merits and Limitations
The methodological choices, while necessary, made much demands on me in terms of travel, a multitude of emotionally charged moments, and a constant refrain to reflexively interrogate the interpretations that were emerging. This demanded methodological triangulation. My long experience as a qualitative researcher and as a cyclical dieter meant I was coming to this study with lots of ‘inside knowledge’. However, the decision to triangulate meant taking on board an ethnographic sensibility comprising prolonged
periods of non-participant observation in slimming classes, and a careful
listening out for and gathering of stories, through observation, interviews,
and an analysis of the organisation’s materials. Overall, I feel I maximised
the opportunities and embraced having, what I term ‘useful’ knowledge and
experiences, of practices of research, and practices of dieting.

Could this particular study have been better served by including women who
have long-since given up on practices of weight loss, women who never
dieted (hard to find), or women who are avowedly anti-dieting? The answer
to this must firmly be in the negative. I restricted participation to women who
were actively and cyclically engaged in weight management. In so doing, the
intellectual puzzle that gave rise to this study – that is, the profound concern
with the pervasiveness of dominant narratives of weight and body size and
their potential impact on women’s everyday lives – was demonstrably
researchable from within this group of women engaged in weight loss. The
methodological concentration on the slimming class unmasked it as a
contradictory space encompassing a regulation/disciplining of women’s
bodies, but also as a pleasurable space for women to meet each other.

An important limitation of the study is that it is a small scale narrative inquiry
that concentrated on women attending slimming classes in the BMW region
of Ireland. As such, it focused on a narrow category of White Irish, rural
women. Categories of sexuality, class and disability, were relatively latent in
the research design and analysis. In addition, theorising from a small number
of cases can be interrogated. Narrative inquiry demands depth and rich
insight and in so doing, emphasises limiting sample numbers. Arguably,
analysis of a diverse and increased number of cases would enhance the
arguments advanced in the study. A further limitation relates to the settings.
Immersing myself in slimming classes, narrowed the narrative settings within
which to gather and analyse stories of weight management. Other settings,
such as online weight loss programmes, obesity clinics and women’s gym
classes, would be interesting avenues to test the significance of institutional
story-telling and how it plays out in women’s lives. All of these indicate that
while my study presents worthwhile theoretical and methodological insights, it could be developed to incorporate the narratives of a more wide-ranging cohort of people, and more diverse weight management settings, to understand the complexities of the workings of gender and bodies in contemporary Ireland.

Contributions of the Research
This study makes a number of contributions. The study extends the increasing body of work emanating from critical weight studies, to research on women immersed in the more pervasive and mundane practices of weight management, practices that are often taken for granted. Through a concentration on areas of women’s everyday lives, minimally analysed in an Irish context, this study also contributes to Irish feminist sociological research. Both Siobhán and Niamh grew up in a changing Ireland, one where women’s lives were no longer as strictly circumscribed as in previous generations. However, in line with other feminist sociologists writing and researching women’s lives in Ireland, I assert that gender inequality persists in many facets of social life. My study demonstrates that in women’s everyday lives, their narratives of weight management are embedded in assumptions about the normativity of women and weight management.

Theoretically, my study contributes to research that challenges the appropriation of Foucauldian feminist perspectives on women and weight management which emphasise ‘docile bodies’ and governmentality. If dieting programmes are so repressive, why do women continue to flock to them in such huge numbers? It is not simply a case of slimming classes generating disciplined, overdetermined subjects (Johnson and Cairns, 2013). Weight management is much more nuanced than this suggests. The social context of dieting is always implicated in women’s narratives of their experiences of weight loss. Here, feminists must be cognisant of the powerful attraction that contemporary neo-liberal conceptions of health and self-transformation offer to women, and how women integrate these into their personal narratives. My study has highlighted some of the paradoxes and tensions for women as they pursue weight loss in their quest for different bodies. Slimming is hard
work and can be lonely and framed by hunger and a sense of failure. But for
the women in this study it was also, at various times, affirming and
educational. There were moments of acquiescence and resistance. The
slimming class engendered nervous tensions before the weigh-ins but
regardless of the outcome of that week’s weigh-in, the collective experience
of attending to oneself was celebrated during and after the classes. The
process of transformation during weight loss, and the attending pleasures
attached to the accomplishment of goals, cannot be ignored. Heyes’ (2007)
reading of these as ascetic practices, suggests that in the context of weight
management, women are afforded opportunities to gain some measure of
accomplishment through the regulatory and normalising practices of dieting.

Of course, theoretically, the slimming class also illustrates the features of
being a ‘forcing house’, having as its ultimate aim to transform these
women’s bodies in alignment with the norms governing women’s bodies in
Irish society, including norms of body weight and size (Goffman, 1961).
Through its articulation of slimming as a quest for a better body, *Slim Ireland*
introduced women to particular techniques and disciplinary practices
positioned as necessary in the struggle to lose weight. Much research has
demonstrated that there exists a ‘tyranny of slenderness’ and that the pursuit
of an ideal body type impacts negatively in women’s everyday lives (Bartky,
1990; Boero, 2012; Chernin, 1981; Gailey, 2014; Gimlin, 2006; Heyes,
2007). Bordo’s (1993:201) reading of the slender body is instructive when
she states that the slender body ‘codes the tantalising ideal of a well-
managed self’. In a society such as Ireland, that has a documented history of
circumscribing women’s bodies up to the present day, a well-managed self is
a much desired social and personal goal.

The study makes a significant contribution to narrative inquiry based
research in an Irish context. I contend that narrative inquiry is a valuable
methodology to examine and uncover the workings of gender relations in
society and the gendered nature of weight management in particular.
Three main reasons for selecting narrative inquiry came to the fore during the initial stages of the study:

1. slimming classes are narrative encounters, where

2. story-telling is a defining feature of weight loss narratives, and

3. weight management is constituted by plots, characters, stories and narratives.

As detailed in Chapter 4, the narrative inquiry approach was informed by Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) methodological framework, and focused attention on the relationship between the form, content and context of narrative production to produce coherent narratives. In particular, this approach favours a methodological focus on institutional storytelling, narrative environments and narrative practices. My study is a case study of this approach. As the study progressed, what was slowly rendered visible was the importance of attending to storytelling in all its complexity.

**Implications of the Study**

This study has shown that how women’s bodies fit in, what they look like, what they do and what they embody about self and society, remain key aspects of normative femininity within which women are framed and frame themselves in Irish society. An underlying theme across both the *Slim Ireland* narratives and the women’s narratives is the normalising power of dominant narratives of women and weight management. The normative endeavour to regulate femininity is evident through the encoding of gender norms in *Slim Ireland*’s narrative construction of weight management. There were constant references to ‘the little black dress’, to ‘the irresponsible woman’, and to ‘the emotional eater’. All of these were referenced in women-only classes, surrounded by brightly coloured images of smiling, happy women engaged in weight loss programmes. As Broom and Dixon (2008) point out, it is not surprising that weight loss organisations mobilise conventional gender norms in their materials – they are ultimately commercial organisations that know and understand their targeted markets.
I have focused on the dynamic interplay between the narrative environment of the slimming class and women’s personal narratives of their weight management experiences. In doing so, I set out to explore aspects of women’s everyday bodily lives, an area that is under researched in an Irish context. The background to the study is the persistence of anti-obesity rhetoric that positions many women as inadequate, irresponsible and unruly. My study takes the position that, while the materiality of body weight is significant, its meanings are socially constructed and culturally specific. The study has a number of implications which suggest pathways for future research in these areas.

Firstly, immersion in slimming classes foregrounds body weight as problematic in these women’s lives. It also makes it a challenge to speak outside of the dominant social norms on weight loss. Thus, in order to claim a moral self, a central feature of neo-liberal societies, women must account and atone for their current ‘problematic’ weight status. This is potentially harmful for women. The findings in this study revealed many of the anxieties and tensions that weight management engendered in women. For example, the pressures to lose weight as soon as possible after giving birth, raises questions about the implications this has, for women’s physical and emotional health. This was not given much hearing in the slimming classes, despite many women presenting with this story on their first night in class.

Secondly, Slim Ireland plays on and perpetuates the entrenched anti-fat narrative that exists in contemporary society around body weight and size. This is problematic and challenging. The implications of anti-fat sentiment on people’s health choices and lifestyles was only touched on in this study, although it provided a backdrop to much of how weight management is framed in the slimming classes and more generally in wider society. In this context, research on people who do not position their own body weight, or indeed fatness generally, as particularly problematic, would facilitate better understanding of fatness in Irish society. In addition, it must be remembered
that *Slim Ireland* draws from neo-liberal conceptions of health, that tend to individualise body weight status and reinforce unchallenged assumptions about what inhabiting a fat body means. This needs to be addressed in future research.

Thirdly, critical weight/obesity perspectives have not reached any real level of acceptance within the academy, within social policy or within the general population in Ireland. There are only a small number of academics working from within this paradigm in Irish society, myself included. My study has shown the relevance of these approaches to deconstructing the ‘obesity as epidemic’ thesis. However, future and larger studies should extend the implications of these approaches in policy areas and in the development of health behaviour programmes. In this context, an investigation of alternative models of body weight, including HAES® would be useful.

Fourthly, we are only at the beginnings of fully integrating narrative inquiry into the canon of sociological research methods in Ireland. Narratives are powerful forms of giving meaning to experience. Narrative inquiry affords researchers the methodology to uncover the workings of narratives in and between societies. The innovative narrative strategy deployed in the current study, could be applied across a range of sociological and political research concerned with understanding better the lives of people, while seeking to uncover the impact of a range of social inequalities in their everyday lives.

**Final Thoughts**

The integrity of this research is grounded in the rigour and quality of the research process (Silverman, 2010). I designed a research strategy to produce a theoretically informed analysis of narratives of women and weight management. While it is not possible to completely replicate this study, it has gleaned important insights into the localised and everyday social worlds of the women undergoing dieting for weight loss which, in turn, is connected with wider social and cultural discourses. My study was not about whether women were successful or not at weight loss. Neither did I position them as
‘having a weight problem’, even though many identified with this category. Rather, the evidence from this study clearly indicates that weight management has become normalised and normative for these women in Ireland. I developed an innovative narrative inquiry strategy that positioned the gathering of narratives at its core. I demonstrated that, while women’s individual and collective experiences of weight management are reduced to a limited range of storylines and articulated in the slimming classes as a linear quest narrative, these failed to capture the complexities of weight management in women’s everyday lives. The literature suggests that women’s lives have changed considerably and certainly for the better in Irish society. However, in this study, I have shown that it is in the small spaces that we see the persistence of a gender order that still insists that for many women, what we look like continues to play a significant role in how we are defined, and how we come to define ourselves as women.
Appendix 1

Topic Guide: Interview 1
BNIM Question

In this interview, I will ask you repeatedly to recount situations in which you have experiences of being involved in weight management. I won’t interrupt. I will take some notes and ask you a few questions when you’re finished. As you know, I’m researching women’s experiences of weight management so can you please tell me how you decided to join this slimming class?

Related questions
Can you recall the first time you thought about dieting? Please tell me about a typical situation.
If you look back, what was your first involvement in weight management? Could you please recount that experience for me?
Tell me about your experiences of ‘slimming’, going on a diet, being on a diet, trying to lose weight, joining a slimming class?
Please tell me about your daily/weekly regime in relation to weight?
What would life without watching your weight look like for you? Please tell me about a situation of this type or a typical day?
If you look at your household, what part does dieting and weight play in it? Please tell me about that situation?
What does dieting mean to you? What do you associate with the word ‘dieting’?
Have your relations with others changed since you have been to this class? Please tell me about a typical situation.
Can you remember a time when you were happy with your weight and body? Please tell me about that.
Can you remember a time when you became unhappy with your body and weight? What happened to make you remember that moment when you became unhappy with your body and weight?
What do you mean by a healthy body? Can you tell me about a situation of having a healthy or unhealthy body?
Can you tell me about your history of dieting? Please tell me about specific situations?
What will you do when you reach your target weight? What will happen next? Have you ever reached it? What happened?
Appendix 2

Topic Guide Interview 2

Follow up from Interview 1: Interviewee X
1. Any story on realisation moments'.

2. Tell me more about the importance of support and weight management?

3. Tell me about a typical day when part of a ‘slimming’ regime?

4. Tell me about what it means to ‘look/feel right’? Any images, feelings, thoughts, moments?

5. Tell me about what it was like to be pregnant? Changes in body shape? Feelings/images/events/moments? Wearing ‘Mam’s’ clothes?

6. Any stories about buying clothes as a big/not big woman?

Interview Topic Guide 2: Generic Questions
1. Any thoughts, feelings, images from first interview?

2. Being in a class, your relationship with the leader, other members, challenges to being/staying involved? Anything you noticed about the class? Of what it is like being in a slimming class? Can you tell me about any one particular class? Any particular occasion/moment within the class? Memory, image, feeling, event? Can you remember anything about the space that the class/meeting takes place in? Can you remember any more about the event? How it all happened? Memories of weigh-in’s?

3. How do you define success in relation to weight management? Can you tell me about your success stories/unsuccessful stories in relation to weight management? What does success/unsuccessful mean to you in the context of weight management?

4. What other ways have you tried to lose weight? Memories, how it all happened?

5. Have feelings about weight changed over time? What has been the impact of weight management on your life?


7. How do you think others view your body/women’s bodies? Society/family/friends/health professionals/class leader/other women/images of women’s bodies in the media/fashion industry/cosmetic industry? What do you think is a perfect woman? How is this portrayed in society and in the media? Women and weight in society?
8. Can you tell me about your image of fat is? What do you think it means to be fat? Dawn French?

9. What do you mean by a healthy body? Can you tell me about a situation of having a healthy or unhealthy body? Can you tell me about other activities you are involved in in terms of maintaining a healthy body? Smoking/drinking/drugs/exercise?

10. Men in classes?

11. What importance do you think society/men place on size and shape of women’s bodies?

12. How would you describe yourself?

13. Comfort eating – any thoughts?

14. What is your understanding of BMI and obesity categories?

15. Sum-up weight management story?
Dear participant.

Thank you for your interest in this project: Women and weight management in Irish society. You are being invited to participate in this research project and I am required to provide a participation information sheet and consent form to inform you about the study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain the potential risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask me any questions you may have. If you agree to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form. Please take as much time as you need to read it. You should only consent to take part in this research study when you feel that you understand what is being asked of you and you have enough time to think about your decision. Thanks again for reading this.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

This is a piece of research I am undertaking in NUIG for the purposes of completing a PhD in sociology. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you are currently involved in a weight management programme and/or you responded to my recruitment notice. From this study, I hope to learn about all the ways that women talk and think about weight management and the potential impacts it has on their lives. Approximately 60 women will be asked to participate in the entire study which will allow me to get a deeper insight into the reasons women are involved in weight management. At this stage your participation in this study will you allowing me to observe you and all the other participants during the weight management classes. In the future, you may be asked to take
part in one taped interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Written or verbal extracts from the observations/interviews may be used for future conference papers, published work and teaching/learning purposes. Your confidentiality and anonymity and of other persons and places mentioned in the interview will be preserved at all times. All transcripts, electronic and recorded versions of the interview are securely stored in my home office and identifiable names will be kept separate from the interview transcripts. This information will be held by me for a period of up to 10 years and then destroyed.

WHAT YOU WILL DO
Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you consent to take part you will be asked to allow me to observe you and the other participants during the weight management classes. You may also be asked to participate in an individual interview with me. This means we will meet to discuss certain topics related to women and weight management in general and your own experiences in particular. The interviews will be taped and I am happy to provide a transcription of the interview to you if you wish. At the end of the interview I will also ask you to fill in a short questionnaire. Some of the topics that we will be looking at during the interviews include: perceptions of healthy bodies, reasons for getting involved in weight management, how weight management impacts on your everyday life, what exercise and dietary programmes are you involved in, body appearance and looks, perceptions of body shape, length of time involved in weight management, role of health promotion, motivations and weight loss and experiences of weight management programmes.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS
Although you will not directly benefit from participation in this study, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of the practices associated with weight management and of the complex ways bodies, looks and appearance impact on all our lives. In addition, I would like you to understand that you are central to this study and the completion of same and you will be invited to feedback on my interpretation of your words and experiences.

POTENTIAL RISKS
The potential risks of participating in this study are limited but you should be aware that as we are dealing with a sensitive subject, some discomfort may arise for you in the course of our discussions. Please understand that you are free to stop the interview at any stage and to withdraw immediately. All information and topics discussed are confidential and your anonymity is assured at all times. I will provide leaflets and contact numbers of relevant organisations at the end of the interview which you can take home with you and contact if you see fit.
PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
The data for this project will be kept confidential. The observations will be recorded using notes that I will take during and after the classes. The interviews will be audio taped. Once the interviews are completed, transcribed and analysed, I will securely store the information in my home office and keep identifiable names and interview material entirely separate. My office will be secure at all times. The tapes will be stored for up to 10 years and then completely destroyed. Some of the data will be transferred onto computer files but these will be filed confidentially and again no identifiable names or other information will be revealed. I will discuss my findings with my supervisor, Dr Anne Byrne of NUI Galway but she will not have access to private information. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous at all times.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS
If you have any questions about this study, please contact myself at the address above. If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously the following: Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. C/o Office of the Vice President for Research, NUI Galway, ethics@nuigalway.ie

Summary
Participation in this study is on the clear understanding that your participation is voluntary can be withdrawn. A consent form accompanies this participant information sheet. A copy of both will be provided to you. You are required to sign a copy of the consent form should you agree to participate in this study. Thank you so much for considering taking part in this study.

PI: 1
Date:
Leaflet: Observation Study

My name is Jackie O' Toole (Government of Ireland Scholar). I'm doing a PhD in NUIG on women and weight management. Slim Ireland have given me permission to attend their classes to observe what happens. I am also going to interview women to find out about their experiences. If you would like any more information on the study and are interested in participating further in this confidential and anonymous study, please phone me at or email me jackie_otoole21@hotmail.com or otoole.jacqueline@itsligo.ie

Thanks!
Appendix 5

National University of Ireland Galway
Women and Weight Management in Irish Society
Participation Information Sheet: Interview

Jacqueline O’Toole M.Soc.Sc.
Department of Political Science and Sociology
Aras Moyal
National University of Ireland, Galway
otoole.jacqueline@itsligo.ie

Dear participant.
Thank you for your interest in this project: Women and weight management in Irish society. You are being invited to participate in this research project and I am required to provide a participation information sheet and consent form to inform you about the study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain the potential risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask me any questions you may have. If you agree to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form. Please take as much time as you need to read it. You should only consent to take part in this research study when you feel that you understand what is being asked of you and you have enough time to think about your decision. Thanks again for reading this.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
This is a piece of research I am undertaking in NUIG for the purposes of completing a PhD in sociology. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you are currently involved in a weight management programme and/or you responded to my recruitment notice. From this study, I hope to learn about all the ways that women talk and think about weight management and the potential impacts it has on their lives. Approximately 60 women are being asked to participate in...
the entire study which will allow me to get a deeper insight into the reasons women are involved in weight management. Your participation in this study will take about 2 hours as I will be asking you to participate in one taped interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour and one follow up taped interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Written or verbal extracts from the interviews may be used for future conference papers, published work and teaching/learning purposes. Your confidentiality and anonymity and of other persons and places mentioned in the interview will be preserved at all times. All transcripts, electronic and recorded versions of the interview are securely stored in my home office and identifiable names will be kept separate from the interview transcripts. This information will be held by me for a period of up to 10 years and then destroyed.

WHAT YOU WILL DO
Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you consent to take part you will be asked to participate in 2 individual interviews with me. This means we will meet twice to discuss certain topics related to women and weight management in general and your own experiences in particular. The interviews will be taped and I am happy to provide a transcription of the interview to you if you wish. At the end of the first interview I will also ask you to fill in a short questionnaire. Some of the topics that we will be looking at during the interviews include: perceptions of healthy bodies, reasons for getting involved in weight management, how weight management impacts on your everyday life, what exercise and dietary programmes are you involved in, body appearance and looks, perceptions of body shape, length of time involved in weight management, role of health promotion, obesity and health, motivations and weight loss and experiences of weight management programmes.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS
Although you will not directly benefit from participation in this study, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of the practices associated with weight management and of the complex ways bodies, looks and appearance impact on all our lives. In addition, I would like you to understand that you are central to this study and the completion of same and you will be invited to feedback on my interpretation of your words and experiences.

POTENTIAL RISKS
The potential risks of participating in this study are limited but you should be aware that as we are dealing with a sensitive subject, some discomfort may arise for you in the course of our discussions. Please understand that you are free to stop the interview at any stage and to withdraw immediately. All information and topics discussed are confidential and your anonymity is assured at all times. I will provide leaflets and contact numbers of relevant organisations at the end of the interview which you can take home with you and contact if you see fit.
PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
The data for this project will be kept confidential. The interviews will be audio taped. Once the interviews are completed, transcribed and analysed, I will securely store the information in my home office and keep identifiable names and interview material entirely separate. My office will be secure at all times. The tapes will be stored for up to 10 years and then completely destroyed. Some of the data will be transferred onto computer files but these will be filed confidentially and again no identifiable names or other information will be revealed. I will discuss my findings with my supervisor, Dr Anne Byrne of NUI Galway but she will not have access to private information. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous at all times.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS
If you have any questions about this study, please contact myself at the address above. If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously the following: Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. C/o Office of the Vice President for Research, NUI Galway, ethics@nuigalway.ie

Summary
Participation in this study is on the clear understanding that your participation is voluntary can be withdrawn. A consent form accompanies this participant information sheet. A copy of both will be provided to you. You are required to sign a copy of the consent form should you agree to participate in this study. Thank you so much for considering taking part in this study.

PI: 1
Date:
Appendix 6

National University of Ireland Galway

Women and Weight Management in Irish Society

Consent Form: Interview

Jacqueline O’ Toole
Department of Political Science and Sociology
Aras Moyala
NUI Galway
otoole.jacqueline@itsligo.ie

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the participation information sheet dated... for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

4. In signing this consent form I agree to volunteer to participate in this research study being conducted by Jacqueline O’ Toole.

5. I understand that I will participate in a recorded interview with the researcher on the agreed topic.

6. I understand that a written transcription of the interview is available to me on request.

7. I grant full authorisation for the use of the above information on the full understanding that my anonymity and confidentiality is preserved.

8. I grant permission to use a pseudonym or first name [delete as required].

_________________ ___________ __________________________
Participant Date Signature

_________________ ___________ __________________________
Researcher Date Signature

1 for participant, 1 for researcher, 1 to be kept with research notes
Appendix 7

National University of Ireland Galway

Exit Questionnaire

1. Date:

2. Age:

3. Occupation:

4. Relationship status:

5. At what age did you leave full time education? _______ years

6. What is the highest educational qualification that you have achieved?

   Primary [ ]
   Second level - Junior Cert./inter Cert. [ ]
   Second level - Leaving Cert. [ ]
   Third level - certificate/diploma/degree [ ]
   Other [please specify] [ ]

264
7. Are you currently

Working at home as a housewife/homemaker [ ]
Full-time employed [ ]
Self employed [ ]
Part-time employed [ ]
Part-time self employed [ ]
Unemployed [ ]
Retired [ ]
Other - please specify [ ]

8. Are you, or have you been in the last 5 years involved in any of the following, please specify:

Health Centre/Gym [ ]
Fitness programme [ ]
Dieting programme [ ]
Exercise programme [ ]
Sporting groups [ ]
Hobby groups [ ]
Other groups [please specify] [ ]

9. How much on average would you spend on body related activities every week?

Less than 20 euro [ ]
Between 20 and 40 euro [ ]
Between 40 and 60 euro [ ]
Over 60 euro [ ]

10. What activities do you mainly spend your money on?
11. Indicate on a scale of 1-5 how important each of these issues are to you personally where 1 = ‘not at all important’ and 5 = ‘very important’

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<tr>
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<th>not at all important</th>
<th>very important</th>
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<td>having a family</td>
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12. Could you write down three words to describe how you felt about your participation in this discussion?

13. Is there anything else you would have included in the discussion?

14. Have you any other comments?

Thanks again for all your help!
**Appendix 8**

**Interview 1 Pro forma: Niamh**

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<th>Role of others/social networks</th>
<th>Identities</th>
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Appendix 9

National University of Ireland, Galway
Ollscoil na hÉireann, Galway

19th February 2006
Ref: 08/JAN/06

Ms Jacqueline O'Toole
Dunfore
Ballinriff
Co Sligo

RE: Ethical Approval for “Women and the Body-Project: an analysis of the embodied practices of women medically and self-defined as overweight and obese in an Irish context.”

Dear Ms O’Toole

I write to you regarding the above proposal entitled “Women and the Body-Project: an analysis of the embodied practices of women medically and self-defined as overweight and obese in an Irish context” which was submitted for Ethical review. Having reviewed your response, I am pleased to inform you that your proposal has been granted APPROVAL.

All NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee approval is given subject to the Principal Investigator submitting an annual report to the Committee. The first report is due on or before 30th January 2009. Please see section 7 of the REC’s Standard Operating Procedures for further details which also includes other instances where you are required to report to the REC.

Yours Sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Andrew Murphy
MD, FRCPG, FRCGP, DOH, DOHs, DIMC(RCSEd), HDOH, LPOM, CertPoppHldh(Aus)
Chairperson
NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee
Bibliography


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