

BODY IMAGE IN GAY MEN:  
ACCEPTANCE, CONTROL, ACCULTURATION,  
OBJECTIFICATION AND IDENTITY

By

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Michelangelo's *David* has represented the ideal male figure for centuries. It is the personification of male beauty in western culture. When you look at his face, you notice that he is more youthful than his muscled body would suggest. Closer inspection shows hands that are not young at all; they are massive and aged like the hands of a laborer. Indeed *David* is considered perfect for many reasons; he embodies youth, power and strength. He is carved of stone and etched into our collective western mind. In the same way that Michelangelo, a gay man, created *David* to represent perfection, our society has fashioned the male body, not out of marble but out of flesh. The gay community has placed extra pressure on its citizens to become the living physical embodiment of perfection.

I came to this topic from personal observations. One friend of mine commented that he timed his coming out around his weight loss since he wanted to be thinner when he came out. It was clear to me that he had integrated his sexual orientation into his self concept; he had accepted himself as a gay man. Acceptance of being openly gay seemed to pivot on the condition that his body was thin enough. Another of my friends commented that in the year following his coming out he lost almost 100 pounds by

seriously restricting his diet. One gay man told me that he went days without eating solid foods. These anecdotal experiences led me to wonder what problems gay men faced accepting their own bodies.

There are many experiences that differentiate gay people from their heterosexual counterparts. Many people of sexual minority status grow up in more traditional heterosexual households. The process known as “coming out” has been used to describe the self-acknowledgment of one's homosexuality and the public disclosure of that new identity. Along with that new identity, there come new expectations not only from the dominant culture but also from the gay subculture in particular. Whereas most people learn about their culture from their family of origin, people of a sexual minority status must seek out and discover this new world for themselves. Seemingly, one of the consequences of this new identity for gay men is an increased sense of dissatisfaction with one's appearance and body shape. More specifically, the literature provides near consensus that gay men report greater amounts of body dissatisfaction than straight men.

Body image represents that part of our self-concept focusing on our appearance and shape. Barron (1998) talks about body image in three different dimensions, (1) how we experience our own bodies, (2) how our bodies affect our relationship with the outside world and (3) how the political/cultural arena influences perceptions about the body. In this way, body image exists as a personal, social and cultural construct. In the past concern about the appearance of the body was mostly limited to women; now men are beginning to feel the effects of body politics. On a macro level, culture informs a man how he should look and what his body shape should be. Body image affects how men interact with each other, and on a micro level influences a man's self-concept.



Body image in men can be broken into different categories. First is concern about the amount of fat on the body; as with women, less is more (Anderson, Cohn, & Holbrook 2000). Muscularity, the middle-ground between slender and monstrously large, represents another common body image concern (as in Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia 2000 or Grogan 1999). Other variables of concern are body hair (Boroughs & Thompson, 2001), genital size and appearance in general. Men in our society are pressured to be powerful and strong, and the body can be one tool to demonstrate those qualities. To do that men have to be muscular with broad shoulders, wide chests, and muscular arms all suggesting that a man is powerful and in control. In contrast overweight men are seen as having no willpower to keep their bodies slender and firm (Grogan, 1999). To be in control of your body is to be in control of your life.

Gay men have taken charge in how they are perceived by others; however gay male culture places value on youth, beauty, and healthy looking bodies (Dick, 2001). The gay community has undergone radical changes in the past 50 years with regard to what is considered acceptable appearance. In the past before the Stonewall riots, gay men were perceived as “sissies” (Harris, 1996). Since then gay men have asserted themselves and created a standard for how they should look. Throughout the 70’s the “clone” look was in vogue in the gay community (Harris, 1997). “Clones” were masculine; they represented manliness by growing mustaches and donning the drag of the working class: construction workers, cowboys and motorcycle gangs. The clone look was a reaction to the perception by the heterosexual world that gay men were weak and effeminate. The body style of the “clone” look was relatively easy to achieve, and little maintenance in the way of working out at a gym or shaving body hair was required.

The AIDS crisis represents a major turning point in the evolution of the gay male body image (Grogan, 1999). One of the unfortunate bi-products of this disease is called wasting syndrome; it causes rapid weight loss throughout the body and is especially noticeable in the face (Wolfe, 2000). People with wasting syndrome have slender builds, and also sunken-in cheeks. This overly thin look has been associated with HIV, sickness and death; looking like this is highly undesirable in the gay community leading toward an ideal that is more muscular rather than slender (Hesse-Biber, 1996). One of the treatments for wasting syndrome is testosterone injections, which does not replace the fat on the body but does increase musculature. This treatment has increased the number of men who may be in their thirties, forties and fifties and who are both lean and muscled to degrees that would not be expected for men their age. These men further push the standards of beauty to levels that are not easily achieved.

The standard for who is considered beautiful in the gay community has changed. However, in recent times this standard has become difficult to live up to. Seemingly since gay men cannot easily achieve the perfect body, they experience dissatisfaction, have increased criticism of their bodies and are more vulnerable to eating-disordered behaviors.

#### Statement of the Problem

Body dissatisfaction refers to the cognitive idea that our own body is not as good as it should be, the affective state of discontent with our bodies and the discrepancy between what our body looks like and what society tells us it should look like. Several key factors contribute to body dissatisfaction in gay men. Internalized homophobia has

been cited (Williamson, 1999) as one of the contributing factors. It is hypothesized that this self discomfort with being gay generalizes to a greater sense of dissatisfaction with the self. Involvement in the gay community seems to be a second factor leading to body dissatisfaction (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley & Grilo 1996). The AIDS epidemic served as another recent factor since one of the byproducts of advanced HIV disease is a loss of body fat, creating a sickly and overly lean image. This overly thin look, being associated with illness, is not considered attractive (Grogan, 1999). Social approval may be a fourth factor- gay men are still trying to overcome the perception that they are “sissies” (Harris, 1997). The gay community places a premium on image, and gay men often compare themselves with this unattainable standard of body image (Williamson, 1999).

Little attention has been made to understand the heightened emphasis on physical appearance in the gay male subculture (Seiver, 1996). Research needs to uncover what contributes to body dissatisfaction in gay men. To date no research on the process of internalization of sociocultural ideals about the body (Lakkis, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 1999) has been conducted. Given these gaps in our body of knowledge, the following questions will be explored in this study:

1. What values, customs and beliefs does the gay community have about the body?
2. How do gay men perceive those messages?
3. How do gay men integrate those beliefs into their self-concept?
4. What relationship does involvement in the gay community have with body dissatisfaction?

## Theoretical Framework

Much of the literature points to gay culture as a major factor leading to body dissatisfaction, but the association is implied rather than investigated. The process of how a gay man internalizes messages about his body is unknown. Qualitative research gives us the tools to ask questions about this process. Rather than obtain variables and test a priori hypotheses, the voices of gay men can be represented to paint the picture of how they respond to these messages about the body and what meaning they attribute to those messages. Seiver (1996) specifically calls attention to the problems associated with quantitative investigation of the issue of gay men and body dissatisfaction. Many instruments used for measuring these constructs were designed for women, leading to problems with generalization in men.

Rather than researching this issue using a positivistic lens, I used a social constructionist perspective. There are two main theoretical camps attempting to define homosexuality. Essentialism postulates that sexuality is an inborn trait of a person, and is a universal human construct. This theory attempts to place a biological root to sexual orientation. Constructivism believes that sexuality is a socially constructed concept (Sears, 1998). How we conceptualize our sexual identity is socially constructed (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1994). Human sexuality, from the constructionist perspective, is a fluid dynamic, and is affected and influenced by society's norms values, beliefs and artifacts. Viewing sexuality and gender through a constructivist lens, provides a

theoretical perspective to enable issues related to the socio-cultural basis for body dissatisfaction to be investigated.

### Significance of the Study

There is increasing pressure in the past decade for all men to “look good” (Luciano, 2001), and men are experiencing more dissatisfaction with their bodies (Anderson et al., 2000). Research has demonstrated that gay men evidence more body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men (Grogan, 1999), and also report greater degrees of restrained eating. Indeed, “for men, sexual orientation [is] the greatest single predictor of body dissatisfaction” (Lakkis et al, 1999, pp. 4 ). The gay subculture places emphasis and importance on lean and muscular bodies (Beren et al., 1996). However, the process of internalizing cultural messages from the gay community to gay men is unknown.

Body image disturbance has been cited as a key factor in the development of eating disorders (Schneider, O’Leary, & Jenkins, 1995). Therefore exploring body image dissatisfaction will provide clues into the etiology of eating disorders in gay men, who are considered a high risk group (Lakkis, 1999; and Williamson, 2001). Eating disorders are a serious health problem that can lead to death (Seiver, 1996).

Qualitative investigation of the role of acculturation of men into the gay community will provide insight about how body image messages are internalized by gay men. Qualitative methodology will build more positive, collaborative research that is lacking in this area (Williamson, 1999). This research should guide counselors and

theorists toward newer, deeper understanding of the relationship of acculturation into the gay community and its impact on body image in gay men.

### Definition of Terms

Acculturation- “the process by which individuals change, both by being influenced by contact with another culture and by being participants in the general acculturative changes under way in their own culture” (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997, 357).

Body dissatisfaction- a distorted body image characterized by seeing oneself as looking worse than you appear to others (Pope et al. 2000)

Body image- “the collective and idiosyncratic representations an individual entertains about the body in its relationship to the environment, including internal and external perceptions, memories, affects, cognitions and actions” (Barron, 1998).

Coming out- the process of accepting one’s sexual orientation, involves coming out to oneself and to others (Nevid, Fichner-Rathus & Rathus, 1995).

Gay culture- the minority community comprised of gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and transgendered people who collectively hold values, beliefs and norms that differ from the larger heterosexual community.

Gay man- self identified man who has sexual, emotional and relational attractions to other men.

Sexual Identity- the intersection of a person’s sexual orientation and global self concept.

Sexual Orientation- the direction of ones romantic interests and erotic attractions- toward members of the same gender, the opposite gender or both genders (Nevid et al. 1995).

Body image concerns are quickly becoming an important issue in men's psychology, especially for gay men. The literature on gay men's body image show gay men have more body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men and are more likely to have eating disorders than heterosexual men. Two theories have been presented in the literature to explain these differences. The first theory postulates that internalized homophobia relates to a poorer view of the self and in turn produces poorer body dissatisfaction. The second theory explains that body image for gay men is acquired due to the emphasis placed on image in gay culture. This research study focuses on the latter. Because the research questions focus on the interplay between the cultural and the personal, qualitative methods are the best choice to answer these questions and will be used in this study. In the next chapter the psychology literature related to body image with special focus on gay men's body image will be reviewed. The absence of qualitative methods to study this important issue makes this study a unique contribution to the literature in this area.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Body Image

Body image has been defined as “a loose mental representation of body shape size and form which is influenced by a variety of historical cultural and social individual and biological factors, which operate over varying time spans” (Banfield & McCabe, 2002, 373). Though body image is a psychological construct, it is grounded in a societal context. Culture determines what body styles are acceptable and which are not. Body image often is affected by the internalization of and comparison to those societal messages about the body. Body image manifests itself in various spheres including the biological, psychological and the social. There is little agreement on these categories, but it is clear that body image is a multidimensional construct (Banfield & McCabe, 2002).

There is no consistent definition of body image. This lack of consistency is prevalent in the research on this topic. Several components of body image are presented in the literature. Body image is a multidimensional construct, including behavioral,



cognitive, affective, and perceptual components. The behavioral aspect of body image, for the purposes of this literature review, would be eating patterns, dieting behavior, exercise and the like. Cognitive body image is the thoughts and beliefs people hold regarding how their bodies look. Affective body image refers to feelings people have about body shape or size. Body image perception has been conceptualized as the mental picture of one's body (Guinn, Semper, Jorgenson & Skaggs (1997). Perceptual body image involves the comparison of a person's actual size, shape and weight relative to the perception of those proportions.

Cognitive body image refers to how one thinks about our body's shape and our attitudes about our own body and other people's bodies. Cognitive research on this topic has looked at social comparison theory and the internalization of societal attitudes. Social comparison, as it relates to body image, occurs when we compare our internal picture of our body with outside models, which could include peers and images in the media. Internalization of societal attitudes is the degree to which people believe society's messages about the body.

The affective component of body image is our feelings associated with our body. Affective body image has been linked to self-esteem and depression (Siever, 2002). Body dissatisfaction is a specific type of body image concern. Just as it sounds, body dissatisfaction is a sense of discontentment with the shape and appearance of one's body.

Perceptual body image entails the internal sense of our body's shape and size. This component of body image is conceptualized as the difference between one's perception of his body's size, weight and shape when contrasted with objective measurements of those dimensions. Barber (2001) found that when mood was

experimentally depressed, men and women “felt” heavier showing a link between our mood and our internal perception of our body.

Body image dissatisfaction has behaviors associated with it. Certain activities, such as dieting, excessive exercise, vomiting and the use of diuretics, all suggest a poor body image. Eating disorders are considered the most extreme manifestation of poor body image (Barber, 2001). These activities are the overt behaviors indicative of body dissatisfaction.

### Methods to study body image

Just as there are many different ways of conceptualizing body image along various dimensions (cognitive, affective, perceptual and behavioral) a plethora of research designs exist to study this issue. Body size drawings are a commonly used tool in the research about body image (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Packard & Krogstrand, 2002; Williamson, Cubic & Gleaves, 1993). A series of figures, usually nine, are drawn on a piece of paper. These figures illustrate a person with the first showing usually a very slender person and gradually progressing to the last drawing which is an obese person. These drawings are used to measure people's perceptions about body size. Williamson et al, (1993) found it important to control for actual body size when using body size drawings. Some research has used this method to determine a person's current perception of their body, and what their ideal body shape is (Barber, 2001). It has also been used to measure people's beliefs about how others see their body. A more modern variation on body size drawings are computer based, where a participant can manipulate

muscularity or body fat on a human figure on screen. This computer program is known as the Somatomorphic Matrix (Lieb, Gray & Pope, 2002).

Numerous studies (Heatherton, Nichols, Mahamada & Keel, 1995; Mukai, Kambara, Susaki, 1998; Packard & Krogstand, 2002) collect data about people's weight and body fat in an effort to determine body image. There are several the methods used to do this. The most common method is known as the body mass index (B.M.I.). To calculate the B.M.I. a person's weight in kilograms is divided by height in meters squared. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company publishes a standard weight table. This table lists ideal weights for people by sex and height. It also defines overweight as 20 percent above the ideal weight. A third method of measuring body size uses calipers. This procedure involves the use of a measuring device which measures the thickness of a person's skin. These procedures are designed to assess who is of average weight and who is considered obese. A person's B.M.I. is an objective measure which is often compared with someone's internal perceptions of their body size. The discrepancy between the supposedly objective B.M.I. and the internal perception is a measure of body dissatisfaction (Russell & Keel, 2002; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002).

Self-report questionnaires are another frequently used method for assessing body image. Parts of such instruments as the eating disorders inventory (E.D.I.) and the eating attitudes tests (E.A.T.) are used to gather information. These instruments purport to detect attitudes about eating, satisfaction with the body and perceived body size. The E.D.I. has several different components, with the most commonly used part in research being the Body Dissatisfaction subscale. Other instruments include the Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (B.A.S.S.), Body Shape Questionnaire, and the Bulimia Test Revised

(Mukai, Kambara, & Sasaki, 1998). Other methods of studying this issue include diagnostic interviews (Striegel-Moore, Dohm, Pike, Wilfley & Fairburn, 2002; Williamson, Womble, Smeets & Netemeyer, 2002).

### Significant findings

There appear to be strong differences in the body image's of men and women. Women in an experimental low mood group desired to be lighter, whereas men in an experimental low mood group desired to be heavier. These results seem to correlate with gender specific norms (Barber, 2001). In adolescent girls, worsening body dissatisfaction was shown to be a significant contributing factor to depression (Siegel, 2002). In a meta-analysis, Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky and Perry (2004) found that body dissatisfaction has increased steadily for women from 1983 until the mid-1990's where it appeared to decrease. The results were specific to data collected at one university which weakens its generalizability. Body image and eating disturbances contribute to higher levels of depression in adolescent girls after one year follow up (Stice and Kate, 2001) and four year follow up (Stice, Hayward, Cameron, Killen and Taylor, 2000). Dieting was found to increase with age in rural women, highlighting the pervasive sociocultural pressure to be thin (Packard and Krogstrand, 2002).

Several factors can be linked to poor body image including, abuse, objectification, media effects, and peer group interactions. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, bullying by peers and discrimination have been shown to be risk factors for eating disorders in women (Striegel-Moore, Dohm, Pike, Wilfley and Fairburn, 2002). Gay men are often

the victims of bullying and discrimination; therefore it is possible that these could be additional factors affecting body image for gay men. Matz, Foster, Faith and Wadden (2002) found that self esteem, adult teasing and internalization of sociocultural appearance standards predicted body image dissatisfaction in adult obese women seeking weight reduction, but not childhood teasing. This highlights the importance of adult self-esteem and interpersonal context in the formation of body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls was found to be related to appearance conversations with friends, social comparison of appearance and body mass (Jones, 2004). Attitudes of friends contributed significantly to the prediction of individual body image concern and eating behaviors for adolescent girls, showing the power of social interaction in affecting attitudes about body (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim and Muir, 1999). Only one third of college undergraduate women had normal eating habits, absent of chronic dieting, bingeing or purging (Mintz and Betz, 1988). Disturbed eating was related strongly to low self-esteem, negative body image and greater belief in sociocultural ideals of female thinness. In women, appearance-based reasons for exercise were significantly related to poor body satisfaction, whereas functional reasons (health or sports for example) were related to more positive body satisfaction (Strelan, Mehaffey and Tiggmann, 2003). Objectification has been demonstrated to be a powerful mediator of body image for women (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Women are socialized as objects by men, and they internalize this perspective by habitually monitoring their appearance. Self-objectification was found to be associated with an increase of negative feelings in women (Gapinski, Brownell & LaFrance, 2003).

The influence of cultural context has an impact in the manifestation of body dissatisfaction. Shaw, Ramirez, Trost, Randall, and Stice (2004) found no differences between white women and ethnic minority women in eating disorder symptoms or risk factors for eating pathology. Pike, Dohm, Striegel-Moore, Wilfley, and Fairburn (2001) conversely found that white women have higher dietary restraint, eating concern, shape concern and weight concern than black women, and were more likely to seek treatment for eating concerns. Japanese women were found to have greater body dissatisfaction but fewer eating disturbances than American women. This finding can be explained by higher body mass in the American women and greater need for social approval for Japanese women.

Psychotherapy has been shown in several instances to be helpful in treating body dissatisfaction. Body image therapy was not found to increase or hamper outcomes when added to a weight control program (Ramirez & Rosen, 2001); however therapy does improve body image and self concept better than no therapy (Dworkin & Kerr, 1987). Body dysmorphic disorder does seem to respond positively to cognitive behavioral psychotherapy (Rosen, Reiter, & Orosan, 1995). Depression seems to negatively distort one's body image (Noles, Cash & Winstead, 1985). Body image correlated significantly with depressive symptoms and lower self esteem, but not body mass (Sarwer, Wadden & Foster, 1998). This finding suggests how people perceive their bodies has more to do with body satisfaction than the objective shape of our bodies. High self esteem results in less perceived effect from media influences regarding body image (Prabu, & Johnson, 1998).

Several limitations exist when examining how women's body image literature could apply to all men, and gay men in particular. When they report body dissatisfaction, heterosexual women wish to be thinner. Men report wanting to be both thinner and more muscular. In the presentation of data it may appear that men do not experience body dissatisfaction because the scores of measures of men who wish to be thinner and those who wish to be more muscular essentially cancel each other out. Research on men's body image must keep this important concept in mind. Qualitative research addresses this concern because its open ended nature allows participants to describe body dissatisfaction in their own terms.

Another failing of qualitative research is the use of body mass index. Researchers who use this measure purport it is an objective measurement of how overweight or underweight a person is. This measure does not take into account different people's body shape. Two people of the same height and weight can have dramatically different body shapes depending on the amount of body fat or body musculature they have. Qualitative methods use more descriptive language to gain an understanding of a person's appearance.

Finally, the underlying behaviors and beliefs about weight loss or exercise may be different for men and for women, making survey instruments designed for women ineffective for men's research. Women may wish to lose weight to achieve a culturally sanctioned body style whereas men may wish to gain weight by gaining muscle mass to achieve the same goal. There may be key differences in the behaviors and beliefs of gay men. Rather than trying to adapt a questionnaire designed for a heterosexual man or woman, asking participants directly about these behaviors represents a simpler and more

efficient method for studying gay men's body image necessitating the use of qualitative methodology.

### Body Dissatisfaction in Men

Since eating disorders first came to the attention of therapists several decades ago, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating have been seen primarily as a women's issue. In fact much of the literature on the subject is written for women. Increasingly, body image concerns have been noted in men also (Anderson, Cohn & Holbrook, 2000). Phillips and Castle (2001) found body dissatisfaction in men has tripled in the past 25 years. Muscularity was of more concern to men than body fat (Liet, Gray & Pope, 2002). Highly muscular men studied had a higher degree of muscle dysmorphia, the belief they were less muscular than they were by objective measurement (Choi, Pope, Olivardia & Cash, 2002). When comparing adolescents, females were less satisfied with their bodies and had strategies to lose weight whereas males had strategies to increase weight and muscle tone (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). An increase of anorexia in adolescent boys has been noted, and those who have been teased, have low self esteem, and are gay seem to be especially vulnerable (Romeo, 1994). Jones (2004) found body dissatisfaction in adolescent boys was directly related to the internalization of muscularity ideals. Substantial body dissatisfaction in men was closely associated with depression, eating pathology, use of performance enhancing substances and low self esteem (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki & Cohane, 2004).



Believing oneself to be less muscular than objective measurement was found to be a primary source of body dissatisfaction in men. It has been theorized men internalize socio-cultural ideals about body shape through magazines in turn leading to body dissatisfaction (Morry & Staska, 2001). After viewing advertisements from magazines, significant discrepancy between ones perceived muscularity and ones ideal muscularity were found(Leit, Gray & Pope, 2002). Self esteem related to body satisfaction and negative affect predicted body dissatisfaction in adolescents; boys were more focused on changing muscularity (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Men have several problems related to their weight such as obesity, too little or too much exercise, and having low self esteem regarding hair loss and body shape. Anderson et al. (2000) stated that body dissatisfaction occurs in all men, but is less expressed in heterosexual men because of the fear of complaining about a supposedly feminine issue; no research or data was presented by Anderson et al. to support this assertion.

Of particular concern for men, in general, is “muscle dysmorphia” (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). Muscle dysmorphia is the reverse of anorexia in that men who have large muscles think they are scrawny. There has been increasing pressure for men to look more muscular; Pope et al. point to many images of men who have physiques that are unnaturally muscular in the media. Weightlifting will increase muscle mass, but there is a natural limit to what can be achieved. Steroids will cause the muscles in the chest, shoulders, thighs and others to grow beyond what nature intended, and many male models, Pope et al. argues, have this steroid-enhanced look to their bodies. These images have theoretically shifted our perception of what is natural for the male body to look like, leading many men to feel inadequate about their bodies.

There are two ways, in general, that men are dissatisfied with the shape of their bodies: the first way is seeing the body or parts of it as not big enough. Secondly, like women, there is a desire in some men for their body to be more lean. In this way body dissatisfaction is bi-modal for men, with a desire for both bigger muscles and less fat. Drenowski and Yee (1987) examined body satisfaction in men, though not accounting for sexual orientation. This study is important because of the nature of the results. Prior to this research body satisfaction was not detected in men in general; however a bimodal distribution was noted. Of those men who were not satisfied with their bodies, half of them desired a thinner ideal shape and the other half wanted to be heavier. These results reflect a need in men to be athletic, low in fat but high in muscle. Further research in this area needs to incorporate the understanding that “thin” is not the only body shape goal with men as the image also involves being “muscular”.

Brand, Rothblum and Soloman (1992) found that men were much more concerned with the appearance of a prospective partner, rather than their own appearance. They also noted that gay men were more likely to report their own bodies as closer to the ideals set by typical weight charts used by insurance companies. Results showed that gay men report being thinner than heterosexual men. Brand et al. noted a much stronger effect of gender than sexual orientation in predicting body dissatisfaction. Women were significantly more likely to report body dissatisfaction than men were. This finding must be mediated by the fact that there were only 13 gay men in the total sample as compared to 39 heterosexual men, 124 lesbian women, and 133 heterosexual women. The trend for some men to desire a thinner body shape and some to desire a heftier one was noted, again showing the trend of the bi-modal distribution in body satisfaction.

## Body Dissatisfaction in Gay men

Body dissatisfaction has been studied a number of times (Beren et al, 1996; Brand, Rothblum, & Soloman, 1992; Drenowski & Yee, 1987; Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Herzog, Newman & Warshaw, 1991; Williamson & Hartley, 1998; Seiver, 1996; Silberstein, Pishkind, Streigal-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1989). The most common design involves dividing participants into four groups by gender and sexual orientation (e.g., Seiver, 1996, and Beren et al, 1996) namely: heterosexual men, heterosexual women, homosexual men and homosexual women. There are two basic methods for measuring body dissatisfaction. The first involves using body size drawings, usually a series of drawings of the male or female body depicting variations in shape from very slender to obese. Participants are asked to rate how they see themselves currently and what their ideal shape is. Body dissatisfaction is based on this measure is the magnitude and direction of the difference between their current size and their ideal size. The second basic method of detecting body dissatisfaction through the use of self-report instruments to directly gauge attitudes regarding one's own body.

Gettelman and Thompson (1993) sought to gather data about the difference between actual body image and the stereotypes about body image. They investigated heterosexual men and women and homosexual men and women with the hypothesis that heterosexual women and homosexual men would have more body image dissatisfaction than the other two groups. They also theorized that there would be more body image dissatisfaction expected of these two groups by their peers. They found evidence that homosexual men and heterosexual women showed greater concern about their own body

image than either heterosexual men or homosexual women. The authors of this study noted:

“The concept of physical appearance may be especially relevant during the development of a homosexual identity and several authors have described this process as a progression of stages that involve restructuring beliefs and attitudes to achieve a coherent self concept. (pg. 552)”

What is significant about this theoretical piece is that the process of coming out was proposed to affect how gay men view themselves physically. As gay men come out they for the first time interact with other peers who have the same sexual orientation. After they begin to have these peers, they theoretically begin to be more concerned with their appearance. In other words, the more people are involved, or acculturated, with the gay community the more they are concerned with their physical appearance.

Using a two by two ANOVA design, Gender X Sexual Orientation (omitting bisexuality), Gettelman and Thompson (1993) used three measures: the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, the Eating Disorders Inventory and the Self-Esteem Scale. Approximately two hundred people comprised the four groups with a good degree of equality (39 lesbians, 43 heterosexual men, 57 heterosexual women and 49 gay men). Results of this study found that heterosexual women had the highest levels of eating disturbance and greatest degree of body dissatisfaction. Homosexual men possessed more body dissatisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts. This dissatisfaction was manifest by gay men expressing more stereotypical beliefs and showing more concern related to weight and attractiveness. Another component of this study was the perceived differences in body image. It was found that gay men were perceived by the other groups

to have had more concern with weight compared to heterosexual men when attitude from all other groups were taken into account. Limitations of this study included the limited contact some heterosexual people were likely to have had with homosexual people.

Silberstein, Pishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko and Rodin (1989) add a great deal of thought to this issue. They recognize the socio-culturally derived component of body image dissatisfaction in heterosexual females and apply that template to homosexual males. This culturally valued body ideal, theoretically transmitted in the gay male subculture, gives the members of this group some sense of dissonance between their body shape and what is considered perfect. It is the magnitude and meaning of this gap that creates problems in terms of self esteem and, as other research points out, leads to eating disordered behavior.

Participants in Silberstein et al. (1989) study were given a packet containing Body Size Drawings, Body Esteem Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Sex Role Inventory, Eating Attitudes Test and Reasons for Exercise Inventory. Multivariate analysis found that heterosexual men were more likely to exercise for reasons of strength, physical ability or health while homosexual men exercised to maintain their appearance. Appearance was more important to general sense of self in gay men than heterosexual men to a significant degree. Also, gay men whose ideal body shape was thinner than their current shape also evidenced more disordered eating.

Self esteem was not a significantly different between heterosexual men and homosexual men. This result was accounted for by the authors by saying:

“The heightened emphasis on appearance in the gay male subculture may have a paradoxical effect. Although it potentiates a greater degree of body

dissatisfaction among gay men relative to heterosexual men, the sub cultural emphasis on appearance may make body dissatisfaction feel more culturally normative for gay men than for the male population at large. As a result, the gay male's perceived-ideal body discrepancy may not significantly affect his self-esteem. (pg. 339)"

In other words, body dissatisfaction in this study does not seem to affect global self esteem since it is a common experience of gay men . All gay men experience and express body dissatisfaction, and because of this shared feeling, they use it as a common bond with each other.

Siever (1994) published a critical piece of research in the area of body image dissatisfaction and sexual orientation. Two hundred fifty college students participated in this study, equally divided by gender and sexual orientation into four groups. Several instruments measuring body dissatisfaction were administered, and data on symptoms of eating disorders were collected. Data analysis indicated that gay men and heterosexual women had higher degrees of body dissatisfaction when compared with heterosexual men and lesbians. These two groups indicated that they had more concern with what their male partners thought of their appearance.

The Body Esteem Scale was administered to determine how the participants felt about various aspects of their general physical attractiveness. To determine how each of the participants felt about their size and shape, all participants were given the Body Shape Questionnaire. Body size drawings show approximately 12 figures ranging from thin to obese, and are commonly used in this area of research to asses the discrepancy between present and ideal body shapes. The Eating Disorder Inventory and Eating Attitudes Test

were given to gauge the presence of eating disorder symptoms such as restricted eating and excessive exercise.

The author explained these findings by postulating that gay men and heterosexual women are both interested in being attractive to men; therefore they experience a sense of being sexual objects. This sexual objectification then causes body dissatisfaction. All men seem to face increasing pressure to have a great body, but gay men have been especially susceptible to this pressure. Siever states that there are two sources of body dissatisfaction in gay men. First, all men in this study reported feelings of inadequacy in terms of physical strength and athletic ability. Second, gay men as a subset of men in general also experience pressure from other men to live up to expectation to be physically attractive to other men. In other words, gay men have body image concerns typical of all men associated with dissatisfaction in strength and athletic ability, but have an added layer of sexual objectification that causes them more distress.

Siever cites several areas of potential research needing to be conducted. Particular to gay men, internalized homophobia, stages of coming out and assimilation into the gay sub-culture are all sources of pressure that may link to body dissatisfaction in gay men. Siever goes on to suggest the more assimilated into the gay subculture a person gets, the more likely he will be to experience body dissatisfaction as he experiences increasing pressure to live up to expectations to have a gym-toned body.

Herzog, Newman, &Warshaw (1991) examined body image dissatisfaction with men. Information on demographics, weight, body satisfaction, eating attitudes and behaviors was collected. The participants were also asked to rate their present and ideal body shapes and the body shape of a prospective partner with body shape figure

drawings. Heterosexual men were heavier overall and desired a significantly heavier ideal weight for themselves. Gay men were more likely to be underweight. Although gay men had a weight that is closer to what they considered ideal, they were less satisfied with their weight. These findings indicate that gay men are thinner, but are more concerned with their weight than their heterosexual counterparts.

Beren, Hayden, Wilfley and Grilo (1996) examined further the role of sexual orientation on body dissatisfaction. They looked at “body dissatisfaction, psychosocial variables and affiliation with the gay and lesbian community.” Literature in this area states that involvement in the gay community leads to body dissatisfaction in gay men. Beren et al. sought to more scientifically investigate this question. They included 250 people which they divided into four subgroups, gay men, heterosexual men, heterosexual women and lesbians. In this study homosexual men and women were older than their heterosexual counterparts, a confounding variable in this study. Body dissatisfaction was assessed with the Body Size Drawings, Body Shape Questionnaire and Eating Disorders Inventory. Psychosocial variables were measured using approximately half a dozen instruments ranging from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to the Expanded Social Pressure to Diet Scale-Revised. Affiliation with the gay and lesbian community was measured with the Involvement Questionnaire.

Beren et al. operated under the hypothesis that gay men who were more affiliated with the gay and lesbian community would experience more body dissatisfaction than gay men with less cultural involvement. Consistent with other research gay men did experience more body dissatisfaction than their heterosexual peers, and were more similar to heterosexual women. In their exploratory, stepwise regression analysis of the



variables in question, age and education were the top two factors that accounted for the most variance in body dissatisfaction. Affiliation with the gay community also accounted for a significant amount of variance in their model. Therefore we can deduce that involvement in the gay community has an effect on body dissatisfaction with gay men, but how that communal pressure exerts itself remains unknown and necessitates further investigation.

If indeed the cultural hypothesis that gay men are dissatisfied with their bodies is true, then it is not just an American phenomenon. Williamson and Hartley (1998) found body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in a sample of 41 young gay British men. When this sample was compared with their heterosexual counterparts, a statistically significant difference was noted on several measures. Gay men preferred slimmer "ideal" figures on body shape drawings and expressed more behaviors characteristic of eating disorders. This study provides some cross-cultural validation of the problem.

Two theories have been presented to explain body dissatisfaction related to gay men: internalized homophobia and socio-cultural acquisition. Internalized homophobia comes from being gay in an un-accepting society leading to long standing feelings of inadequacy and rejection. Socio-culturally acquired body dissatisfaction comes from being part of a sub-culture which places great emphasis on appearance and body image. Both of these theories point to culture as a primary causal factor in the genesis of body dissatisfaction in gay men necessitating a brief review of literature on the gay male subculture.

## Eating Disorders in Men

Gay and bisexual men appear to be at a heightened risk for eating disorders. Carlat, Calmargo and Herzog (1997) sought to better understand the etiology of eating disorders in men. Hospital charts were reviewed from all men who had been treated for an eating disorder at Massachusetts General Hospital from 1980 to 1994. DSM-IV criteria were used to assess the appropriateness of a record for study. One hundred thirty five records of men were reviewed, and there were obvious differences in diagnosis by sexual orientation. Forty two percent of bulimic patients were identified as either bisexual or homosexual. Overall 27% of all male patients with eating disorders were either gay or bisexual.

David Herzog could be considered one of the founders of research examining eating disorders and men. In his 1984 study (Herzog, Norman, Gordon, & Repose, 1984) sexual conflict was examined in 27 men with eating disorders. The researchers found that men with eating disorders were more likely to be homosexual. Herzog et al. found 26% of the men in this study were gay, a much higher prevalence of same sex orientation than in the general population. Based upon clinical experience, Herzog attributed the increased cultural pressure of homosexual men to be thin and attractive as a major factor influencing the development of eating disorders with this population.

Eating disorders in college men were investigated by Olivardia, Pope, Mangweth and Hudson (1995). They recruited students by placing an ad. They screened all potential participants to determine that they met the criteria for an eating disorder. Two comparison groups were recruited, one a male group with eating disorders and the other a

control group of men without eating disorders. Data were collected via interviews and transformed into quantitative data for analysis by looking for key phrases. Results indicated that eating disorders in men were similar to women in terms of type of eating disorder and characteristics associated with disorder. Olivardia et al. (1995) did not find that sexual orientation was a statistically significant factor in the etiology of eating disorders in men. A notable difference between the men with eating disorders and the women was that men were much less likely to seek treatment. The authors reconciled previous research by hypothesizing that gay men were more likely to seek treatment for an eating disorder than heterosexual men.

Charles Berry (2001) investigated "subclinical eating disorders and internalized homonegativity." His research stemmed from the theory postulating that eating disorders in gay men are a result of long standing feelings of inadequacy. Berry studied 259 gay men of diverse ages, most of whom were White. Data were gathered from the following sources: a demographic questionnaire, the Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory-Revised, the Eating Disorder Inventory, Body Size Drawings and the Obligatory Exercise Questionnaire.

Results showed a "clear association between internalized homonegativity and body image dissatisfaction and maladaptive eating behaviors." Personal homonegativity, that is, how an individual feels about himself being a gay man, was the strongest predictor of eating disorder symptoms. Even though most of the responders were out of the closet, lingering negative feelings about being gay may still exist. These negative feelings in theory channel themselves into destructive patterns of eating and exercise and distorting one's self perception.

## Gay Culture

The experience of being gay in America has changed greatly over the past century. Society has gone from condemning homosexuality to tolerating same sex relationships. This change in the level of acceptance has shaped the way that gay men see themselves and their bodies (Harris, 1996). In fact, gay men have redefined what it means to be gay, and that changing definition includes specific requirements for weight and body shape.

Large scale communication exploded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. New methods exchanging ideas were born including radio, television and the movies. Cinema has played a key role in the lives of many gay men (Harris, 1994). Talking about the movies and popular actresses became a code for gay men used to identify each other. Frequently the movies were the first, and sadly sometimes, the only source of information for gay men to model how they were supposed to look and act. Hollywood became the first teacher of many gay men by showing homosexuals as limp-wristed, effeminate, and asexual. This was largely how homosexuality was portrayed at that time, as something to be pitied and made fun of (Freidman & Epstein, 1996). The social climate of that era for gay men was secretive and quiet. People with same sex desires did not speak of these desires out loud, and the need for same sex contact was fulfilled in random secret locations. Homosexuality was shameful. The only way gay men knew to be at that time was to follow suit with Hollywood and buy into the slender effeminate stereotype.

Further, if being gay meant that you were slender and weak, being heterosexual meant being tough, virile and sexy (Harris, 1996).

The first erotic material available to consumers with same sex interests was called *Physique Pictoral* in the 1950's (Harris, 1996). It was a body-building magazine expressly intended to inspire heterosexual men to engage in body enhancing exercise. The magazine failed at its primary mission, but it did fuel the fantasies of many homosexual men. Scantily clad men were shown in such masculine "settings" at gas stations, farms, and prisons (Harris, 1996). One of the artists featured in *Physique Pictoral* was Tom of Finland who published some of the first drawings of ultra-macho gay men. His drawings featured men with prominent and exaggerated muscles, bulges and genitals; these images set a new standard in the erotic imagination of gay men. Not only could gay men now see themselves as masculine, they also had a mental picture for what the perfect man should look like, though no one could ever achieve this super-human physique (Lahti, 1998). The images created from such sources as *Physique Pictoral*, Tom of Finland and their successors created a physical ideal for gay men that was not realistic.

A major turning point in gay culture came in the 1970's after the Stonewall riots, the birth of the modern gay rights movement. Gay men started standing up for themselves, and taking charge of their lives in way never experienced before. Part of the new found control of their lives was used to recreate their image and the "clone" was born (Harris, 1996). The "clone" image took heterosexual idealized images of a police officer, cowboy and biker and made them mainstream gay standards. Gay men adopted these personas as their own and changed the way they saw themselves. The 1970's and

80's were dominated by gay men with moustaches, construction boots and Levi's (Harris, 1996). If all gender is drag, then the drag of this time was working class and butch.

Examination of the erotic material during the period of "clones" reveals a great deal about what a desirable body looked like. Pornographic movies at that time were viewed in a theater, and they served as a backdrop for men to engage in anonymous sexual encounters. The images on the screen were of men who were hairy and had average bodies. The pumped, buff, smooth gods of current films were absent. The production quality of the films was also poor. There was inadequate lighting, and sloppy editing, creating movies that were of mediocre quality at best. Instead, the images on the screen were secondary to the activity engaged in while viewing it (Harris, 1997). At that time how a man looked was secondary to how it felt to be with another man.

Today, technology has changed and so has the nature of erotic material. Rather than going to a movie theater, pornographic films can be viewed in the privacy of ones own home, and images on screen are crisp, clear and unmistakable (Harris, 1996). The change in the qualities of these movies parallels a change in the sexuality of gay men. The public film house has been replaced with the VCR and the DVD. The average man has been replaced with the buff porno god. Clandestine sexual encounters have been exchanged for masturbation at home. The focus of sexual activity has gone from how sex feels to how sex looks.

In the current gay subculture, what is considered beautiful has become "over idealized" in recent times (Mann, 1998). Even gay men who are attractive feel inadequate to the images of lean, buff models that are pervasive in the media of this community (Blotcher, 1998). This subculture has set up a kind of class system, with the

buff and the beautiful at the top and the average at the bottom. In fact, husky, stocky and hairy men have created a division known as “bears” within the gay subculture to be discussed later. This hierarchy also enforces discrimination based upon looks, limiting access to clubs and parties to only those who are deemed worthy (Mann, 1998).

Giles (1998) talks at length about the discrimination faced by larger gay men. In fact, larger gay men at least until the creation of the bear subculture were considered non-people. “I don’t exempt myself from this intolerance. Earlier this year, I suddenly found myself losing weight again, and sure enough, as the pounds peeled off, I started buying into the prejudice, too!” (Giles, 1998, 356).

The perfect body image seems to have been created in part as a reaction to the AIDS crisis. “The image is muscular and very white and very young and very clean (Mann, 1998, 346).” Cleanliness seems to be an important issue. Mainstream gay models are smooth, having little to no hair on their chests, stomachs, backs, butts and so on. That lack of hair suggests youth, further suggesting innocence. The subtle implication is that a hairless person is less experienced than someone older (more hairy) and, thus, less likely to have HIV. In addition to smoothness, recent cultural norms have moved away from areas associated with anal sex, namely the “basket and buns” (Mann, 1998) to other more sensual parts of the body. The area of focus is no longer on the genitals but on the pectoral muscles, abdominal muscles, arms and shoulders. AIDS created a climate where gay men fear overly lean men (Blotcher, 1991) who are seen as possibly suffering from wasting syndrome, characterized by the loss of fatty tissue, one of the possible effects of AIDS.

The “ideal” man constructed in the collective mind of the gay male community today seems to have mixed effects. The idealization serves to discriminate based upon looks, yet it also seems to represent a kind of unifying force. It seems that the gay male community has created solidarity in the agreement of what is considered beautiful (Mann, 1998). This is the central paradox to the entire issue to gay men and body image: gay men attempt to look like what they consider the healthy, beautiful gold standard, but that image comes out of unhealthy practices such as steroid use and poor dietary habits. Also the body image which has had a unifying force has ironically created a body social caste system.

Sergios and Cody (1986) noted the importance of physical attractiveness in the fledgling years of the AIDS crisis. They found that physical attractiveness was the largest predictor of how much a participant liked a date and how likely he was to ask him out again. Standards of beauty were already firmly entrenched at the time of this research, standards based on “facial looks and bodily appearance”. They note the double bind of gay male sexuality and standards of beauty. Gay men both want to be with attractive men and want to be perceived as attractive. This double bind was proposed as well by Mann (1998).

Mishkind, Rodin, Silverstein and Striegel-Moore (1986) report that men in general prefer to be of “well proportioned average build”. They also note that men would prefer to have a “muscleman-type body characterized by well-defined chest and arm muscles and wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist” (Mishkind, et al, 1986). They argue that all men have body dissatisfaction, but the gay male subculture with its focus on attractiveness magnifies the intensity of that dissatisfaction leading to more



eating disorders and unhealthy weight control behaviors. Pope, Phillips and Olivardia (2000) counter that argument. They postulate that gay men as a result of their culture merely express body dissatisfaction more than their heterosexual counterparts.

Extracting the cultural values placed on weight can be difficult to research. Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley and Brownell (1996) examined these expectations by studying personal advertisements. A random sample of 500 personal advertisements was collected from various magazines targeting specific groups. At least 50 ads were gathered for the following groups: African Americans, European Americans, homosexuals, heterosexuals, high SES, those over 60 and those under 60. This created six variables to be analyzed using an ANOVA. A coding system was created to evaluate body shape, demographic information, personal information etc. Body shape was measured by counting each incident that weight or height or any adjective describing those was written. Results found that gay men had the highest incidences of “body shape descriptors (BSD)” when compared with other sexual orientations. Lesbians had the lowest incidences of BSD’s. Body shape descriptors were more common than general comments about attractiveness. From this study we can further deduce that gay men express an interest in the body shape of prospective partners. Gay men presented themselves in a thin ideal and were more likely to list their physical height and weight. This study provides more evidence that gay men experience cultural pressure to conform to specific ideals about body shape.

### Gay Acculturation

Acculturation is best viewed as a multi-dimensional construct, not merely the acceptance or rejection of a dominant culture (Nguyen, Messet, & Slollak, 1999).

Acculturation includes people's attitudes, behaviors and identities (Berry, 2001). Changing cultures can be a challenging experience and is referred to in the literature as acculturative stress. Mexican immigrants, for example, experience acculturation stress when they are separated from their families (Hovey, 2000). There are four primary modes of acculturation: integration, separation, marginalization and assimilation (Berry, 2001). Integration, maintaining original culture and having relationships with other groups, was associated with the least psychological distress compared to the other three acculturation styles (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Assimilation, abandoning one's original culture and integrating highly into the new group, was associated with the least amount of social difficulty compared with the other three styles (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Separation is a style of acculturation where the new group does not associate with the dominant culture while marginalization results from isolation of the new culture and the culture of origin.

Most gay men are not born into a same-sex nuclear family, and therefore at some point they must seek out others with those same attractions. Cass (1979) developed a six stage model of the coming out process. During the third stage in this process, identity tolerance, a person begins to look for gay contacts. Stage four involves accepting a gay identity and exploring sub-cultural activities. By stage five the individual solidifies his gay identity to the extent that he may actively shun mainstream values. These three stages are important because during this time, a person begins to learn the values of the gay sub-culture, and integrate those beliefs into his personality. This is the socialization part of coming out or the acculturation into the gay community. It is important to note that coming out to others is not always possible or desirable (Cain, 1991).

Sexual identity formation involves a person's journey through the integration of their sexual orientation with their self concept. In the process of forging sexual identity, coming out, gay men make contact with others in the gay community. Therefore embedded in the coming out process is acculturation; however, acculturation is not limited to that time period. A person may have a homosexual sexual orientation but not taking part in the gay community by going to gay owned businesses, participating in gay social clubs and reading gay magazines and books. It is also possible for someone to be fully out and also increase their acculturation by moving to a gay ghetto such as the Castro District in San Francisco. Whereas sexual identity refers to the internal process of discovering one's sexual orientation, acculturation refers to the social process of learning about the norms, values and beliefs held in the gay community.

Acculturation typically refers to the process when two cultures merge, typically by immigration. It also refers to the psychological process of the changes that occur when a person comes into contact with a new culture (Bourhis et al, 1997). The assumption behind acculturation theory is that the new culture has values different from the culture of origin. As in this study, the heterosexual culture that most are raised in differs from the gay culture people come in contact with when they come out. When a person comes into contact with a new culture, he/she can respond in several ways. First, he/she could publicly adopt the new culture's values, but privately maintain their old values. Secondly, a person could integrate the new culture's values and make them their own. Thirdly, a person could discount the new culture's values completely. (Bourhis, et al, 1997)

Acculturation into the gay community has not been discussed in the literature. Review of half a dozen internet based databases, such as Proquest Direct, PsychInfo and Sociological Abstracts, produced only one article that directly talked about acculturation into the gay subculture (Seibt, Ross, Freeman, Krepcho, Hedrich, McAlister & Ferna'ndez-Esquer, 1995). Seibt et al. defined acculturation into the gay community as, "The process of social integration into the gay subculture ... measured by the number of friends who are gay, member of gay organizations, reading of gay magazines and newspapers, and identification as being gay." Seibt et al examined the role of acculturation in the gay community as it relates to safer sex practices, and found that peer relationships affected safe sex behaviors.

Body image is a multidimensional construct composed of behaviors, thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Culture and societal expectations shape people's experience of their body image by imposing expectations of people's weight and body shape. Discrepancies between those expectations and people's actual body shape cause body dissatisfaction or lead to unrealistic perceptions of one's weight. These discrepancies have been studied using a variety of techniques primarily through surveys, body size drawings and the measurement of body mass index. The degree to which women internalize societal messages about body image has been a primary theory to explain body dissatisfaction in women. This theory has also been used to explain why gay men report higher levels of body dissatisfaction than do heterosexual men. The literature on gay culture shows that gay culture places an emphasis on appearance and youth, but how the messages from gay culture become internalized is unknown. This study addresses that process by using a qualitative design.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine how gay men internalize the messages transmitted from the gay male subculture regarding body image. Researchers have postulated pressure from the gay male subculture to be thin and attractive accounts for significantly greater body dissatisfaction in gay men when compared with their heterosexual peers (Herzog, et al, 1984, Silberstein, et al, 1989, Seiver, 1994 and so on). Thus far, no research has examined directly how contact with gay culture impacts a man's self concept. Clearly the context in which these cultural values arise holds critical information in understanding this topic, making the use of qualitative methodologies ideal. A qualitative analysis is suited to creating a more in-depth understanding of this issue. A phenomenological design should serve to fill the hole in the literature. This approach will give voice to the "lived experiences" of gay men (Creswell, 1998). It is critical to uncover how body dissatisfaction affects the daily lives of gay people. The qualitative design allows the researcher to gain a more complete description of gay men's body image, and will explore the relevant issues related to coming into contact with and become part of gay culture.

The design chosen for this study is a modified phenomenological approach. The psychological approach to phenomenological research is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived. (Moustakas, 1994, 13)”

### Role of the Researcher

As a member of the community, I as the researcher struggled to assure the findings of the study emerged from the data. Being part of the group being researched gave me increased sensitivity to the important issues. The tradeoff for that increased sensitivity comes from a lack of distance with these issues. To assure that the findings came from the data several techniques were used. The titles for the major chunks of data came from the research participants. I used the language of the research participants to describe phenomena whenever possible. Further the findings are grounded in the data, many direct quotes from transcribed interviews were used in the reporting of data. These strategies assure the findings come from the data and are not based on stereotypes, preconceptions or hunches.

### Participants

Purposeful convenience sampling was the method used to invite 12 openly gay men for this study. For the purposes of this study, being openly gay means self

acceptance of one's same-sex sexual orientation and disclosure of that sexual orientation to other gay men. Not all men in this study were out to certain people such as family members or coworkers. All men in this study were Caucasian. Their ages ranged from 21 to 45, with a mean age of 33.67 years. Six of the men self-identified as being in a long term relationship, three characterized themselves as dating and three said they were single. The years of being out ranged from less than one year to 26 years with a mean of 9.83 years. All of the participants were high school graduates, five held a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree and two were completing an advanced graduate degree beyond master's. There was a broad range of occupations including unskilled labor, service industry, education and business. No data were gathered regarding income level or objective measurements of height and weight.

## Method

Data Collection: Individual interviewing was the method employed for data collection. Data collection began February 15, 2003 and ended on December 13, 2004. The interview format was semi-structured; the initial interviews began with a predetermined set of questions. After the first few interviews the interview script was abandoned in favor of a more conversational style. The interviewer was able to gather data for all the questions proposed in the interview script. The interviews took place in two locations in two separate Midwestern cities. The first location was at a college counseling center office in the first city while the other location was at the primary investigator's home in the second city. The interviews, lasting from 45 to 90 minutes,

were audiotape recorded, and transcribed verbatim. After the interview a brief field note was written describing the interviewee's appearance, dress and demeanor. All data, including audio cassettes, notes taken during the interview, and transcripts were labeled with a predetermined pseudonym. The pseudonym list linking the names of the participants to their data was destroyed at the conclusion of the data collection adding a layer of protection for the interviewee's privacy. A professional medical transcriber was hired; this person never had access to any of the participant's identifying information. All interviews and tape recordings are in the possession of the primary interviewer. The transcripts were checked for accuracy, and corrections were made to the final transcript.

Data Analysis: Analysis began with a reading of the transcripts. Eight basic codes were created and each code had its own color coded page marker flag: *critical*, *accepting*, *persona*, *expectations*, *sanctions*, *age*, *gender* and *other*. Each interview was then coded using these eight codes. The coded data were then placed on three separate poster boards. The first poster board had a two by three table with *critical* and *accepting* as the headers. Each of those categories had three levels: *body*, *self* and *others*. The combination of these created six cells for data to be written in: *critical body*, *accepting body*, *critical self*, *accepting self*, *critical others* and *accepting others*. Poster board two had codes related to personas, which in the reporting of data is labeled *iconography* to use the word given by one of the participant. There were eight initial groups of data: *twink*, *muscle*, *drag*, *leather*, *hiding*, *straight acting*, *cowboy* and *theater*. Cowboy and theater are not reported on for lack of data. The final poster board had data for *expectations*, *sanctions*, *gender* and issues related to *age*.



While the data were being coded, the researcher wrote down reactions in a separate notebook. After coding each transcript, an analytic memo was written, the beginning of written analysis. The memos contained the major ideas presented in the interview. Also they served as a way of making analytic connections between the interviewees. To aid this process a data map was created where a concept, such as body image in childhood, could be mapped for each person. This process highlighted similarities and differences among the participants and served as another level of analysis. The memos were reviewed by the dissertation advisor to keep the committee updated on the research progress and to gain feedback about the data analysis process.

During the entire research process, the researcher wrote analytic notes. These served as a way to interpret the data and as a way to consider connections between the data. Also these analytic notes served as a way to record and monitor personal reactions. Out of these analytic notes and analytic memos came the five major themes. The themes were then checked out with two interviewees for verification and clarification.

Verification: Two follow up interviews were conducted to clarify the data and to check the legitimacy of the major themes. Once the entire results were written, that chapter was given to one of the participants for feedback. Feedback from these follow up interviews was incorporated into the final product. Collaborating with participants in the interpretation of data was the primary method of triangulating the data (Patton, 2002, 560). For further verification, the results and discussion sections were given to a gay man who did not participate in the original interviews. Consent to participate was obtained in the same manner as all other participants. The new participant thought the themes were relevant and accurate.

## Ethics and Rigor

There are two main ethical concerns present in this research, participant privacy and inclusion of the participants in the research process. To protect privacy, participants were given full informed consent by signing a written consent form and by being given a verbal explanation of the procedure. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant from an alphabetical list created before the beginning of data collection. Any identifying information was stored separately from the raw data, and no data have identifying information included. Participants in this study are seen as co-investigators. Following this rationale several participants were invited to give feedback on the analytic process. Having participants assist in the analytic process gives voice to their viewpoints and strengthens the conclusions of this research.

To strengthen the rigor the reporting of data, the data codes have been included with each quote presented from transcribed interviews. Each quote has a code consisting of one letter and three numbers. The letter refers to the pseudonym of the participant; the pseudonyms were created alphabetically enabling the use of one letter to identify each participant. The three numbers are the line numbers in the transcriptions. A few four number codes exist indicating a reference from a follow up interview.

A qualitative design was employed to study the gap in the psychological literature on how gay men internalize messages from gay culture about appearance. Twelve openly gay men were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. The men represented varied ages (from 21 to 45 years old), length of being out, educational attainment, occupations

and body types. All data was fully transcribed and coded. Researcher bias was addressed by oversight of the research process by an additional researcher, grounding conclusions heavily in the data and by constant checking of findings with the research participants. Presentation of the five major themes follow in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

“I would hate to be ugly and be gay. I would I don’t think I really want to think what that would be like. C134”

This study began as an investigation of the body image of gay men and the impact of socializing into the gay world upon that image. The twelve men interviewed for this study were all born into households with heterosexual parents as role models. As such they were socialized with the expectation they would grow up and be heterosexual. The men in this study talked about feeling different than their peers, and eventually coming to identify the feeling of different as being gay. The process of making one’s sexual orientation incorporated into overall self concept is known in the literature as identity theory, often presented as a series of stages a person goes through which culminates in the disclosure of their sexual orientation to others. A parallel process occurs as gay men abandon the heterosexual culture and values and enter into the gay culture, a process borrowed from social psychology known as acculturation. Michael Seiver’s (1994) seminal work on sexual orientation and gender as factors in body dissatisfaction suggests assimilation into the gay community is a factor affecting the body image of gay men.

Investigating the process of psychologically acculturating into the gay community uncovered five themes: *acceptance*, *control*, *acculturation*, *objectification* and *identity*. Each of these themes is related to the body image of gay men. One of the unexpected outcomes in this study was that body dissatisfaction did not begin as gay men entered the gay community. Many of the men in this study talked about feeling unhappy with their bodies as children; three had eating disorders as teenagers. This early time when gay men felt unhappy with their bodies coincided with a time they felt unacceptable because of being different. In fact the men in this study recall getting clear messages from family and society that being gay was unacceptable and sinful. Rather than making this difference known initially, the men in this study said they hid this difference and tried to present themselves to some degree as heterosexual. Many talked about a transitional stage before fully disclosing their sexual orientation, living *two lives*, where they presented themselves as heterosexual to some and homosexual to others. Eventually all men in the study came to self-identify as gay. Going from being unacceptable to self-acceptance highlights the importance of the *acceptance* theme. Gay men want to be accepted by a larger group, want to identify with a group, and will actively conform to that group to gain acceptance.

The gay men in this study are not passive victims of oppression, but spoke of taking *control* of their lives in whatever manner possible to protect themselves from real and perceived rejection from dominant society. One way of taking control for gay men is through image management: mannerisms, dress, exercise, eating, grooming, and the like. The men in the study felt unable to control their sexual feelings and unable to control how the people around them perceived homosexuality, so image becomes control.

Keeping their difference, their same sex attractions, private is control. Becoming devoted to athletics was a form of control, of hiding. When becoming part of the gay community the men talked about the importance of taking control of their grooming in order to meet the gay community's norms related to appearance. Control is an important dynamic affecting body dissatisfaction (Grogan, 1999).

Appearance is highly valued in the gay men's community, and was discovered as the men in this study entered that community. Because they grew up in heterosexual households they had to seek out and find other gay people, a process identified in this research as *acculturation*. The men in this study have chosen to assimilate into the gay community to varying degrees by abandoning a heterosexual self-image and taking a homosexual self-image. On this path of discovery they realized the importance of physical appearance for gay men, which is reinforced in the media and by other gay men personally through direct verbal feedback and through body language. These reinforcements shape gay men's attitudes about their image.

One of the largest factors affecting gay men's attitude toward image is *objectification*. Previous research has hypothesized that gay men and heterosexual women experience body dissatisfaction because they both want to be attractive to men (Seiver, 1994). Men are focused on appearance as the basis for attraction, a process known as objectification. The gay men in this study identified objectifying other men and being objectified by other gay men, making objectification bi-directional with gay men. Appearance is important to such a degree that the men in this study indicated gay culture being stratified by appearance with more attractive men at the top and less

attractive men at the bottom. As the men in this study felt objectified they came to experience body dissatisfaction or the *discounting* of one's appearance.

Appearance for gay men has a deeper meaning in addition to objectification; image for the men in this study defines their *identity* as gay men and establishes their place in gay culture. The community of gay men is not a single homogenous group; it is a collection of numerous subcultures, each being differentiated largely by its image. The icons revealed in this study are *twink, muscle, leather, bear* and *drag*. Each of these icons has specific expectations about appearance, body type and style of dress. Body image is identity. Having one of these identities, these icons, solidifies a person's place in the gay community and makes that particular group more cohesive. The sense of belongingness is important to the gay men in this study because it fosters a sense of acceptance, bringing the results of this study full circle. The men in this study have felt rejected in the past making the search for a group they feel a part of and accepted by doubly important. Membership in these groups in the gay community has a great deal to do with appearance. The body image of the gay men in this study hinges on how they see themselves fitting into the gay community.

### Acceptance

This research sought to investigate body image in adult gay men. No questions were asked about the participants' childhood; however more than half of the men interviewed talked about childhood experiences of their bodies and body dissatisfaction. Retrospective accounts of body dissatisfaction in gay men as children have been

previously reported (Stoltenberg, 1998 and Feraios, 1998). Body dissatisfaction, evidenced by how these men describe themselves as children, has two vectors, being either too slender or being obese, either “scrawny or chubby” . Both of these imply a lack of athleticism and power.

“[I] know I’m not fat, but as a child I kinda was. So, like, it’s still like in the back of my mind...like I look fat. I know I’m not fat, but I feel like I am sometimes. D147”

“I never had a real good picture of my body, or felt good about my body even as a child. When I was much younger, junior high and high school, I felt I was kinda skinny. M403”

“I know in high school I still felt fat. I was very self-conscious about my body and now when I look back... I look scrawny. E534”

One man recalls feeling “very tall, lean, wiry and it was a very negative impression. There was a perception that I was not tough, not ah, I didn’t have any strength I was a weakling. K112”

“I’d always felt small. I’m not a small boy... I had always felt like I was the smaller brother. H140”



“Little chubby kid” is one of the men’s self-description who did not want to take his shirt off when he went swimming. “It was a self-conscious thing, it wasn’t because I was afraid of getting a sunburn. Cause I didn’t want people to look at my body. E518”

Keeping oneself concealed and hidden from view sends a clear message “I do not want people to looking at me, my body is not acceptable and, in turn, I am unacceptable”. Grogan (1999) cites two main reasons for body dissatisfaction: low self-esteem and the perception of a lack of control. Both of these factors are present in the narratives of participants in this study. Body dissatisfaction in childhood for these men has two directions, being too skinny and being too fat. Scrawny is powerful choice of words as it suggests weakness, and is an expression of the lack of power and control, one of Grogan’s main factors of body dissatisfaction. The men in this study describe a sense of shame about their body, evidencing low self-esteem and a belief their body was something to be hidden. Feeling un-athletic communicates a sense of lack of power and low self esteem for their bodies. Clinical experience indicates hiding ones sexual orientation predisposes men to disordered eating (Blotcher, 1998). Hiding ones physical self parallels hiding ones sexual orientation, concealing how one feels different from peers.

Different

At the same time many of the men in this study become aware of not being happy with their bodies, the same men come to feel *different* or they “knew something was different. I012.” This expresses a feeling of being unlike their peers in some fundamental way. It is a vague feeling, one they did not fully understand as children. Only later in life do they equate *different* with being gay.

“Even as a small child I remember I knew I wasn’t like the other boys. I just didn’t know why. D626”

“Well I always knew I was gay, when I was a little kid I knew it just didn’t understand it. A375”

“I always knew I was different but I didn’t have a name [for being gay]. K025”

“When I was four or five years old but I didn’t know what it was. Didn’t know what it was all about. All I know is I liked guys. You have Dad and Mom telling you well someday when you get older you’ll quit liking guys and start liking girls. Your school teachers told you that too. F005”

All of the men interviewed for this research were brought up in heterosexual households with parental expectations they would grow up and be straight. Some understanding exists that same sex feelings run contrary to the expectations of the family and lead to potential rejection (Elizur & Mutzer, 2001). None of the interviewees was

raised in an environment accepting of homosexuality. Quite the contrary, they were raised to believe that homosexuality is morally unacceptable. Many gay men are taught homosexuality is wrong (Coleman, 1982) and is considered a stigma (Wells & Kline, 1986).

“Coming from the bible belt, that you’re preached about day in and day out, how they’re child molesters even, perverts, and all that. I047”

“I was very religious and am still very spiritual but up until that point [when he came out] it was never ever okay for me to be gay because it was sin. H012”

“Being gay is an abominable sin. Just the bottom line, you’re going to hell so I didn’t want to tell them. D438”

“I hate the word I hate the term fag.. It meant heretic for what they did during the dark ages. They would burn sodomites at the stake... That image I, you know, that’s kind of always there. K781”

One interviewee’s mother told him, “I would never want a gay child because I think it’s selfish for them to dash and steal all my hopes and dreams that I’ve dreamt for so many years. K802”

“I have a feeling that I’d probably been ask to change my last name. It would have been that bad, so I’ve not really been out to my family. G523”

The gay men in this study came to know same sex attraction is not acceptable to their religion, family and society at large. Rather than immediatly disclosing these feelings as they become aware of them, these feelings are kept private rather than risk family rejection (Wells & Kline, 1986). They are simultaneously protecting themselves against negative consequences from the family and are protecting the family from having to cope with a dramatic change in expectations. The common term for not being open about same sex attraction in gay culture is being “in the closet.” Early in life gay men become aware of their difference, but this difference is not external. It is an internal trait. Sexual orientation, unlike race or gender, lacks physical, identifiable clues. Because you can not tell someone is gay by looking at them, homosexuals can blend in with their peers. This is the strategy adopted by the men in this study, because those who are in the closet are protecting themselves against social sanctions such as being rejected by their families, being victims of hate crimes or being subjected to discrimination. Also by remaining in the closet they are creating a personal front, an image of themselves that is socially conventional. They are managing their identity to conceal a stigma (Goffman, 1959).

### Two Lives

Because they perceived same sex attraction was not accepted, some of the men in the study reacted by either trying to change themselves, or at least have the outward appearance of heterosexuality. The gay men in the study did not want to be rejected for their sexual orientation, so they often tried to live up to heterosexual standards. One way of accomplishing this is to date a woman, or having a *beard*, “old eighties gay term meaning someone to hide behind in terms of your sexuality. K057” They believed there is a way to act straight, and they responded to the pressures to be straight.

“There was a lot of... inner turmoil trying to figure out why [he was gay]. I was trying to force myself to be straight or trying to play out that role. E153”

“Oh I’d always known that [I was gay]. [I] fought it for a long time because I had parents that were... homophobic. G521”

“When I went to college I was still dating girls and I guess living a straight life style, though by that time I pretty much knew I was gay. I guess I still wasn’t accepting it, I was still in denial to some extent, trying to fight it. E111”

This is not passive denial, but is an active state of working to create an appearance of being heterosexual. The men in this study did not want to draw attention to themselves at this point and they managed their identities to draw attention away from their sexual feelings.

“But that was only like very discreet behind the doors. We always pretend that we were just friends. I would never have classified him as a boyfriend. D545”

“I would go to other cities and meet guys while I was out of town. L010”

“Being gay you sort of live two lives. You have the life that you live with the people that you are afraid to let know who you are. Because you don’t know their reaction, or it’s not acceptable [to be gay]. So you have to pretend to be this heterosexual male... when you can be around your friends that are accepting and are just like you, you can be your other self where it doesn’t matter what you do, they don’t care. It’s the double life, the double standard... I was living a double life. I151”

Another method of drawing attention away from ones sexual orientation is delving into athletics. Several of the men augmented the *two lives* strategy of hiding by immersing themselves in exercise. One man, for example, poured a great deal of energy into a competitive sport. Keeping the focus on exercise also reduces the focus on one’s sexual orientation.

“All I did was work and do that [exercise]. A152”

“In my junior year in high school ah I was leading two lives. I went to school and played football, wrestled, was our newspaper sports editor, dated the cheerleaders,

was dating the richest girl in town... My senior prom she was home by 10:30, 11:00 o'clock and I had dropped her off. I turned around and drove the 50, 60 miles the other direction... and went out to the gay bar. M776”

*Two lives* speaks to a transitional period in the lives of gay men. This stage of the coming out process occurs between the awareness of same sex attraction and formally coming out to other people. During this time gay men focus on making themselves seem heterosexual by keeping same sex relationships private and by dating members of the opposite sex. By doing so they are managing their identity in order to maintain their identification with dominant heterosexual society. *Two lives* is an active strategy to draw attention away from being gay. This is a critical stage to understand the body image of adult gay men because at this time gay men learn to adapt their outside behaviors to meet the expectations of a larger group.

### Coming Out

Living two lives is difficult and putting up a heterosexual façade gives way to being open about being gay. A strong desire exists to be congruent with self and honest with others (Wells & Kline, 1986). Coming out signals to others acceptance of one's same sex attractions.

“I finally just had to get to a place where I had to deal with it. H010”

“I’d been struggling with it for probably a good ten, twelve years [he was 28 at the time of this struggling]. Ah I decided that I knew what was different about me and I wanted act on it just to put my mind at ease... so I did. I012”

Eventually all the participants in the study have come out, though not all are out in some part of their life such as not being out to family. Coming out is a difficult process, as they run the risk of being rejected by others.

“I was a blithering in consulate [inconsolate] pile of glandular crap on the floor wailing because I could no longer hide. K182”

“I grew up in like a very straight family and stuff so it was hard [coming out]. F027”

The men interviewed for this study did not expect their parents to be supportive of them if they self disclosed their sexual orientation. Despite the risks, being out is preferable to “pretending to be something that I’m not. C007.” Men have an easier time coming out in an environment of social support (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001). The men in this study described their family environment as critical when they came out and expressed their parents’ desire for them to be heterosexual. A critical and controlling family environment is a major factor for the development of eating disorders in women (Haworth & Hoepfner, 2000). This dynamic may have translated to gay men as three of the men in this study specifically disclosed having an eating disorder as teenagers.



“My mom didn’t speak to me for two whole weeks; it took my Dad about two years. Ah there was a span where he wouldn’t even speak [to me]. M699”

“My father was so disrespects it and doesn’t understand it and won’t try. That I know... the family could even be closer if I wasn’t [gay], but I don’t think that’s my fault. A038”

One man’s mother has told him, “Why can’t you just do normal stuff, you don’t have to go the bars every night... She doesn’t like it that I go to Pride, she doesn’t like it that I do the AIDS walk. She would just prefer I go to work, I come home, I stay home and not have a social life. L570”

Gay men have feelings, which they recognize are different and potentially dangerous to themselves. This is an important conceptual piece to understanding body image in gay men because it is the first example of creating an external presentation to fit into a group. People tend to present themselves in a favorable light (Goffman, 1959). They act and pretend these forbidden feelings do not exist as a way of protecting themselves against rejection, harassment and discrimination. This is the genesis of actively changing ones appearance and action to blend in with a larger group. Pretending to be something you are not is a powerful and effective adaptation to a hostile environment. From the time gay men realize they feel “different” until the time they come out of the closet, they are practicing acting to fit in with a dominant group. They

then choose to make their outside presentation congruent with their inside feelings. As gay men begin to enter gay culture, they want to find a place of acceptance with other gay men. Being accepted in gay culture has a great deal to do with appearance. Additionally, the skills learned during the “two lives” stage are later used to a great degree when gay men try to acculturate into gay society.

### Control

The gay men in the study feel they cannot control their sexual orientation and feel unable to change the environment of people who do not accept them for their sexuality. Because they cannot control their sexual feelings nor how others treat them, they look for alternative ways to create more control in their world. This need for control sublimates into control of body image and appearance. Three men interviewed for this study experienced eating disorders during their teenage years. Participants were not sought out who had eating disorders, and the presence of three individuals in a sample of twelve is striking. Eating disorders often develop during adolescence for women which is conceptualized as having difficulty adapting to developmental challenges (Mussell, Binford, & Fulkerson, 2000). A similar phenomenon seems to occur with some gay adolescents as seen in this study. Other studies such as Russell and Keel (2002) found gay men are specifically at risk for eating disorders.

“[My parents] were very controlling. I’ve done research on this later as a young adult and I found that almost all of the people that suffer with eating disorders,

usually it's not so much the image as it's more of a control issue. That they feel that their lives are completely out of control, they have no control over what they are doing and what they're saying and that's something that they can control and nobody can stop them. Because nobody can make you eat and nobody can make you gain weight and nobody can make you lose weight. It's totally your discretion. D188"

One man describes his mother. "She is a very controlling person and she's very self involved so you know it was a challenge." As an adolescent, he was simultaneously at home with a controlling parent and aware of his homosexuality. "High school I... can remember fretting about having to wear my 27 inch waist jeans because my 26's were getting a little tight. That was a concern. You know I was actually in high school diagnosed by my doctor as a borderline anorexic, which is how little I ate and how much I weighed. B373"

A third interviewee, who reports having had an eating disorder, turned to competitive sports to gain a sense of control. Despite numerous injuries he maintained participation in the sport. Not only did sports give him a sense of control, it was also a way to hide his sexual orientation.

"It was a very strong sense of control because you knew exactly what you were doing and ah there's the control issue, ah there's the body limitation, it's like

you're making a deal with God... It was a very safe place to hide and it gave me self-esteem and I didn't have any before. K095"

Some use exercise as a way to cope with feeling rejected for ones sexual orientation while others use eating as a coping strategy for gaining a sense of control. One interviewee tells of two of his friends who are gay but attempted to hide by getting married to women. Being in the closet and not honest with themselves and those closest to them made them miserable people. Food became a way to cope with that misery.

"One of the things that they did to try to block out their unhappiness was eat. They both became very, very obese men. Ah both of them have since divorced their wives and had gastric bypass surgery to drastically reduce their weight. B245"

"I can look back now and see that I just got more and more depressed... I'm in my late twenties and never had a significant relationship... so you comfort yourself with more chocolates and cookies, hotdogs instead of something good for you. H348"

Stoltenberg (1998) conceptualizes being overweight as a protection from one's sexuality. By being overweight, gay men can make themselves unattractive and do not have to deal with their sexual feelings. In these examples we see incidents of gay men experiencing the perception they lack control in their lives, specifically about their sexual

orientation. Both the disordered eating and the exercise are attempts to gain some mastery over psychological distress of being gay in the context of a homophobic society and dealing with feelings such as sadness and isolation. Food and exercise become ways of gaining control.

### Identify and Fix

“Cause you know I have this, I don’t know if most people do or not, but I tend to be able to step away from myself like identify and fix. Like okay you need this, this and this and so you go about doing that for awhile. H433”

As gay men in this study came out and integrated themselves into the gay community, their concerns about appearance did not end. They learned about the appearance based values and expectations of the gay community, and about working towards meeting these high expectations. Some respond by conforming to the culture, changing themselves to become more physically fit. The body-related expectations talked about by these men are low body fat, high musculature, youthful appearance, good grooming, stylish dress, and appearing healthy. The first two expectations of gay men relate to body shape, with the ideal being low body fat and high muscle mass. High body fat is not acceptable by their description. Several men mentioned dieting as a way to adhere to this expectation with men disclosing the loss of 65 pounds, 155 pounds, and even 200 pounds. Others lament the body fat around their stomach. Weight loss was accomplished by restrained eating and exercise.

“I wake up and think, gaw I’m horrible... it’ll just be a day where like I’m just fat. C193”

“I got kind of a gut now, a belly you know, that I wish I could get rid of. F305”

“That’s what I did when I lost the 65 pounds I just uh I would push food away before I was finished before I felt like I was full. A539”

Lower body fat and high musculature are ideals for gay men and are consistent with other research, Miskind et al (1986) for example. One interviewee indicates all people need low body fat and high musculature, “everybody probably needs that. Whether they know it or not. C370” One man specifically appreciates his legs because they exemplify the low fat, high muscle ideal. Some men in the study believe there is no upper limit on attractive muscle mass; others do not agree. Clearly the trend is: bigger is better. The men in the study did not disclose any steroid use, but several mentioned using steroids to achieve a highly muscular appearance. Being highly muscular is desired and the men in the study feel pressured to achieve muscle mass.

One man describes his body as, “its got too much fat on it. And I need more muscle. C358”

“I was about 300 to 400 pounds and so I just started working out at that point. That was basically the whole challenge is getting the weight off and get muscles. G052”

“[I] like my legs, muscular tone. Um. It’s all I need them to be muscular and toned. That’s what I want them to be. A479”

“I may be overweight but I’m also extremely muscular and I’d like to build on that aspect... that I’ve beefed up, bulked up. M433”

“As far as I’m concerned there is not such thing as too big (muscular). H749”

“You know god’s honest truth if I could use steroids, I would. If I could be 230 pounds of rock hard muscle... I would do it. K648”

“I’ve thought about it (steroids) but I won’t do it because... I’m a professional singer I am not going to ruin the muscles in my throat. H734”

“I worked out every day for at least a couple of hours but four times a week with my weight trainer. G084”

Previous research has captured the importance gay men place on low weight-high musculature, but has failed to illuminate the importance of clothing. Clothing being

fashionable and well fitted impacts the perception of body image. Men talked about the importance of wearing clothing in which they felt thin, and clothes which fit well. Ill-fitting clothing magnifies a sense of awareness of body shape, highlighting unflattering features. Frith and Gleeson (2004) found all men use clothing to “conceal” or “reveal” their body.

“Wear nice clothes, clothes that accentuate your body. The parts that look good. A568”

“Then being able to, after some of the weight came off not having to go to the fat man’s store, I could go buy nicer cloths to wear. Everything just started changing I had a nicer wardrobe. G064”

“Well what it feels like when I put clothes on they don’t drape quite naturally over you and it makes you look like you got a big bulge, stomach. F316”

“The look [expected of gay men] is just basically in shape, well kept, well groomed. G114” Another area of concern not previously discussed in the psychological literature is grooming. Grooming includes skin care, tanning, nail care, and body hair maintenance. The men interviewed talked about the importance of adhering to rituals that maintain appearance. They expressed a need to work to be presentable and acceptable to others based on their appearance. This is another form of control. They feel pressure to conform to standards of appearance by grooming.



“You’re groomed well. That you have good hygiene. That uh you don’t want people thinking you’re nasty stinky. C290”

“I’m not becoming some slob or slouch and not bath or anything and still going try and keep myself hygienic, I guess you know I’m well groomed. I’m a big exfoliator. I’m a big fan of that, facial scrub and exfoliation. Don’t ask me why! Good skin. M450”

“I do trim all my body hair, if not trim or shave some parts. Like, I shave my armpits and other areas. Trim the hair on my leg... I bleach my teeth about once a week to keep them white. Ah, I do a facial about once a week my combined mask or something like that. I usually wash my face almost every day. Ah, I dye my hair. Ah, I tweeze my eyebrows. I used to do a manicure and a pedicure every week or two... Sometimes I’ll do like a salt rub on my body and moisturize my skin and exfoliate my body. D351”

“Sure I moisturize and I cleanse and I have my own little regime. When I’m in shows I use nothing but Mary Kay it doesn’t do anything to my skin, I never break out... I have a scrub and matte thing I do once a week on my face, I have a daily face cleanser, and I’ve got the astringent and the moisturizer and the blah, blah, blah. And I cut my hair every three weeks so it looks the same, sometimes it’s getting blonde tips I do that myself cause I do it cheap and since it’s almost

the same color I don't have to worry about it looking funky so I can do it myself. I generally give myself manicures and pedicures when I have the time. H759"

Maintenance of body hair evoked strong opinions. Some appreciate body hair, "I like my hairy chest. E425" Others do not. Whether body hair is appreciated or not, there seems to be agreement that body hair needs maintenance. Body hair is associated with age, with low body hair indicating youth and high body hair indicating maturity. Some of the subgroups, to be discussed later in the chapter, define themselves by body hair. Body hair is an important variable to consider when examining gay men's body image.

"My own philosophy own body hair is that you cut the hair on your head, why not trim or shave the hair on the body. I just think it's gross when anybody lets that go crazy... Let it go all natural. I think that's disgusting. I think it's absolutely just the grossest thing in the world. Nobody lets their hair go all crazy so why do you let the hair on your body go all crazy. D358"

"Detailing, I guess is the way to say it, my beard and sharpening the edges. M467"

Youthful appearance is important. Even the youngest interviewee (22 years old) worries about his age. Being older is not generally valued, with older gay men being called such things as "fossil", "troll" and "bitter old queen". The men in this study

highlight the belief gay men differ from heterosexual men in the desire to maintain a youthful and attractive appearance.

“I don’t like showing age. I don’t know why. I think it’s just because society as a whole has such a preface on a younger looking face. D332”

“I hate getting older... You reach a certain age you are sort of a outcast. I472”

“I’m probably one of the older people that is more obsessed with the way I look... I think in the gay community even the older ones still want to look good, want to look presentable. G596”

The oldest man alone appears to appreciate his age.

“Well I think all of that generation has died and I think that there is a new generation coming up and it’d kind of like rebuilt with kind of like AIDS and stuff and kind of like makes us realize how short life actually can be... Well I’ve seen a lot of people die. Had a few friends that died like a whole generation just wiped out. Ah but in a way those people died young they’ll never have to experience arthritis or you know anything like that or growing old, which I would like to experience. F470”

Additionally AIDS has changed the way men view body fat,

“Back years ago fat was not good you know in the gay community and I think things have kind of changed that because AIDS started coming into the picture just like the people who were turning into nothing but skeletons wish they were fat and they could live because they lost all their body weight and everything. F385”

Maintaining appearance is not the only reason gay men expressed for exercising and maintaining their diet. Health was a common reason mentioned for exercise.

“I’m working towards looking better and being healthy... health is another motivation because I’ve had high blood pressure long time. C427”

“I’d love to loose 30 or 40 pounds I think I would have more energy, I would be healthier. Ah but in the same aspect I wouldn’t mind gaining ten of it back as muscle mass and be beefier. M429”

### Confidence

Several of the interviewees talked about the relationship of their bodily perception and emotion. Generally exercise increases self-esteem. The gay men in the study make a strong connection between the changes in their body and their self-esteem. Self-esteem

and exercise affect each other in both directions. As one man states, he can not make progress in his exercise goals if he has unresolved emotional issues.

“It was the first time that I was able to really lose some weight because I started being happier with myself... As long as I was unhappy with the way I looked it never got better. I got significantly better looking when I thought I was better looking... I got better looking cause I was happier I suppose my inside felt that way... I can tell if I’m not making progress physically it’s cause I’ve got stuff on the inside I haven’t been dealing with so I’ll figure out a way to get that going. H109”

“Being in better shape makes me feel good. Not only good about myself in the way you appear, but also it makes you feel good because you can just feel better. Physically feel better. A096”

Exercising “greatly improves my self image ah I used to not think much at all about the way I looked. As far as muscularity or body, not face looks, I think now I feel better about myself in that sense. E314”

“I do manage to look in the mirror sometimes and think, God I do look good... Satisfaction. And you know it gives you confidence. C184”

“Ah just people making comments, compliments that’s changed a lot. The more and more I bulk up the more I lose, I think, the more attention I get. That might be because I’m more confident in myself. You know, you exude that. People can tell your more confident that way before I would go into a bar... Now it’s totally different. Now I’ll be getting ready and I’ll spend more time getting ready. I’m more worried about what I look like. G226”

As seen in the last quote, making changes such as losing weight and increasing muscle mass are positively reinforced in the gay community. Grooming, clothing and exercise are all ways the gay men in this study use to increase their perception of control. The drive for this sense of control can be distilled from two basic sources. First, control in these areas is a way to deal with negative emotions, such as those resulting from family rejection. Second, taking control of one’s image is a response from the pressure in the gay community to maintain a healthy, youthful appearance. The men in this study feel pressured to present and maintain an attractive appearance, and this pressure becomes part of the acculturation process as they shift from seeing themselves as part of the straight culture to part of the gay culture.

### Acculturation

The gay men interviewed in this study felt unaccepted in their families and in society at large for their sexuality. Because they were not accepted, they chose to hide their sexuality and to present themselves as heterosexual. This was either a full time

pretending to be heterosexual as in “being in the closet” or a part time guise of heterosexuality by living *two lives*. While parading around as heterosexual, gay men practiced forging an identity to conform to a larger group’s expectations. When they come out of the closet, they are departing from the norms and values of heterosexual culture, and are highly invested in being accepted into gay culture. The experience of coming out of the closet is freeing. Not only is it a great relief to not have to pretend to be heterosexual, men feel they can be more open and direct with others.

“Being out I don’t feel like I have a lot to hide I feel like I can be myself and talk about anything... I don’t have to pretend to be someone I’m not. So I decided that’s where I belong. A397”

“I decided I had lived a third of my life alone and bored and I was not going to live another third that way. L016”

Belongingness was critical for the gay men in this study because they feel unaccepted by heterosexual society. Developmentally, gay men are ready to begin seeking out gay culture and making contact with the gay community. What gay men come to find is that gay culture has a great deal of influence upon body image.

Seibt et al. (1995) define acculturation as it can be applied here, as moving from a dominant culture to a subculture within it. The gay men in this study were not born into gay culture and did not grow up within it therefore they must search it out. Part of psychological acculturation is socialization into the new culture to learn its values, norms

and expectations. Gay men must actively seek out the culture of gay men (Lukes & Land, 1990). Straight culture dictates men should not care about their appearance (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), and based on the experience of the men in this study, gay culture differs because it highly values appearance. Gay male culture, which has been described as “body culture”, magnifies the mainstream cultural values of beauty and youth (Schneider, 2001).

### Stereotypes

There are two major stereotypes about gay men that the men in the study were aware of as they began to come out; the first is the stereotype of the feminine gay man, one the men in this study felt they did not identify with. This was seen as an unflattering stereotype. The second stereotype regarding appearance will be discussed later.

“I guess the famous stereotype is the limp wrist and the swishy walk and the any use of the phrase girlfriend (laugh) if you’re not a girl. I guess the general public would pick up as being stereotypically gay. E083”

“Flamboyant or nelly acting or whatever that you are weak or that you are less of a man or that you are a bottom.... someone who is sissified or flamboyant acting or someone. And in the same sense someone who won’t stand up for themselves. A363”



No one in the study currently identified with being feminine. Because this stereotype is predominantly known by the dominant heterosexual culture, gay men use these stereotypical behaviors to draw attention to their sexual orientation. This is another example of a gay man actively managing his appearance, and a technique to find others.

“I was out in high school, took a guy to prom, was a very flamboyant, very effeminate youth.... Well one of the many reasons I was so effeminate back in high school was that I was trying to get sanction. You know, I was crying out for attention. I needed people to notice me; I needed people to know that I was gay. You know, I wanted them to know. I wanted to confront them with who I was.  
B011”

Whereas in the *two lives* strategy, gay men present themselves as typically heterosexual, gay men can also play up the feminine stereotype as a way to display sexual orientation. “Feminine acting once in a while, they can be a little embarrassing... just draws a lot of attention for no reason A018.” What both the two lives and feminine strategies have in common is that they are methods gay men have developed to alter their behavior, appearance and general image as a way of managing how straight people respond to them. Both strategies are reactions to heterosexual culture and are ways gay men cope with its often hostile attitude towards homosexuals.

Acculturation for the purposes of this study is the psychological process of abandoning one culture and being socialized into another culture. In this case, men are brought up in the heterosexual community. At some point in time they become aware

they are different from their peers. This difference is hidden from them because gay men keep their difference, being gay, a secret or in the closet. Acculturation is not the process of coming out; rather, it is the process of finding the gay community, being socialized into the expectations of that community and internalizing those expectations which chronologically co-occurs with the coming out process.

The expectations of the gay community have a great deal to do with appearance, so the second stereotype is that gay men are supposed to be focused on being attractive. Unlike the feminine stereotype, with which the men in this study did not identify, the stereotype of attractiveness is highly salient and tremendously affects gay men's experience of being out and part of the gay community. Many have internalized this stereotype and feel pressured to conform to highly set standards of how they should look, what they should wear, how they groom themselves and what their body shape should be. These are behaviors seen as within their control.

“It's a part of being gay. It exposes the whole myth that gay men as a whole are suppose to know how to dress and suppose to be very attractive. D260”

“Image is everything to gay people. Whole culture revolves around the right look and the right body type. I1088”

“If you're not young and pretty your odds of making it in gay society aren't real good. M321”

“Well we do have this reputation for being very superficial... Everything’s based on your looks and actually there’s a high number of people who probably wouldn’t even, if you don’t look good, they wouldn’t talk to you. Or don’t find you attractive in some way. Um. So unfortunately I think that tends to be true quite a bit. C119”

Because gay men are not born into gay culture the way straight people are born into heterosexual culture, gay men must search out others like themselves. As gay men begin to learn about the gay community they typically go to media first such as books, magazines and the internet. This begins the socialization/accluturation process. Expectations are communicated such as how and where to meet others.

“I bought my first issue of a bear magazine and ah it was like cool! It was like my niche in live that’s who I identified with at that point and from then on. M047”

“I got more books and started reading them. Several which talked about how to go out and talk to people in bars.... I have a huge fear of failure so I over compensate by more information... you’ve got to just get out. Ah talk to strangers, introduce yourself, it talked about pickup lines, it talked about what to wear, where to stand, and how to cruise. If you’re going to make a lap always come back to the same place so they’ll know where to find you the next time. I mean all these kind of things. Down to the minute detail. H377”

“Well I guess I first started meeting people online. Um. And I never went to any kind of gay bar or event or anything until I came out. So I mean first was to meet people online, and then I would meet them in person. C227”

“Just searched it out. Just did random searches trying to find out where the best place were when searching for info to see what was out there. I074”

“Planning to move back to [City] I got on the internet, online looking for a [City] Gay Chapter and started talking to people trying to find out what life was like in [City]. Although I lived there pretty much all my life, I’d never been gay in [City] so I didn’t really know. E187”

“There’s chat rooms, there’s news articles, shopping, it’s got a variety of different things and like every picture you see of a guy on there you know he has the pecs, six pack out, the built arms, you know he’s got little bitty shorts on. I mean it’s constantly panning the phrase ‘looking good’. It’s a part of being gay. D256”

In essence by consulting these media, the gay men in this study learned about how to be gay--not how to have same sex attraction, they were not recruited but learning about the expectations of the collective gay community. After consulting various media such as the internet, many gay men find their way to the hub of gay social life, the bar.

The gay bar is described as a place where gay men feel comfortable to be themselves; it is an insulated cocoon protecting one from a homophobic surrounding community.

“I have a really good time when I go out. You are more at ease with yourself. Not worried about being attacked if you hold hands or kiss... you feel like you are in your own little country. Everyone is accepting. You not hearing that you are not right or you are going to burn in hell. I1047”

“A men’s bar and there weren’t as many real young gay men, women there and it just felt more comfortable I guess is the way to say it. It wasn’t as loud. Ah, it was smaller. Just more homey, more comfortable. M535”

One of the men in the study says bars are important, “To the gay community, some of the gay community. That is what I found that to a lot of the gay community it is important but there is a whole other segment they don’t care about. L596” This study is limited to men who are assimilated and active in the gay male community. Certainly it is possible to be gay and not be part of the gay community, and the experience of these men related to their body image is unknown. While gay men feel free when at a bar, going to a gay bar isn’t purely a stress -free experience. It is a place where the expectation to look good is at its zenith, and the pressure to look good keeps some away. The bar is not so much a place to talk with people, but a place to see and be seen.

“A bar, it’s pretty much a meat market and you’re there to impress... I wish there was more outlets for gay people. Just to hang out, relax and stuff, not have to worry. D097”

“I was not the typical type that would go out to the bars and ah I just didn’t do it. I didn’t fit the look that goes along with it so I never really got into that scene. G107”

“I don’t feel good about myself when I go out to the bars. I feel intimidated. I feel I’m not good enough looking for those people. I feel like it’s very judgmental in the bars. F368”

#### Everybody Notices, Everybody Comments

Pope, et al. (2000) surmises gay men do not experience body dissatisfaction more than heterosexual men, gay men just express it more. This research supports the notion that gay men are able to verbalize their feelings and beliefs about their body image freely. This is a critical point. Gay culture accepts, perhaps encourages, men to openly comment on the subject of body image and this commenting has a strong impact on gay men’s body image. The men interviewed in this study have the perception straight men are not as able to discuss body image concerns as gay men are.

“There were fat jokes that people would tell that I would overhear nobody [straight] was rude to come right out and say it to my face. G139”

“And of course you know in the heterosexual world people don’t notice as much. They don’t seem to notice. A165”

If a gay man does not meet expectations based on appearance, the men in this study were told in a direct and unkind manner when they did not conform. Blotcher (1996) identifies a large amount of weight bigotry in the gay community. Feraios (1996) describes overweight gay men as being treated like non-people, with other gay men not looking at them or smiling at them. In addition to comments made directly to a person, gossip is another method of expressing disapproval with one’s appearance as one man points out gay men gossip about, “So and so’s new relationship. Who’s gained weight. Um maybe if someone was looking bad. C325” Not only is disapproval verbalized, it is also reflected in body language such as by not smiling, no eye contact or rolling of the eyes (Feraios, 1998).

“Everybody notices. Everybody comments. When people are out of shape. If you’re fat they’ll tell you. They’re bitter people, they will tell you straight up you are fat or you are out of shape or you’re not good enough for me. A182”

“You could tell that they’re like he doesn’t really fit in just from people walking by and they glance over and you just tell you don’t fit in. G162”

“Someone giving him the cold shoulder, snubbing him off or whatever you know, like I’ve got better things to do than talk to you. F449”

“It was like they were trying to leave skid marks to get away from (me) fast. G747”

One man was told, “I would have never given you or your partner a second glance or even talked to you... because of what he saw on the outside. M861”

The expression of approval of one’s appearance has equal potency to the expression of disapproval. The men in this study reported others openly verbalize praise when other gay men approve of their appearance.

“They are more likely to talk to you ah, give you a complement. C262”

“And that’s a place where people don’t mind... touching each other. You know so someone comes up and oh you are so you look good. They reach out and touch you and it makes you (feel good). A268”

“And it’s kind of contagious I think when you know your friends start making comments about how you look. That gives me more of a motivation to go on and the same thing when people will hear it. If I’m around some of my friends who



may hear you look awesome you lost weight you look great. People like getting compliments. G639”

“Very rarely go shopping without somebody to give me an opinion on it. I can tell if I think I look good but I always want a second opinion. G289”

It is important to note that gay men are not just the passive recipients of compliments, but actively seek them out. Getting compliments has a meaning deeper than just a critique of appearance. It is a signal of acceptance from their fellow gay men, and it is an acceptance gay men need after having faced homophobia and its rejection. This acceptance helps the men in this study feel secure in their place in the gay community. Having a place of acceptance is important because of the years of perceived separation when gay men were in the closet (Blotcher, 1998).

“I tend to get lots of good comments. You know that helped me feel secure. H517”

“I might be thinking I’m having a fat day and they might counter with I think you look very hot so it’s like fishing for compliments. But it’s not compliments really it’s reassurance and I think people confuse the two. I mean it’s always nice to be complimented but it’s even more important to feel reassured in a situation if you’re not comfortable. K715”

## Relationships

There were several beliefs verbalized about the relationship between attraction and relationships. Beyond feeling accepted, there is a powerful connection between how gay men feel about their body and their expectation of having a relationship. A belief was verbalized that being attractive was the only way to have a relationship. Attractiveness is seen as necessary in accessing other men to date. Some perceive only attractive people have relationships, and those judged as unattractive cannot meet others. The ability to have a relationship is seen as an important form of acceptance by the gay community.

“I had this idea in my head that the only way I was going to be loved was if I looked a certain way. You know, that the only way I was going to be accepted was if I looked a certain way and so the fact that I was gaining weight was taking me farther away from what I saw at the time of being what I should look like. And so it was really hard. It was unnerving a little bit. B383”

“I felt that in my mind I had to change the way I looked or else I would never [meet anyone]. The first impression is what makes or breaks it... But in gay arena if you're looking for a partner, a life partner, I really do think people look at the outside first. I think if you don't have a pleasant outside I don't think you're going to get to meet some of the people you want to meet. I never could. As a fat

man you know I'd see somebody that you know I'd love to be able to meet that person but I can't. G153”

“The younger you were and the pretty you were your survival was almost guaranteed... You knew you would be accepted... You would be able to find a partner a mate whatever... As you get older and let's face it, gravity and everything else takes over then it became more difficult or seemed like it would be more difficult. Ah if my partner was too God forbid pass on or move on or pass away, and I was left to start all over again... I would think of myself as screwed. Cause, like, you know, I'm in my late 30's, almost 40 now the chances of me finding somebody that's interested in fat old ugly me probably ain't going to happen. M343”

“When you're in a relationship you sort of oh I don't think it means as much as what it did before hand. You're not trying to impress, you're comfortable with the person you're with, there's nothing that they don't know about you, they've seen every inch of your body so I mean if there was something bad wrong they would let you know. I mean if my other half said I wish you'd do this, I'd do it but he's never ask for that. I521”

Highlighting the belief that only attractive men have relationships, one interviewee commented being in a relationship lowers the pressure to be focused on attractiveness. The men interviewed in this study feel pressured to present themselves as

attractively as possible. Based on these interviews, gay men reinforce this pressure by complimenting and critiquing the appearance of others. The gay men's community is perceived as lookist and image driven. The men in this study found the image-focused nature of the gay male community present in media directed towards gay men and in how gay men treat each other. A specific method of reinforcing the image-focused nature of the gay community is through objectification.

### Objectification

“I want him, and I want him to want me. I1096”

Men visually inspect others who they find attractive and Men objectify other men, as with strippers for example (Tewskbury, 1994) This viewing communicates sexual interest and is an approval signal for their appearance, and objectification is the word coined to describe this phenomenon. Searching with the terms “objectification” and “gay men/homosexual” in the databases PsycARTICLES, Proquest, and psycINFO on January 5, 2005 revealed no psychological literature conducted on the subject of objectification with gay men. Interviews in the study revealed the presence of objectification through visual inspection and eye contact. These behaviors, even brief glances, carry tremendous meaning in the gay male community. First, viewing other's signals approval of another's appearance; conversely the deliberate withholding of eye contact sends an equally powerful signal of disapproval for ones appearance. Secondly, a lingering eye contact suggests to other gay men that the other person is a fellow gay man.

Sexuality is important to gay men because it is the feature differentiating them from heterosexuals. Our culture constructs the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals, with sexual orientation as the key distinction. One method of making this difference known to other people, particularly from one gay man to another, is simply to tell someone your sexual orientation. The act of coming out is a public declaration of ones typically private sexuality, and makes sexuality a more open subject of discussion.

“I’ve found that sex is a much more open thing in the gay community. D046”

It would be burdensome to verbally express one’s sexual orientation to everyone so additional strategies have been employed to make one’s sexual orientation known. Moreover, gay men do not necessarily want to tell everyone they meet their sexual orientation, necessitating a more covert method of disclosure. The men in this study talked about eye contact between two gay men lingering longer than would be expected among heterosexual men. This brief moment of the meeting of two men’s gazes is interpreted as a message of sexual interest and/or of one’s sexual orientation. This form of eye contact is a subtle behavior gay men use to communicate their sexuality to one another.

“When you catch somebody’s eye and they don’t look away... Men don’t keep eye contact with men for very long and it’s uncomfortable. But then I do because I don’t find it being uncomfortable. I’m not uncomfortable with myself. A071”

“If you make eye contact with another guy and they make eye contact with you and they don’t turn away then there is some little bit of interest there. L483”

“Cruise, when you look at somebody. Interested, if there’s interest there, if they’re looking you up and down. K665”

In addition to eye contact communicating one's sexual orientation, this form of body language also expresses sexual interest. Eye contact and its subtle implications is sometimes referred to as “cruising”. Visual inspection and eye contact are the methods men use to objectify others, to sexualize them. Objectification and identification co-exist. Because gay men’s sexuality defines this group, men in this study relate feeling desired and sexual are synonymous with feeling accepted as part of the group. Some gay men seek to be objectified because it affirms their sense of belongingness in this group. Gay men enjoy being objectified to a degree (Blotcher, 1996). Objectification has two directions: objectifying other gay men and the desire to be objectified (Stoltenberg, 1996).

### Stand and Model

“When you walk into a gay environment the moment you step, before you even open up the door you are now being judged. They are either putting an icon with you or they’re perceiving something. They’re looking at how you’re walking.

Are you smiling? What does that mean? Are you giving me the eye? Are you being up front? K654”

“Cause it’s such a meat market... being in a bar it’s pretty much a meat market and you’re there to impress. D097”

Entering a gay environment, particularly a gay club, highlights how gay men objectify each other. A great deal of acculturation into the gay community happens at a bar, according to the men in this study. It is not a place to hold a conversation as much as it is a place to see and be seen. Some gay men chose to adapt to the objectification at the bar by embracing it and presenting themselves as attractively as possible. There are many ways to be noticed, one of which is the wardrobe.

“You have to be somebody to go to the bar. You have to make a presence if you want to get noticed. L614”

“A tight shirt. That’s important. So people can see you. C256”

“So like I put something on and so like if it shows my stomach at all I don’t like it. I feel like I look fat. I know I’m not fat but I feel like I am sometimes and so I’ll keep changing. D149”

Another tactic specifically deployed in the bar is *stand and model*. The men in this study identify the strategy serving two functions, the first to see and be seen, and the second to serve as protection from the sometimes harsh criticism from people in the bar environment. Stand and model exemplifies objectification in the gay community; it also shows the value placed on attractiveness and fitness in the gay community.

“Stand and model is where you would think of the best place to dance and you might be on the first tier of the balcony where everybody could see you and you just stand and you just look and you just scan the crowd. It’s an elitist measure, I think it’s a self defense measure for a lot of people. K329”

“If you look at the boys on the dance floor they are just standing there like a model, they just want to stand there like aren’t I pretty but don’t talk to them. They have that look on their face that you’re not worthy of me so don’t talk to me. L431”

### Tax Bracket

Social stratification in the gay community has a great deal to do with appearance with the attractive, youthful, slender, muscular at the top and the unattractive, overweight and older at the bottom from the perspective of the men interviewed. This social stratification was referred to by various terms such as *tax bracket*. Men who *stand*



*and model* are seen as being at the top of this hierarchy. Men who are older or deemed unattractive are seen as being on the lower rungs of the hierarchy.

“Its different levels of looking good. You know your league is someone who would be I guess a similar level of attractiveness as you are. C149”

“A list gays... cream of the crop, top of the heap people, party boys, stand and model. K312”

“I don’t have the physical attributes that they’re looking for, or I’m too old. L182”

Several gay men interviewed felt they moved up the hierarchy of appearance. Upward mobility is possible within this stratification by making changes to enhance appearance or by losing weight. They describe a direct connection between losing weight and getting positive verbal reinforcement for that change. One man describes a similar experience with his weight loss and increase in musculature: he received a great deal of attention from other gay men as a result of these physical changes. The changes and resulting positive feedback have had a positive impact on his self-esteem.

“Its almost like you, its almost like a tax bracket. I feel like I went from one tax bracket to another, I got into the more elite tax bracket or something. Its like more response to people um. I get a lot more complements. A128”

“I jumped on both spectrums at both ends... Being a adult and being fat and then going to you know being acceptable... The more and more I bulk up, the more I lose, I think, the more attention I get. G510”

“Oh now it’s night and day. Now I can actually now I have more confidence in myself I will actually go up and talk to people... areas it’s night and day they’ll come up and talk to me. I get ‘Oh you’re cute, you got a nice body’ You know those are usually the first things that people see the first impression it’s what you look like. It’s not about what you do, it’s not about what’s in your heart or how you care for people, it’s about what you look like. G187”

Some find the positive attention good for self-esteem; others find objectification stifling. When men find they are valued solely on their appearance, objectification is not appreciated. Seemingly objectification is not a problem until gay men find they are not seen as a whole person.

“I was saying earlier ninety percent of the people’s first comment to me is ‘you’re cute’. You feel real stifled, there’s more to me. It’s such a superficial thing and I still just worry about it so much... It really bothers me that I worry so much about it... That’s all that people really notice about me until they actual start to talk to me. But there is a lot to me than how I look. D751”

With heterosexuals, men are the objectifiers and women are the objectified. Gay men are both the givers and the receivers of objectification. Mann (1998) describes this as, “I want to look like this person. I want to have this person.” Feeling objectified does not decrease the effort devoted to appearance. Despite being valued primarily for appearance a great deal of energy is devoted to maintaining appearance. This suggests the gay man does not want to decrease degree he is objectified; rather, he would like others to value the other parts of himself and view him as a complete person. Others noted getting attention for physical characteristics, not personality traits, which is objectification, the focus on a person’s external features and not their internal selves.

### Discount

According to the men interviewed, the after-effect of objectification is a decrease in the appreciation of ones body. The attention given to ones appearance, though enjoyable, leads to body dissatisfaction.

“And on one hand I feel good that I’m getting complimented but at the same time my brain is justifying or discounting the compliment... Justifying why they are saying it for some other reason are they truly liking what they see. E435”

The gay men interviewed compare their body to other gay men, especially to the gay men in the top tax bracket. This social comparison lacks objectivity resulting in the devaluation of their appearance. Even when reinforcing feedback is given, the

compliments are discounted. Because the focus remains on evaluating the body and not on other non-image characteristics such as personality, complimenting paradoxically leads to negative self- evaluation.

“Even when you’re in shape, you feel like you are out of shape. Cause so many people are so pretty and so perfect. A235”

“I see pictures of guys that I think are in good shape and have a good build and I try and compare them to me and I sometimes they can be really pretty similar for some reason I can’t accept that I look as good as they do in my eyes. E373”

“I find that I think that uh other gay men are more accepting or liking of what I look like than I am. A514”

“I, my opinion of myself, is that people think I look better than what I think of myself. C173”

“We always would like to change something. I mean everybody would and if they say no they wouldn’t they’re lying to you. M427”

“I can look in the mirror and feel and only see the bad things. I can see the extra fat around my waist or a the fact that my shoulders aren’t rounded out like they should be. So I think it’s in my head. I mean I thought about what I would think if

someone else presented me with a picture of myself that I didn't realize was me. If I could totally be objective about my body by thinking it was someone else what I would think of it and I really don't know. I don't know, I see pictures of guys that I think are in good shape and have a good build and I try and compare them to me and I sometimes they can be really pretty similar for some reason I can't accept that I look as good as they do in my eyes. E365"

"It's very difficult, I'm hypercritical of myself perfectionist, for me it's, for folks to understand that in my situation is that gymnasts you don't it's not like a time where you try to get the best time or the score where you're always increasing. You have a set score and everything is a step away from perfection so it's a different model. You don't get the 9.0. They're getting 9.95, that's great but when the start value of the routine is 10 it's not great and that's how a lot of gymnasts think. K361"

From what the gay men interviewed said, body dissatisfaction is the norm, rather than the exception, in the gay community. There is a common theme that gay men find their bodies never to be good enough. Some approach their desired body shape, but no interviewee described himself as being fully satisfied with his appearance and body shape.

“I am I would say for the first time in my life in the last oh I’ll say two years year and half that I’m getting close to what I’ve always wanted my body to look like.

H577”

“So while I feel like while I’m young enough to get my body to a point to where I feel like its perfect just so I can say I had it there once. So just so that I can enjoy it myself and be happy. So happy with myself and not have self conscious I am about my body. Would be nice for a little while. A418”

“I still have a lot of work to do. I still want to lose another 20 pounds. I want to get as much here as I possibly can. I’m not talking competition size that’s just my goal. By the time I hit 40 years old I want to have the body that I want. G418”

Objectification was a salient concept to the gay men in this study. They feel judged based upon appearance and by being viewed in a sexualized way. Based on the standards of attractiveness in the gay community, men are stratified into classes based on appearance. These standards are part of the socialization as gay men acculturate into the gay community. The men have internalized these standards, and are self-critical and discounting of their appearance. Not only is objectification a critique of a person’s appearance, it is a method of subtly communicating ones sexual orientation.

Identity

Gay men's body image carries a meaning deeper than feeling overweight or unattractive. Body image relates to how gay men see themselves as part of the gay community. Gay men need to conform to the standards of the community (Faraio, 1998). Appearance is an important part of socialization (Luke & Land, 1990). The other aspects of gay men's body image--acceptance, control, acculturation and objectification--form the foundation on which body image as an expression of identity is placed. From early on gay men in this study felt different from their peers, and they came to understand this difference equals being gay. In American society when these men were growing up, being gay was unacceptable. These men felt unaccepted from peers, family and society.

To protect themselves from the negative consequences of being gay, these men attempted to conceal their sexual orientation by putting themselves in the closet, displaying a personal front of heterosexuality. Some were living two lives, one outwardly heterosexual and one inwardly homosexual. Throwing energy into other pursuits such as sports was another tactic to distract others from finding out their sexual orientation. These are all active attempts at coping with homophobia, and they are ways of creating some sense of control. One way of feeling in control is to take control of your body.

From the days of being in the closet, gay men in the study long for acceptance and use the image as a tool to that end by molding outward appearance to meet the expectations of a larger group. When they come out, begin seeking out the gay community, and begin socializing in the community, they desire to be accepted by this new group. The gay men interviewed for this study found the gay community to be highly focused on image. Personal appearance matters a great deal and is reinforced

verbally and through body language. Men considered attractive are praised; men who are considered unattractive are shunned, ignored and degraded. When the men in this study integrated into the gay community, they became aware of and internalized image-based values.

Gay men making the transition from a heterosexual identity to a homosexual identity have a strong desire to be accepted in this new identity. It was important for the men in this study to find a place of acceptance and commonality, where they could be open with their sexuality and be shielded from homophobia.

“I guess its nice like when you have your gay friends. Its, you know, a smaller community and uh you just kind of like automatically have something in common. That’s not largely prevalent. C017”

“I feel like there is nothing to hide. When you’re open, when you’re out. People who are gay and uh and not out have a lot to hide, but being out I don’t feel like I have a lot to hide I feel like I can be myself and talk about anything.... I don’t know .. I mean, it feels natural. A023”

### Group Cohesion

This sense of belongingness is valuable as gay men look for their niche in the gay community. Gay society is constructed of smaller sub-communities, and membership in those sub-communities is determined a great deal by personal appearance. Cohesion in



the gay community is important as is distinguishing it from heterosexual culture (Luke & Land, 1990). One man characterizes this phenomenon; he has a word to describe the segmentation of the gay community: iconography.

“Its image in how you’re supposed to think. Gay culture is a very regimented culture... there a certain attitudes, morays, social doctrines. K549”

“Iconography is a study of icons... James Dean, Rebel Without a Call, ah Cause. The twink icon from the sex movies of the fifties with Rock Hudson and Doris Day. There are icons that I think almost every gay person I’ve talked to has always tried on. You try the twinkie, you try the gym rat, you try this, you try the bear, you try the cowboy, and you look at you try those personas on and the baggage that may come with it. That serves you for the first couple of years till you try to figure out who you are. You may stay in the twinkie culture, the gym rat culture, you might do something else but that icon, that is that cookie cutter hole that you can place yourself into because you kind of know the rules, you kind of know the boundaries, you kind of know how your suppose to feel about yourself, what your suppose to be protecting, what you’re suppose to be doing. And then you slowly expand your form, your core to either fit that mold or reject that mold. Ah you know I’ve known many former drag queens because that suited them at that time, that role they thought they were suppose to play so they’d pop into that role, they experienced life within that concept and they either accepted or

rejected it. So with the gymnast culture, with the frat culture, with the gay culture, I went through those icon phases. K472”

Icons are the personal fronts (Goffman, 1959) of the gay community which are chosen, not created. Gay men acculturating into the community learn about the different icons. Each icon has its own image, norms and values. Body image for gay men has to do with which icon they portray, how well that icon suits them, and how closely they can portray the ideal image for that icon. Acceptance from other gay men comes to those who fit nicely into an icon category. How gay men look goes hand in hand with acceptance by other gay men, making body dissatisfaction as much about feelings of acceptance or rejection as weight issues.

Popular culture influences gay men from early in their lives, and the association of iconography with pop culture is clear. As discussed in the acculturation section, gay men use media as a way of finding other gay men. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century gay men used movie references as a type of code for finding each other (Harris, 1997). In more recent times men use books, magazines and the internet to find each other directly. These forms of media are saturated with images of men with ideal physiques “Samson”, men who are “Greek gods” and Arnold Schwarzenegger (in the 70’s before he became a politician). Magazines and the internet are littered with clothing ads filled with highly attractive people. Pop culture plays a major role in iconography, which is the basis for body image as identity. One man quotes from a television program popular in the gay community:

“Ab Fab. Its just a line in a show. Its probably one of my favorite lines cause her saying, ‘I am thin and gorgeous’ and she’s not. But dang it she can sure think it if she wants to. A632”

“If there wasn’t pretty much kind of a universal, at least a minimum of what looked good, then we wouldn’t have all these clothing ads. C156”

One of the basic assumptions of iconography is that it is possible to look straight or to look gay, an assumption supported by the success of the television program, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Some men talked about not feeling “gay” because their appearance did not match how gay men are “supposed” to look.

“I was not the typical type that would go out to the bars and ah I just didn’t do it. I didn’t fit the look that goes along with it so I never really got into that scene. G107”

“I don’t make a conscious decision on my part to act straight or deny my sexuality but I think a lot of it has to do with my privacy and my discomfort in talking about personal things and emotions and all that but it just doesn’t come across. I mean there are some things I do that are totally stereotypically gay. E044”

The stereotype of the attractive, well dressed gay man does not match the reality of gay culture. The gay men in this study expressed the desire to conform to the cultural standards of appearance in the gay community. There is not, however, a single set of standards for appearance; rather there are numerous sets such as *twink*, *muscle*, *bear*, *leather*, *drag* etc. Each of these types represents a subsection of the gay community with particular ideals about appearance and behavior.

“The more diverse the gay population was, they segmented into the different types of... identities that they associated with. I458”

Finding a place of acceptance is important to the gay men in this study. Part of that process can be finding a subgroup in the gay community with which you identify, your icon. Homogeneity of appearance is a way the gay men in this study perceive can find that place of acceptance. Interviewing these twelve men highlighted the importance of acceptance. These icons facilitate that process by creating ways to solidify their membership in a group. Icons are uniforms in the sense they foster a feeling of similarity to others by creating similar appearances.

“It was almost like an epiphany or like the end of a long journey in a way, I guess is the best way to say it... It was like my niche in life that’s who I identified with at that point and from then on. M102”

“We have to categorize everything, put people in pigeonholes... I guess I understand the safety of labels. It can help bolster people’s self-esteem to identify as something or to try find their groove and say I’m a whatever and that way they have an identity. B213

The desire to find a subgroup where the people look similar is not universal in the gay community, but it is a widely known and understood aspect of gay culture.

Iconography applies to those who assimilate into gay culture. Some do not choose to assimilate into the culture, preferring to not have their sexual orientation define their appearance. To those in the gay community who value image, understanding the dynamic of iconography is critical to understanding body image. Iconography is the mental template gay men use to measure their congruence with an accepted standard. Each icon has defined features which are important to completing the look. These features distinguish the different icons in the community. Objectification is part of iconography, especially in bars. Men exemplify an icon to be noticed and appreciated for the degree to which you espouse the image and its values. To be noticed as a member of one of these sub-communities is the prime objective.

“You have to do things they notice. Just being an average guy is not going to do it. To me that is what the people who don’t go to bars have learned that they are just guys, there is not models, there is not ...at the bar there are more segments, there are the drag queens, the twinks, the leather daddy’s there are different segments. L627”

## Icons

Icons are images or facades chosen by gay men. Each icon varies on several continua: body fat, body musculature, body hair, style of dress and masculinity. The desire to be youthful and the importance of grooming are strong for each icon. Choosing an icon means searching for a place of acceptance and a place where other gay men look similar, accepting each other based on appearance. Not all gay men choose to take part with an icon, but these are known parts of the gay community according to the men chosen in this study. What follows is a brief description of the major icons found in this study: *twinks*, *muscle*, *bear*, *leather* and *drag*. Each icon is described in the words of the men in this study. These are broad generalizations meant to illustrate, rather than define, the icons. As all cultures grow and change, so do these icons, and variations exist in each icon.

TABLE I- Prototypical Icons

	Body Fat	Body Muscle	Body Hair	Dress	Degree of Masculinity
Twink	Low	Low to Average	Low	Fashionable	Average
Muscle	Low	High	Low	Fashionable	Average
Bear	High	Varies	High	Casual	High
Leather	Varies	High Desired	Varies	Biker	High
Drag	Varies	Low	Low	Female	Low

Twink The *twink* and *muscle* icons conceptually go together because they are the dominant icons in gay culture. They represent the mainstream image values of the gay community such as youth, low body hair, low body fat and musculature (Durgadas, 1996). In essence *twink* and *muscle* are the top of the *tax bracket*. Twink is the youthful, slender icon. Low body hair, low body fat, lean musculature, fashionable dress, and moderate masculinity describe this icon. Being considered a twink has certain advantages and status as it is valued in the gay community. Others find it stifling to be valued solely for your appearance.

“Oh, smooth and flat. Always. Or they’ll be the first ones to take off their shirts and show off their muscles and their six packs and start flexing for everyone to see. L543”

“It is a lot how you look, if you start gaining weight then you have the fat, fat twink person so therefore you must be very bubbly or you must be very vicious. There’s really no in between. K529”

“Definitely very long muscled, not at all rounded out, not overly fat. H199”

“It was a pretty boy game the younger you were and the pretty you were your survival was almost guaranteed... You knew you would be accepted... You would be able to find a partner a mate whatever. M342”

“There’s a myth about attractive people that they are either stuck up, they’re stupid or you know there usually isn’t a lot behind they’re looks. D718”

“They just kind of wanted me like a trophy, just someone cute to stand next to them. So somehow they vicariously benefited from that. D735”

Muscle: The second icon found in this study is *muscle*. This type is also described as Adonis or Greek god. Objectification is part of the appeal of this icon, to be viewed and desired. This icon is described by low body fat, low body hair, high musculature, fashionable/athletic dress and average masculinity. There is powerful verbal reinforcement for maintaining this image, the same verbal reinforcement as in the acculturation section.

“The good old-fashioned Arnold look, Arnold Schwarzenegger, that look. It’s very clean, slender-waisted, big muscles, it’s always been what I thought was very, very good looking and powerful. And there’s a certain amount of leftover meaning to be big and powerful. H588”

“It seems like in men’s their more the bronzed Greek god look... They may pick out a specific body part that say they particularly like a or just like the overall package. E576”



“I am a big beefy guy. I’m not skinny but I’m not fat. I’ve got a football build you know but the Adonis look is what basically gets all the attention. Even myself, my friends, you got somebody that comes in that you can tell has been spending major time in the gym, muscled up, good looking, tanned you know they’re they’ve been working hard at that and you notice it. In the gay world you notice it. It’s kind of contagious I think when you know your friends start making comments about how you look. G640”

“I should tell you that all through, starting in junior high and all through high school I do vividly remember having an obsession with bodybuilders. I mean anybody would bring one of those muscle magazines to class I was like over their shoulder looking at it asking if I could borrow it from them. So much so that in high school if I had any extra money it was buying a muscle and fitness magazine. They were pretty much my porn during those years and loved it, loved the look. H233”

Bear: The leather and bear icons have a large degree of overlap, both emphasizing masculinity. Bear as an icon defines itself as being medium to high body fat, average to high musculature, high body hair, casual dress and high masculinity. Bear as a subculture is a reaction to the *twink* icon in order to create a accepting space for men who do not look that way (Durgadas, 1998).

“Bear type which are the hairy types. I462”

“I think with the onset of Bear population and Bear culture that changed stuff. It’s shown people that there is a nook in life that there is a place; it is true there is someone for everyone. M360”

“A larger framed or a furry person you know. M221”

“Bears tend to stick with bears. Why because it’s a insular construct. K877”

The leather icon is notable because it purports to embrace many body styles. Even though many body types are acceptable, this icon still has norms and is an image rooted in biker culture. There are expectations of someone’s image and appearance. People display the necessary images and appearance in order to proclaim their membership to this group. This icon is defined by average body hair, average body fat, average to high musculature, biker attire and high masculinity.

“The leather community is not, not based on looks. Um. People are from a skinny little boys to great big giant huge men, up to I mean three and four hundred pound men can be in the leather community. Now and be accepted as much as the beautiful muscular men are. Its all how they perceive themselves they just ask that you be comfortable with yourself, not what you look like. Just like yourself and be comfortable with yourself... It seems like they are so much,

much, much more closer knit than even the gay community in general. And its something that I adore so much is that. A323”

“I did quickly notice that in the leather community every body type is acknowledged as acceptable. H514”

“But that’s image I mean your dealing with the biker culture you’re dealing with the rough and tumble... It’s very much a closed society someone has to let you in. Ah someone has to bring you into the group and expose you. This person’s all right, let them in... Ah but in terms of the culture I always think that there’s always a mentor someone who introduces you into the scene. Ah with leather it’s a very regimented society... there’s all these little verbal cues and physical cues that someone who’s not let in can make a lot of mistakes very quickly. K621”

Drag: Drag is the most iconic of the gay subtypes. It is the most direct expression of gay men taking control of their appearance and molding into something new. This is not a full time identity, but is a powerful demonstration of the flexible, adaptable nature of the presentation of self. Drag as icon is defined by average body fat, low musculature, low body hair, female dress and low masculinity.

“Drag impersonation. Ah which is a man pretending, dressing up as a woman and performing as a woman using makeup, costuming and stuff like that. Shape their male body and give it the illusion of looking like a woman. I’ve been doing that

for awhile now. It's fun though. With that though, it's not – because a lot of people have misconception on that – I do not want to be a woman but like in high school I did a lot of theater. I did dancing. Ah I studied makeup and costume design and stuff like that and drags incorporate all those interests into one, what I like to call art form. I just find it fun. I mean there are so many cool things that girls get to wear that guys don't. I mean, women's fashion as a whole is so much more elaborate than men's. And I love fashion and all that stuff so it's just fun for me. D462”

“I think that sometimes drag queens are interesting people. They have even different concepts when everything and they certainly aren't afraid to tell you anything that's on their minds. They will tell you right out usually. A220”

“You know nights when I would go out and a drag queen would just come and start talking to me and pretty soon I'm her best friend for the evening and you know like through the drag queen pretty soon I've been introduced to everybody in the place. H461”

Five major body types or icons were disclosed by the men who participated in this study. The criteria to define each of these icons (twink, muscle, bear, leather and drag) are based on image based criteria including body fat, musculature, body hair, style of dress and degree of masculinity. Icons have an important role in gay culture because they create a sense of group cohesion. Gay men use image as a tool to create various

subgroups within the larger gay society. In essence gay men use icons as a way to look more similar to each other, and as a way of feeling part of the group. The acceptance from other gay men was mentioned as being important because several men in this study felt unaccepted by their families and heterosexual communities.

Gay men do not come into gay society knowing about icons, it is learned as they become acculturated in the gay subculture. Objectification is a primary process for this learning. Prior to entry into the gay subculture, the men in this study were not visually inspected; that is to say they were not objectified or “checked out”. As they began participating more in the gay subculture, they noticed other men visually inspecting them. Additionally they were given positive feedback for things other men found attractive and given negative feedback for unacceptable features. During this process they internalized the viewers perspective and began evaluating their body and appearance based on that perspective leading to being less satisfied with their bodies.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The first research question in this study sought to describe gay men's values, customs and beliefs about the body. The gay men interviewed for this study were concerned about their appearance and discussed it openly. Congruent with previous research (Pope et al, 2000), expressing concern about appearance is not a taboo for gay men as it is for heterosexual men. Being image-focused creates group solidarity for gay men. In mainstream society, the belief is men should not be concerned with their appearance (Frith and Gleeson, 2004). For gay men to embrace the concern of appearance, they are rejecting dominant societal values and simultaneously create a unique subculture.

According to the men interviewed for this study, the gay subculture has specific norms regarding appearance. Low body fat, high muscle tone, flattering clothing and impeccable grooming are the standards revealed in this research. The gay men in this study valued maintaining appearance through some combination of exercise, diet, clothing and grooming. Not all the men felt they could achieve the ideal image of an Adonis, but there was agreement that these are the criteria for judging one's appearance.

The men in this study described gay culture as valuing appearance to such a degree it creates stratification in the gay community, a tax bracket as one man described. The men in the study did not all believe the gay community should be stratified by appearance, but there was consensus that attractiveness equals status. Those considered unattractive are marginalized and treated less favorably than better looking men. Making changes enhancing one's appearance are praised and reinforced. Attractiveness is regarded by some to be a highly valued commodity in the gay community.

The second research question asked how gay men perceive messages about body image. Messages about body image can be transmitted before men make contact with other gay men by way of media. Gay men must find a path of entry into the gay community before they can become members of it as such. All the gay men in this study were brought up in heterosexual households and had to seek out other people with the same sexual orientation. Using the media is a common method for finding others. Books, magazines and the internet are some of the major avenues for gay men to find the gay community and other gay men. Books and magazines help gay men find gay establishments. The internet allows gay men to meet and communicate. Embedded in these media are advertisements and pictures of men with phenomenal physiques; therefore before men even begin to become part of the gay community, they are exposed to idealized images of what this subculture says a man should look like.

After media, objectification is another process by which gay men perceive messages about body image. Objectification is the process where men visually inspect others. Having only been applied as a concept between men and women, this research confirms gay men objectify each other serving two purposes. First, the action of

objectifying communicates attraction and desire toward someone. This is a powerful mechanism to reinforce the importance of attractiveness. Many of the men in this study want to be objectified because it is a sign they are attractive to others. “Stand and model” is an action where gay men strategically stand in a location where they can best be viewed by others. The second function of objectification is to communicate group identity. According to men in this study, when a man visually inspects another man, it is a signal of one's sexual orientation. The importance of this signal to communicate membership of the same subculture can not be understated as gay men inject a great deal of meaning into this subtle act.

In addition to the messages sent from media and from objectification, gay men use direct verbal feedback to communicate messages about body images. The men in this study recounted experiences of both being praised and scorned for their appearance and body shape. Some were given compliments from other gay men for having a lean, muscular physique or for being attractive. Others were directly insulted by other gay men for being considered overweight or unattractive. Some men talked about methods of soliciting this feedback, fishing for compliments, by wearing body-revealing clothing or directly asking about appearance. This method of reinforcement serves to solidify the cultural norms of body image for the gay community. Praise is given to those who espouse the cultural values of attractiveness and physique. Scorn goes to those who cannot or choose not to embody these values.

Research question three asks how these beliefs are integrated into gay men's self-concept. Objectification plays a large role in gay men's self-concept related to body image. Gay men both objectify other men and are the objects of other men's



objectification, causing gay men in this study to internalize and utilize the internalization perspective when evaluating their own body. Seeing themselves as objects leads to critiquing parts of their body and evaluating themselves based upon their image culminating in the need to *identify and fix*.

*Identify and fix* is the end product of the internalization of objectification. When the gay men in this study *identify and fix* they critically examine different aspects of their appearance such as musculature, body fat, clothing, grooming and general appearance. This evaluation creates a drive toward perceived improvement. For example, a man could identify his stomach as too large, creating a need to reduce that weight through exercise or by wearing clothing to conceal this part of his body. The process of evaluating oneself by the criterion of appearance had an effect on the self-esteem of the men interviewed in this study.

Self-esteem in this study related to body image is reflected in the concepts of *discount* and *confidence*. When the gay men in this study compared themselves to other gay men and images of men in the media, they tended to think less of themselves and have a lower opinion of their body image. Even when getting compliments on their appearance, several men in this study internally discounted the validity of these compliments. Paradoxically, complimenting someone on their image does not lead to increased body satisfaction. It focuses the worth of that person on how they look, not on who they are. Several men in the study talked about the relationship between feeling good about their body and *confidence*. These men made physical changes such as losing weight, and reported feeling more confident about themselves and increased self-

esteem. This increase in self-esteem does not come from compliments from other gay men; rather it is a result of an internal attitude change.

Research question four is, “What relationship does involvement in the gay community have with body satisfaction?” The answer to this question begins in childhood. Many of the men interviewed talked about feeling *different* as children, which they later came to discover was their sexual orientation. Rather than discuss this openly, all chose initially to hide this and attempt to pass as heterosexual because they felt unaccepted for their sexual orientation. By doing so they actively presented themselves in a way acceptable to the heterosexual community; this was seen as a protective strategy from the negative consequences of being gay. As many in the study felt unaccepted by their family, church or peers, finding a place of acceptance in the gay community becomes critical.

Looking for a place of acceptance in the gay community is an active process of searching through the different sub-groupings within the overall community. Gay culture is not a single homogeneous group, but is a collection of many groups distinguished by different images or *icons* as one interviewee described. The five icons in this research are twink, muscle, bear, leather and drag; though there are certainly more icons within the gay community than just these five. Each icon has specific norms for body fat, musculature, body hair, attitudes, behaviors and style of dress. For example, the twink icon has youth, low body fat, lean muscle, fashionable style of dress and little body hair. Body satisfaction comes from the degree of congruence each person has with the icon or subgroup of which they are a part. Someone who is older, has high body fat, and dresses

plainly will not be as readily accepted as part of the twink culture as they will be in bear culture. One's appearance has a great deal to do with acceptance by other gay men.

## Conclusions

Two theories are used to explain differences in body dissatisfaction in men and women- socio-cultural theory and objectification theory. Both of these theories have been used to explain body dissatisfaction in gay men however they have not been directly investigated (Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Seiver 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989). The socio-cultural theory of body dissatisfaction suggests gay men experience greater body dissatisfaction than straight men because of the gay community's emphasized importance of physical attractiveness. Objectification theory suggests gay men and heterosexual women experience body dissatisfaction because both groups want to appear desirable to men, with desirability being determined primarily by physical appearance. Both of these theories are used to explain body dissatisfaction in gay men, but are not investigated.

The current research investigates these issues and provides support for both theories. The men in this study believe appearance determines how socially accepted you are in the gay community. Attractive people are valued in the community, and unattractive people are marginalized. Social pressure was found to be the primary mechanism for communicating and enforcing this value with praise and positive attention given to reinforce the cultural values of youthful appearance, low body fat, high musculature and healthy appearance. This is a shaping process. When men make changes towards those cultural ideals they are positively reinforced, and changes contrary

to those ideals are punished. The men in this study expressed a belief that gay culture places greater value on image than heterosexual culture, and felt pressure to conform to those cultural standards.

Objectification was also found to affect the body image of gay men.

Objectification was evidenced by visual inspection between two men; this inspection carries two messages- attraction and identification. Desiring another man and being desired were important parts of objectification. The subtext of visual inspection carries the message of disclosing one's sexual orientation, it is a shorthand for communicating one's identity as a gay man rather than making a formal verbal declaration.

The origin of body dissatisfaction is rooted in feelings of loss of control and low self esteem (Grogan, 1999). Control was an important concept for the men in this study. The need for control varied developmentally according to where these men were in the coming out process. Before coming out, control was an important issue because gay men could not control their or other's lack of acceptance for homosexuality. After coming out, control was important to adhere to the gay subcultures focus on body image. Berry (2001) found that internalized homonegativity led to sub-clinical eating disordered behavior. Three men in this study disclosed having eating disorders as adolescents which they related to this notion of being unaccepted and lacking control of their same sex attractions. Control was an important factor. Low self esteem was expressed by feeling unacceptable because of ones sexual orientation and by discounting ones appearance.

Pope et al. (2000) postulate gay men do not experience more body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men, they merely express it more. This finding is not given the importance it deserves, it represents an important distinction between gay male culture

and straight male culture. The men in this study agree it is more acceptable for gay men to express thoughts and feelings about body image. This difference represents an important way for gay men to build group solidarity by rallying around a common cultural value. If both gay men and heterosexual men experience body dissatisfaction it seemingly has different meanings in the context of why men engage in compensatory behaviors, namely exercise. Gay men exercise for appearance, to feel in control of their body and to feel healthy.

An additional theory has been presented to explain body dissatisfaction specifically in gay men. Berry (2001) found internalized homophobia to be positively related to body dissatisfaction. Theoretically body image dissatisfaction is secondary to not being comfortable with one's sexuality. The current research only partially supports this theory. Body dissatisfaction was found to be a lifelong concern for the gay men in this study. The only identified time when the men in this study were uncomfortable being gay was around the time of their working on their self acceptance. If internalized homophobia were the only cause of body dissatisfaction then once men had accepted their sexuality at the same time they would have accepted their body image. This was not found for the men in this study; dissatisfaction with their body continued after their acceptance of their sexuality and was related more to perceived failures to meet expectations of appearance in the gay community and to self objectification.

### Implications for Counseling

According to previous research and the interviews conducted for this study, body

image concerns profoundly affect the self-image of gay men and carry significant implications for presenting issues in psychotherapy. Body image with gay men can be expected to impact socialization, self acceptance and adjustment problems. Because body image is used as a tool for creating and maintaining group cohesion in the various sub-cultures within the gay community, gay men feel pressured to conform to standards of appearance based upon the sub-culture with which they identify. This pressure can be problematic in and of itself. As several men in this study discussed, a great deal of time, energy and thought can go into how gay men present themselves physically and into appearance maintenance. Knowledge of this dynamic can lead counselors to develop hypotheses useful in therapeutic endeavors.

One hypothesis relates to socialization. A gay man could present for therapy with concerns of feeling isolated from or criticized by other gay men. Body image establishes and maintains group cohesiveness in the gay community. The group of gay men the client attempts to socialize with may not be a good fit for him because of his body type. For example, suppose the client is a gay man who has a large build with body hair. He would likely be ostracized by younger gay men who are slender and hairless because they have different *icons*, the client being a *bear* and the younger gay men being *twinks*. Therapy could be helpful in assisting the client to explore alternative avenues for socialization, especially alternative where appearance may be less of a factor than in a nightclub. Such alternatives include gay churches, gay sporting leagues, and political, charity or social organizations. Caution is recommended in using vernacular terms such as *twink* or *bear* when addressing a client as they may take offense to being labeled in a way they may not identify. Calling someone a *bear* who does not all ready identify as a

*bear* might not be received well by a client, for example. We see by this example that image affects gay men's sense of belongingness influencing who they choose to socialize with and date.

Another hypothesis which could be generated based upon the results of this study relates to control. Actively changing one's appearance was discussed as a way to gain an increased sense of control. A client who noticeably takes great care in their appearance or who suddenly makes a change in their appearance may be doing so as a comforting technique to ease a sense of unrest in his life. Exploring issues related to control could be a productive area of discussion leading perhaps to the therapist helping the client acquire additional coping skills. There are many socio-political, cultural and religious issues which gay men feel hopeless to affect. Assisting the client cope with these stressful external events and empowering the client to advocate for himself would be timely interventions to these men.

The final hypothesis stemming from this research is the role of objectification in gay men's lives. As gay men enter the gay community they are objectified by other gay men causing them to be more sensitive and attentive to their appearance. This would be detrimental to their mental health if they valued themselves largely based upon their appearance. The strong focus on being youthful makes aging and the associated perceived declines in appearance especially difficult with which to cope. A counselor could assist the client in fostering a sense of self with positive qualities which are not image based.

## Limitations

The first limitation has to do with the sample: all men in this study are Caucasian. How each of the conclusions of this study would be similar or dissimilar for men of other ethnic minority cultures is unknown. This research was conducted with men from the Midwest, and the results may not translate well to other gay men in other parts of the country or the world.

All participants in this study are assimilated into the gay community, limiting the conclusions as transferable only to other gay men who are part of the gay community. There are men who remain in the closet and those who are gay but not part of the gay community. There were several references by the participants of gay men who were not interested in taking part in any activities specific to the gay community, men who had not assimilated into the gay community. The body image of those men is not known based upon this research.

There is also a cohort influence to this research. The men in this study range in age from 21 to 45. The results must be considered for adult men. The body image of gay adolescents and for older gay men was not researched, and may differ than men in this age range. Also there will likely be a generation effect to this research. Gay culture and its place in dominant American society has changed significantly in the last twenty years, and will likely change in the future. Results of this study must be seen in the contexts in which they arise.



The primary researcher in this study is a member of the community being studied. It is considered both a strength and a weakness of the study. Being integrated into the community gives the researcher a life experience upon which to direct the investigation. Also being a member of the group, the likelihood of heterosexist bias is likely to be reduced. As there was only one researcher, the diversity of perspectives on the meaning of this data is not present. Someone outside the gay community could have brought an outside perspective, illuminating the data to highlight different conclusions.

### Suggestions for Practice and Policy

Body image is a relevant and highly salient issue for gay men. Though the research focused on body image for adult gay men, nearly all participants talked about body image in childhood. Clearly this is a lifelong issue, and the potential to intervene and shape positive body image begins in childhood. Integrating programming on developing healthy ideas about our body for all children would address this issue. Such a curriculum could include units on valuing different body shapes, discourage teasing others for their weight, and appreciating individuals for their personal strengths, not on their appearance.

The men in this study felt being gay was unacceptable based upon attitudes from family, church and society. This lack of acceptance seems to be a primary concern for the men interviewed. Living in a culture where these men felt they had to hide their sexual orientation led to shame about who they are. So long as being gay is controversial and unaccepted in American society, these issues of shame will likely continue. Progress

towards social equality for gay people needs to continue to prevent future generations of gays experiencing the negative consequences of being an unaccepted minority.

Based on this research and clinical experience, body image may not be the primary reason for seeking services, but it is intertwined with issues of identity, self-esteem, acceptance and control. Body image is not just an issue of feeling overweight for gay men but is intertwined with their identity as gay men. Appearance affects the part of the culture gay men identify with. Problems with body image can occur when gay men do not feel accepted in a social group because of their body shape. As discussed in this study, men who do not meet the gay community's expectations of body image are shunned, degraded, judged and ignored. Control is another issue related to body image. Exercise, grooming and clothing choices are important because they all represent something gay men can control.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

Future qualitative research in this area should investigate body image with groups of gay men not covered in this study. The body image of gay men from ethnic minorities is unknown. Conducting similar studies with African American, Asian American, Native American and Latino men is suggested as the interplay of being a double minority, both an ethnic and a sexual minority, is unknown. The age range of this study ranges from 21 to 45. The body image of gay men under the age of 21 and over the age of 45 could have significant differences from the men in this study. Data in this study also point to other issues related to body image. Future research focusing gay men's ideas about health,

healthy behaviors and healthy appearance is a promising area for further investigation, given the effects of AIDS on the consciousness of gay men.

This research is expected to be well received in the gay community because of several factors. The data are grounded in the language of the participants; they were given the opportunity to voice their beliefs about their body. The research participants were in effect co-researchers in this project because the emerging themes were checked with participants for clarity and accuracy. The findings of the research demonstrate the complex nature of gay men's body image and does not reduce it to simpler issues. This creates a full rich picture of this important issue for gay men.

Much of the literature on gay men's body image focuses on the negatives of body dissatisfaction and gay men's apparent greater vulnerability to eating disorders. This study confirms both of those findings. Several men in this study reported a history of eating disorders, and many of the men expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Gay men's body image is not limited to these two issues. Based on the findings of this study, gay men's body image represents group cohesion. There are smaller groups within the larger gay community, and one's appearance determines group membership. Because appearance is so closely related to group identity, body image is an important issue in understanding the psychology of gay men.

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## APPENDIX A

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (LZW) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.



## VITA

Paul Chadwick Neal

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: BODY IMAGE IN GAY MEN: ACCEPTANCE, CONTROL,  
ACCULTURATION, OBJECTIFICATION AND IDENTITY

Major Field: Educational Psychology

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Poteau High School, Poteau, Oklahoma in May 1994; received Associate in Arts degree majoring in Sociology/Psychology from Carl Albert State College, Poteau, Oklahoma in May 1996; received Bachelor in the Arts degree in Psychology from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 1998. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree with a majoring Educational Psychology at Oklahoma State University in July, 2005.

Experience: Completed practicum experiences at University Counseling Services, the Counseling Psychology Clinic, Transitions Geriatric Psychiatry Unit and at the Veteran's Affairs Hospital in Oklahoma City; Completed pre-doctoral internship at the VA Eastern Kansas Healthcare System in July, 2005; Graduate assistant for World of Work, Introduction to Counseling Skills and Group Process courses.

Professional Memberships: American Psychological Association.

Name: Paul Chadwick Neal

Date of Degree: July, 2005

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: BODY IMAGE IN GAY MEN: ACCEPTANCE, CONTROL,  
ACCULTURATION, OBJECTIFICATION AND IDENTITY

Pages in Study: 138

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Educational Psychology

Scope and Method of Study:

A qualitative design was employed to study the gap in the psychological literature on how gay men internalize messages from gay culture about appearance. Twelve openly gay men were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. The men represented varied ages (from 21 to 45 years old), length of being out, educational attainment, occupations and body types. All data was fully transcribed and coded. Researcher bias was addressed by oversight of the research process by an additional researcher, grounding conclusions heavily in the data and by constant checking of findings with the research participants.

Findings and Conclusions:

Much of the literature on gay men's body image focuses on the negatives of body dissatisfaction and gay men's apparent greater vulnerability to eating disorders. This study confirms both of those findings. Several men in this study reported a history of eating disorders, and many of the men expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Gay men's body image is not limited to these two issues. Based on the findings of this study, gay men's body image represents group cohesion. There are smaller groups within the larger gay community, and one's appearance determines group membership. Because appearance is so closely related to group identity, body image is an import issue in understanding the psychology of gay men.

Diane Montgomery

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: John Romans