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*The management of identity and accountability in online weight loss discourse*

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**The Management of Identity and Accountability  
in Online Weight Loss Discourse**

Kerry McSeveny

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the management of accountability and identity in an online commercial weight loss group. The commercial weight loss context is socially significant because it is a space which foregrounds women's efforts to control their bodies and behaviour in order to conform to culturally prescribed norms of 'femininity' through continued self-surveillance and restriction of consumption. The analysis examines 2219 individual posts in 422 message threads over a 24 hour period on a message board on the Weight Watchers website. The site explicitly promotes itself as a space in which members can obtain advice and emotional support from fellow dieters in an encouraging and egalitarian environment, and is therefore intended to be used as an aid to becoming a more successful 'weight watcher' (and consequently a 'better woman'). Using a feminist hybrid discourse analytic method, and drawing on Goffman's notion of 'face', the empirical chapters explore the interactional management of progress reports by group members.

The commercial weight loss group provides a space in which the confession of transgression is *encouraged*, and analysis of the message threads reveals that members of the message board community are accountable to both societal gender norms and to their fellow weight watchers. In these confessional exchanges group members realign themselves with social norms of 'femininity', and renew their commitment to the body modification project. Group members employ face-protective mitigation strategies in their delivery of confessions, and responses to confessional posts orient to group norms of solidarity and support while rehabilitating the transgressing members back into the eating regime. The analysis also explores the use of humour in the construction of the confessional message which, despite its potential to undermine the regime, appears to perform a face-management function, and is used to display 'expertise' about the regime while fostering group solidarity. In message threads where group members report 'inexplicable' failure to lose weight, the group work to maintain commitment to the regime by explaining lack of success in ways which are protective of the reputation of the regime as an effective means of losing weight, thus ensuring continued dedication to the body modification project. The community offers solutions which provide the member with new 'expertise', helping her to become a 'better weight watcher'.

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# Chapter 1

## Cultural Norms of 'Femininity': Gender, bodies and interaction

*when u put it like that it does sound  
trivial but we all need to do it to feel  
better about ourselves*

rowan\_timms

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of the interactional management of relationships and identity in women's online talk about food and dieting. The analysis will consider how these online exchanges relate to wider concerns about gender and power, conceptualised within a feminist Foucauldian framework. The interactions take place on a message board on the website of Weight Watchers, a well known commercial weight loss organisation. The message boards are intended to be a space in which members can obtain information, advice and support from fellow 'weight watchers', to help them to be successful in their weight loss endeavour. In order to be able to interpret the exchanges on the Weight Watchers message board, it is necessary to take into consideration the wider socio-cultural context in which these interactions take place. The weight loss industry in this country is a multi-million pound business, a figure which reflects the prevalence of dieting behaviour in the UK. In fact, weight management practices are so widespread within society that such behaviour is seen to be 'natural' and 'normal', nothing notable or out of the ordinary. However, as the thesis will show, dieting to lose weight is not an ideologically neutral act. The activity of dieting, and the women who engage in these practices, reflect and perpetuate cultural norms surrounding 'appropriate' feminine appearance and behaviour.

It is important to note from the outset that weight management is by no means an *exclusively* female activity. Many of the concerns regarding societal judgements about weight are also relevant to men, and men are becoming increasingly concerned with their physical appearance and body image (see Grogan, 1999 for further discussion). However, dieting is certainly a *predominantly* female activity, and as many as 95 percent of commercial weight loss group members are estimated to be women (e.g. Lowe *et al.*, 2008). There were no male members in any of the groups I observed throughout the course of my research, and membership of the Weight Watchers message boards is overwhelmingly female. As I will outline in more detail

later in the chapter, body modification (and especially body *reduction*) holds a particular cultural significance for women. Women are expected to conform to incredibly narrow, culturally prescribed norms of 'authentic' femininity, and are far more likely than men to be judged according to their physical appearance (e.g. McKinley, 1999). Feminist scholars (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Bordo, 2003) have discussed at length how the pursuit of these often unattainable ideals ultimately leaves women weak and submissive, and how the time devoted to body modification activities distracts them from other, more productive endeavours. Therefore, my analysis will concentrate on the experiences of *women* dieters, and will consider the cultural context from this perspective.

Germov and Williams suggest that an exploration of the cultural significance of dieting 'requires a renewed focus on the role women play in the processes that shape their lives' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 118). This is consistent with my own approach to research, which is concerned with women's lived experiences and subjectivities. The analysis aims to use a range of critical resources to attempt to gain a greater understanding of the microprocesses that contribute to gendered subjectivity and unequal power relations by looking at women's day to day interactions. Chapter 3 will discuss the rationale behind the research approach in more detail.

This chapter will offer an introduction to the macro context within which women's dieting experiences are located, and will provide an overview of previous feminist work which has dealt with the culturally constructed norms surrounding women's relationships to food, and 'acceptable' feminine behaviour and appearance. The chapter will also consider the significance of *interaction* as a site in which gendered norms are reinforced and perpetuated, and will discuss the relationship between language, gender and identity. The chapter ends with an outline of previous ethnographic studies of the commercial weight loss experience. Perhaps surprisingly, given the prevalence of dieting behaviours among women, and the popularity of commercial groups as a means of losing weight, there is relatively little research in this area. I will therefore provide a review of this body of empirical work, and discuss the ways in which the findings of these studies, and the methodologies employed, have informed my own approach.

Chapter 2 will reflect in more detail on the practices of self-surveillance which are central to the experience of weight watching. The moral framework inherent in talk surrounding weight and food will be examined, and the thesis draws on the work of Michel Foucault to more fully

understand the disciplinary nature of the rituals of self-monitoring and confession of transgression. The chapter will also explore the potential appeal of the commercial weight loss regime, as it offers its members the opportunity for *self transformation*.

The Methodology section (chapter 3) will describe the approaches to data collection and analysis, and discuss the ethical considerations required when conducting research online.

Chapter 4 considers the local context of the Weight Watchers group. It provides an overview of my ethnographic and 'netnographic' (Kozinets, 1997; 2001) observations of both the 'offline' group meetings and 'online' message boards, and will discuss the nature of the message boards as an 'online community'. The 'community of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Wenger, 1998) is also a useful concept in order to begin to understand the social practices taking part on the message boards, and their relationship to members' identities as members of the community of 'weight watchers'. This chapter will also take into account the commercial nature of the weight loss group, and will invoke the concept of the 'brand community' in order to explore members' commitment to the Weight Watchers regime and their loyalty to the organisation.

The analytical chapters go on to explore the way in which group members negotiate their identities in relation to socio-cultural and community norms, invoking identities as 'good/bad women' and 'good/bad weight watchers' through their exchanges on the message boards. In chapter 5 the interactional management of confession of transgression is analysed in detail, and the analysis suggests that confession plays a key role in the perpetuation of the norms of 'acceptable' behaviour for women, as group members confess their desire for, or lack of control around, 'bad' food. Confession also acts as a way for community members to display and renew their commitment to the Weight Watchers regime, and the exchanges on the message boards are managed in ways which rehabilitate the transgressing member.

Chapter 6 explores the use of humour in message board confessions. Analysis of these message threads demonstrates that although joking about the Weight Watchers regime has the potential to undermine the authority of the organisation, humour in this context may actually serve to reinforce community norms and ideals, playing an important solidarity-forming function.

The final empirical chapter (chapter 7) examines the management of reports of 'inexplicable' failure of the regime in the message board exchanges. The analysis explores the way that the community work to provide rationalisations for unsuccessful weight loss which are protective of the Weight Watchers regime. All three chapters will examine how group members construct their identities, perform relational work, and orient to gendered behavioural norms in their message posts.

Finally, chapter 8 will provide a summary of the main findings of the empirical chapters, and will discuss the significance of these findings in relation to the cultural context introduced in the earlier literature review section. In this chapter I will also reflect on my own experiences of the research process, and will propose possibilities for future work.

## **1.2 The prevalence of women's dieting and the social construction of 'normal' weight**

The act of 'watching one's weight' is one which is commonplace in today's culture, and this is particularly true for women. A recent poll reveals that 37% of women describe themselves as 'dieting most of the time' (BBC News Website, 2004), and research shows that it is not only those who are medically classed as 'overweight' who engage in these dieting practices. The rituals of counting calories, of following eating plans, and the denial of particular foods are familiar to women of all shapes and sizes, and dieting is a predominantly female activity. 64% of women who have never been defined as 'overweight' have nevertheless been found to have been on weight loss diets at some point in their lives, compared with only 23% of men in the same circumstances (Biener and Heaton, 1995). The membership of organised slimming groups like Slimming World and Weight Watchers is overwhelmingly female, and dieting behaviour is so prevalent among women that it is considered normative. Rather than being a short-term temporary measure to reach a 'healthy' weight, Germov and Williams argue that for many women dieting is a lifelong commitment, noting that 'for many women it is now 'normal' to be on a diet; to be a professional dieter, to watch one's fat and kilojoule intake, to plan each meal, to be in a perpetual state of disordered eating' (Germov and Williams, 1996a: 631). The Weight Watchers organisation and the eating regime it promotes will be outlined in detail in chapter 4.

It is crucial to note from the outset that the notion of 'overweight' is itself a cultural construction, and the equation of weight with health is not necessarily as straightforward as is widely accepted. The definition of 'normal weight', and consequently what is considered to be

'overweight' is one which is so culturally ingrained that its arbitrariness is obscured. Yet as several authors note (e.g. Rothblum, 1990; McKinley, 1999; Heyes, 2007), the accepted measure of 'healthy weight', Body Mass Index (or BMI), is fundamentally flawed. The measure currently in use is based upon standardised height-weight charts, which were originally created for insurance purposes in the USA in the early 1940s. The 'ideal' weights in these tables were based on an insured population, who were not representative of the population as a whole, and were likely to be below average weight for Americans at that time. The charts also assume a direct relationship between weight and health which was not based on any real statistical evidence. These measures have continued to be used, and weights within the accepted range continue to be readily equated with health, despite these criticisms. This does not necessarily mean that there are no health implications associated with being very 'overweight' (or 'underweight' for that matter), but Heyes (2007) explains that these can often be linked to causative lifestyle factors such as lack of physical activity, or a diet high in fat or sugar, rather than being simply an effect of body weight itself (see Gaesser, 2002 for a more detailed critical discussion of the equation of weight with health). Labelling bodies as 'overweight' implicitly accepts the notion of an 'ideal' or 'normal' weight, and consequently constructs anything outside these narrow boundaries as abnormal and problematic. When considering the equation of weight with 'health', Foucault's work on neoliberalism is particularly useful.

Neoliberalism encourages 'care of the self', with each individual being expected to take responsibility for their own wellbeing. This 'responsibilisation' of the individual means that each person is expected to take action to reduce the risks to their own health, for example by eating healthily and taking exercise. This pursuit of health is an ongoing process, as 'definitions of health are constructed around a concept of 'optimal' well-being and are no longer simply understood as an absence of disease' (Davies, 1998: 149). Individuals who do not take the necessary action to do this are seen as 'lacking self-control, ... therefore not fulfilling their duties as fully autonomous, responsible citizens' (Petersen, 1997). This means that individual citizens are obliged to discipline their own behaviour, in order to conform to socially prescribed norms of conduct in relation to self care which are highly gendered, as the discussion later in the chapter will show. Foucault's work, and its relevance to the commercial weight loss regime will be returned to in the next chapter (chapter 2).

### 1.3 Weight and morality

Weight also carries a moral ascription, and the classification of 'overweight' is an ideologically loaded one. Bodies defined in this way are seen to be excessive, deviant and out of control. This moral judgment extends beyond the physical body, as assumptions made about body weight relate not only to the health of the individual in question, but also to their character and their worth as a person. Orbach observes the importance placed on body size within society, noting that, 'we live in a culture that continues to be obsessed with women's body size and body shape - that sees fatness and thinness as ultimate statements about people's worth rather than descriptions of the ratio of fat body tissue and lean body tissue' (Orbach, 1997: 14), and these societal stereotypes are so deeply rooted that there is evidence that even young children interpret fat in this way (Hill and Lissau, 2002). Several studies have investigated society's attitudes towards overweight people, revealing that they are seen in a very negative light compared to those of 'normal' weight. Overweight individuals are not only assumed to be unhealthy, their size also carries cultural ascriptions of laziness and lack of discipline, among other negative traits (Bordo, 1993/2003). Such negative character judgements show that the social costs of failing to measure up to normalised standards of appearance can be high, and as section 1.5 will discuss further this is especially true for women, as 'according to dominant culture, fat women are not only physically unhealthy, but also mentally unhealthy, out of control, and sexually deviant' (McKinley, 1999: 107). These social sanctions put pressure on women to engage in weight reduction activities in order to 'rein in' their unruly flesh, and the social stigma attached to fat ensures that all women are aware of the negative consequences of failing to keep their bodies under control (McKinley, 1999). These moral values are not simply projected onto women by others, women themselves take on board the negative connotations of excess weight. Malson found that similar themes emerged when women spoke about their *own* bodies, and observes that 'discursive constructions of 'the fat body' are consistently negative, and this negativity is produced in a variety of ways. The 'fat body' is construed as ugly, unattractive, disgusting and shameful. It signifies gluttony and uncontrolled sexual availability. The 'fat self' is unhappy and lacking in control and self-confidence' (Malson, 1998: 105).

In contrast, the slender body is associated with moral superiority, 'autonomy, will, discipline, conquest of desire, enhanced spirituality, purity, and transcendence of the female body' (Bordo, 2003: 68). In order to achieve and maintain these bodily standards, women are required to constantly monitor their consumption, scrutinising both the type and amount of

food that they ingest. As the later discussion will show, dieting is one way in which the female body and its desires are kept under control. As Chernin notes:

A woman obsessed with the size of her appetite, wishing to control her hungers and urges, may be expressing the fact that she has been taught to regard her emotional life, her passions and 'appetites' as dangerous, requiring control and monitoring.

(Chernin, 1981: 2)

These moral themes of control, discipline, and self denial permeate talk about weight and dieting, and can be observed throughout my own data. The moral classification of food (and those consuming it) will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter (chapter 2). Chapter 2 will also explore in more depth the cultural significance of the self-surveillance practices demanded by weight loss regimes, which are central to the experience of dieting and the regulation of appetites.

#### **1.4 Controlling the female body**

Although body modification and food regulation have occurred throughout history, the late nineteenth century is arguably the time when dieting as we know it began to emerge as a social practice. As Vertinsky notes, this time 'was a period crucial to the formation of gender attitudes and practices we have inherited in the twentieth century' (Vertinsky, 1994: 150).

Although cultural meaning has long been ascribed to bodies of different shapes and sizes, slenderness has not always been the most desirable bodily form. In times when food was less widely available, thinness signified poverty, whereas a larger, fleshy body was a symbol of status associated with health, wealth and beauty. The ideal body of the Victorian era for both sexes was significantly larger than the ideal of today, and fat on the body was a sign of economic status, providing physical evidence that an individual had no need to do manual work. The ideal female body of the time reflected women's domesticity and maternity, their fleshy bodies a sign of fertility and good health (Fraser, 1997: 23).

Yet even in these times where plumpness was desirable, women's relationships with their bodies and food were by no means straightforward. As well as the fashion for flesh and curves, the Victorian female body was defined by the corset, which was designed to emphasise the breasts and hips, further highlighting women's reproductive role, and serving to make

them weak and immobile. The 'ideal' silhouette eventually became more and more pronounced, with waists growing smaller and smaller. As section 1.5 will discuss, the wearing of corsets is just one of a number of ways in which women's bodies have been sculpted and their freedoms have been restricted. And despite the general trend for larger bodies, women were also expected to restrict their appetites, as 'it was considered unseemly for them to be caught in the delicate act of eating' (Fraser, 1997: 24-25). In order to be considered 'ladylike', women were required to control their consumption in public, something which is consistent with women's experiences today.

By the late 1800s, the shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one had dramatically changed the way in which people accessed the food they ate. A move towards processed, mass-produced food meant that food was more freely available than ever before, and as a result excess weight was no longer a sign of prestige (Fraser, 1997: 18). At this time, a clear trend towards thinness began to emerge, and Bordo cites this as the time when what we understand as 'dieting' today really came into existence, as 'arguably for the first time in the West, those who could afford to eat well began systematically to deny themselves food in the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal' (Bordo, 2003: 185).

Until this point the fashion for restrictive clothing was solely the preserve of the aristocracy, but dieting soon became a preoccupation of the middle classes (Bordo, 2003: 185), as the slender body had become a symbol of status. As chapter 2 will discuss in more detail, trends in appearance norms are closely linked to social class, because the pursuit of a particular body shape requires considerable investment of time and money (Fallon, 1990, cited in Grogan, 1999). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, what has been considered to be a desirable body shape has continued to fluctuate over time. From the very slim, 'boyish' look of 1920s flappers, to the curvaceous Hollywood starlets of the 1940s, idealised images of womanhood have varied greatly. However, the idea that women's bodies can be moulded to fit the 'ideal' image of the time remains constant.

While our attitudes towards food and the body can be traced back over several centuries, many feminist commentators identify the late 1950s and 1960s as the point at which our current obsession with thinness really began. There are a number of possible reasons why this occurred, and as Hesse-Biber notes, 'this time, the super-slim body ideal met and merged with other social influences. These forces included a new feminist movement and changes in women's roles, the increasing power of the media, and rampant consumerism' (Hesse-Biber,

1996: 28). Schwartz also notes the link between economic factors and the trend for thinness, observing that 'dieting strategies have followed the stages of capitalism so closely that one could be the model for the other' (Schwartz, 1986: 327). This decade also saw the birth of the commercial weight loss industry as we know it today – the first Weight Watchers meeting was held in 1963 in the USA, and by 1967 the organisation had spread to the UK (Weston, 1999).

The feminine ideal continued to change, from the athletic, toned standards of the 1980s to the much-publicised glamorisation of extremely thin models in the 'heroin chic' trend of the 1990s (Grogan, 1999: 15-16). However, one thing remained constant - the idea that women's bodies were inadequate as they were, and needed to be modified. Throughout this time, the popularity of dieting as a means of controlling the body continued to grow. Dieting today is not simply an activity, it is an *industry*, and it is a highly lucrative one, as section 1.6 will discuss in more detail. A recent newspaper article estimates the revenue from Weight Watchers meetings in the UK to be around £1 million each week, and this figure does not take into account the huge amount of income the organisation makes from their branded foods, magazines and other merchandise (BBC News Website, 2002). Hesse-Biber suggests that the dieting industry actively promotes consumerism as a way to solve the problem of excess weight, noting that, 'many women believe that in order to lose weight the need to buy something, whether it be a pill, a food plan or membership in a self-help group' (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 39).

Now, in the early twenty-first century, our cultural relationships with food and our bodies seem to be even more complex. On one hand, a more sedentary lifestyle, and an increase in the availability of cheap, high calorie processed foods has resulted in an increase in body size which the World Health Organisation has defined as an 'obesity epidemic' in the Western world (World Health Organisation, 2006), and yet the dieting industry has still continued to grow. And as Julier (2008) notes, the same food industry produces both the low calorie, 'healthy option' foods which are marketed as a solution to the social problem of obesity, alongside the high fat convenience foods which are charged with causing (or at least contributing to) the problem in the first place.

At the same time, the trend for thinness has become yet more pronounced. In the preface to the tenth anniversary edition of her book 'Unbearable Weight', Susan Bordo outlines the changes she has observed since its original publication in 1993. The last decade has seen a dramatic increase in cosmetic surgery as a means of changing women's bodies, and the 'ideal'

female body has reached worryingly slender proportions, with the media promoting images of models and celebrities who are visibly extremely underweight (Bordo, 2003: xxv-xxvii) . The 'size zero' phenomenon, as it is now known, has been associated with increased body dissatisfaction in women (Ahern, Bennett and Hetherington, 2008). The backlash against such extreme thinness can already be observed in the media, where women are exposed to a baffling array of messages - they are vilified for being too thin, yet fatness is equally deplorable. Among all of these contradictions, the only consistent message is that women's bodies can only be socially acceptable if they are kept under *control*, and the way to do this is through the restriction of appetites.

The seemingly 'normal', everyday nature of the act of dieting obscures the fact that this constant disciplining and restriction is not a natural way to consume food. Rather than simply eating when hungry, dieting demands that all intake is constantly monitored, measured and controlled. Certain types of food must be rationed, or are off limits entirely, and any excesses must be compensated for, either through exercise or denial of food later in the day. This continued self-surveillance encourages a preoccupation with food that has been likened to the mental state of those suffering from clinical conditions such as anorexia or bulimia. However Bordo claims that body dissatisfaction and issues surrounding food are common elements of the experience of womanhood, noting that, 'most women in our culture, then, are 'disordered' when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies; eating disorders, far from being 'bizarre' and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture' (Bordo, 2003: 57). Many authors (e.g. Orbach, 1997; Malson, 2000; Bordo, 1993/2003 among others) consider what is seen as 'normal', everyday dieting to be on the same continuum of disordered eating as these conditions. As Bordo notes, 'Feminist analysts see no firm boundary on some side of which a state of psychological comfort and stability may be seen to exist. They see, rather, only varying degrees of disorder' (Bordo, 2003: 61).

However, an important distinction is the way in which dieting is perceived within society. While conditions such as anorexia and bulimia are pathologised, and those 'suffering' from such 'disorders' are seen to be in need of treatment, weight loss through dieting is considered to be 'normal', unproblematic behaviour. In fact, in the context of dieting successful weight loss is considered to be an achievement, and is rewarded. The focus of the current literature in the area suggests that the act of controlling weight by restricting food is considered to be such a natural, 'everyday' behaviour that it has not been viewed as worthy of extensive study,

and has perhaps been neglected in favour of clinical conditions like anorexia and bulimia. Ogden suggests that rather than simply concentrating on these conditions, 'perhaps what people should be more interested in are the normal average things which affect more normal average people. The drama associated with eating disorders detracts from the effects of dieting which may not be so dramatic or threatening but which have an impact on more people's lives. The effects of dieting may not be as exciting or traumatic but they are still important and deserve to be understood' (Ogden, 1992: 38). While Ogden's description of eating disorders as 'exiting' conditions which affect women who are not 'normal' is problematic, her point that the social 'acceptability' of dieting should not preclude its critical study is a valid one. Just because the activities of calorie control and denial are commonplace, this does not mean that they should not be explored and questioned. With this in mind, this study aims to learn more about the experiences of women engaged in 'everyday' dieting behaviour, through their participation in a commercial weight loss regime.

Although this work concentrates exclusively on women in a non-clinical setting, the behaviours of both clinical and non-clinical groups emerge from the same socio-cultural context. As Malson notes, the classification of anorexia and bulimia as an individual pathology is not a helpful way to understand the conditions, as the body management practices engaged in by individuals suffering from these conditions are 'located precisely *within* the parameters of 'normality'; produced by the same complex matrix of discursive and material practices which produce and regulate 'normal' 'feminine' subjectivities in contemporary Western(ized) cultures' (Malson, 2000: 367). The analysis will attempt to identify how some of these regulatory practices are played out within the interactions *between* women, and the commercial weight loss group is a setting in which such regulation is particularly foregrounded. The concept of 'normal' 'feminine' behaviour that Malson mentions is useful in understanding why dieting is a traditionally 'feminine' pursuit.

### **1.5 The significance of gender norms and the 'thin ideal'**

While the moral judgements ascribed to fat and thin bodies discussed in section 1.3 may help to explain why it may be desirable for an individual to lose weight, this does not account for the fact that those engaged in dieting are predominantly *female*. While negative judgements are made about overweight individuals of both genders, the bodily standards expected of men and women are quite different. The previous section outlined some of the historical changes in the cultural standards against which women's bodies are judged, and Grogan notes that 'the

social pressure on men is different and less extreme than that on women' (Grogan, 1999: 19). An analysis of these differences may help to explain the gendered nature of the activity of dieting.

There is a vast body of feminist scholarship which has attempted to explore the complex and conflicted relationship that exists between women, their bodies, and food. The following sections will address women's bodies, and will outline the differences between the physical standards expected of men and women, while considering how these gendered norms are productive of a cultural imbalance of power. Chapter 2 will explore how the pursuit of an 'ideal' type of femininity involves the denial of desires and the restriction of consumption, and will describe how dieting activities intersect with discourses of morality and self control.

The body acts an important cultural symbol, and 'fat and thin bodies are saturated with a multiplicity of gendered meanings and moral connotations' (Malson, 2008: 27). The body is particularly significant for women, as they 'are looked at and objectified more than men' (Rothblum, 1994: 71), and, 'from the day they are identified as female, girls learn that others evaluate them in terms of their appearance, whereas boys are evaluated on other bases such as strength, coordination, and alertness' (McKinley, 1999: 99). Women are constantly subject to the 'male gaze' (Blood, 2005: 37-40), and are judged according to how closely they fit in with normative ideals of attractiveness. Orbach (1997) argues that this makes self-presentation a key activity for women, as they must constantly work towards making themselves more appealing to others, to conform to bodily norms which require them to be slender and petite. Women's *worth* is judged according to their appearance, and they 'gain social capital in a social 'marketplace' that offers admiration and 'self-validation on the basis of their physical appearance rather than their actual achievements' (Guendouzi, 2004: 1651). In other words, while men's worth is judged by their actions, women are judged according to how they look.

These bodily norms are instrumental in the regulation of femininity – women are not only more likely to be defined in terms of their physical appearance, but they are also far more likely than men to be judged negatively if they should *fail* to meet the required standard. The gendered norms governing appearance and behaviour determine what is considered to be 'acceptable' for women in terms of how they act and appear, and girls learn from an early age that they can be judged harshly for failing to conform to these norms (McKinley, 1999).

The standards set for male and female bodies are also very different. Tyler and Abbott observe that for women 'doing gender' 'involves the presentation and performance of female bodies as feminine in ways that conform to *patriarchally determined* aesthetic codes on femininity' (Tyler and Abbott, 1998: 435, my emphasis). Not only are men less likely to be judged according to their appearance, they are also subjected to fewer physical restrictions. While men are expected to be big, strong and aggressive, women are supposed to be small, fragile and quiet. Men are permitted to walk taking long strides, and sit with their arms and legs spread widely, while women must walk daintily and sit demurely (Bartky, 1990). The cultural and economic significance of these gendered differences will be discussed later in the chapter.

These physical restrictions can also be observed in gendered attitudes permitted towards food. Men are expected to have large appetites, and to indulge those appetites, while women are supposed to show restraint and control around food, and resist their desires. The interplay between the practices of self surveillance and self control, the moral characteristics ascribed to indulgent foods and those who eat them, and the strong parallels between food and sexuality will be discussed in chapter 2, but these are concepts which are far more relevant to women's experiences of food than men's. These double standards permeate our cultural understanding of gender, as Brownmiller notes, 'In the popular imagination masculinity always includes the concepts of powerful and large, while slight and weak are feminine descriptions. A man-size portion puts more food on the plate and the Man-Size Kleenex packs more tissues in the box' (Brownmiller, 1984: 28). So men are expected to enjoy food and to indulge their appetites, and carrying a few extra pounds makes a man appear more 'manly'. Yet women are required to practice moderation around food, and the same few pounds mark her out as deviant for failing to conform to the norms of femininity. Women's fat is seen as problematic because 'while fat creates the celebrated dimorphic curves of womanhood, it is also the agent of massiveness and bulk, properties more readily associated with masculine solidity and power' (Brownmiller, 1984: 32-33). Gender norms dictate that women's flesh must therefore be reduced, to achieve a more 'feminine', delicately sized body. And it is not only body size that women are expected to transform, there are multiple ways in which women can work to 'improve' their bodies. As well as being thin, women must also 'improve' themselves by removing any excess hair, deodorising, wearing makeup and perfume and dressing in suitable clothing (Orbach, 1997). This seemingly endless array of physical characteristics which women are expected to attend to ensures that the 'body project' is an ongoing and constant one.

The pressure to conform to these often unrealistic appearance norms encourages women to engage in various forms of body modification activities including dieting and exercise, and in more extreme cases can result in eating disorders or lead them to seek cosmetic surgery (a form of body modification which is becoming increasingly normalised). However, as previously mentioned it is not only those who are overweight who engage in body modification practices - dieters can be any size or shape, but 'what motivates dieters to diet is their *perceived size*' (Ogden, 1992: 15, emphasis added). There is a significant body of research which explores the experiences and identity management of overweight and clinically obese women (e.g. Degher and Hughes, 1999; Cordell and Rambo Ronai, 1999), but although research involving severely overweight women offers an interesting insight into the experiences of someone who does not conform to the 'thin ideal', it does not explain fully the phenomenon of dieting. Many of the women who diet fall *outside* this category, and Biener and Heaton's (1995) findings that almost two thirds of 'normal' weight women diet regardless of their size highlights the pressure that women feel they are under to become, or to continue to be, slim. All of this perpetuates the idea that female bodies are somehow deficient. As Ussher notes, 'as women squeeze, constrict and pad their bodies to comply with some artificial ideal, they are internalizing the message that the natural body is unsightly, not attractive, and needs to be changed' (Ussher, 1989: 38).

### **1.6 Gender norms and power**

Much of the feminist literature discusses the pursuit of the 'thin ideal' as a continuation of other forms of body modification traditionally expected of women. For example, Rothblum (1994) outlines the parallels between modern day dieting and the practices of foot-binding, the wearing of corsets, and female circumcision, noting that 'under the guise of fashion – and fashion that was supposedly dictated by other women – women's behaviour and appearance have been radically restricted' (Rothblum, 1994: 59). She observes that these practices served a dual purpose – they accentuated the differences between women and men (thus making them more erotic), and served to limit women's freedom and behaviour. So while some of these practices may appear to us to be barbaric, they actually have much in common with the day to day dieting behaviours engaged in by women today. Women are still expected to conform to a socially-defined model of attractiveness, and the physical expectations placed on them with regard to what is considered to be 'feminine' treat the female body as a project to be worked upon and 'improved' in order to become more desirable or acceptable within

patriarchal society. While at one time the corset was used to control the body (and indeed the woman wearing it), now we 'are left with only our flesh to control' (Ogden, 1992: 5).

The apparent 'normality' of dieting behaviour also hides the fact that dieting itself is a socially constructed phenomenon, in the same way as the bodily norms that women are working to achieve. Feminist authors have discussed at length the role played by these norms, asserting that they are constructions of a patriarchal society which encourage submissiveness in women, and producing 'docile bodies', ensuring that they remain weak and powerless. It is argued that the enforcement of these norms serves as a form of social control, and much feminist literature has been devoted to discussion of the relationship of gender norms to the distribution of power within society (e.g. Wolf, 1990; Rothblum, 1994; McKinley, 1999; Bordo, 1993/2003 among others). Ensuring that women remain subordinate to men has economic implications, and these authors argue that there is a direct link between women's position in society and the form that these appearance norms take. As Faludi (1991) observes, while the feminist movement has empowered many women to become more successful in their careers, and become more economically and politically powerful, this coincided with an increase in the stringency of the physical norms they were expected to conform to. This view is supported by Germov and Williams who claim that, 'gendered bodies and the production of the thin ideal can be perceived as an attempt to neutralize these gains' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 120). Feminine body norms can therefore be understood as a means of maintaining patriarchal power, as the 'steadily shrinking space permitted the female body seemed expressive of discomfort with greater female power and presence' (Bordo, 2003: xxi). Similarly, Wolf suggests that, 'Western economies are absolutely dependent now on the continued underpayment of women. An ideology that makes women feel 'worth less' was urgently needed to counteract the way feminism had become to make us feel worth more' (Wolf, 1990: 18). By ensuring that women devote much of their time and energy to the pursuit of an often unachievable ideal, these norms, and the activities involved in policing the norms, maintain the patriarchal gendered power relations present within society. As Rothblum observes, 'women's appearance norms are not created by women, and they are not healthy for women. Rather, the norms profit men, define the erotic, pump money into the economy, and restrict women's power' (Rothblum, 1994: 72). Rothblum further discusses the power implications of these body norms, noting that the appearance norms that women are expected to conform to are indicative of submissiveness. While dominance and power are represented by increased size, women are required to reduce their weight and take up less space.

The physical demands placed on women to be small and delicate ensure that they remain weak, fragile and submissive. They also perpetuate the focus on women's physicality as a means of determining their worth, as 'working to achieve and maintain ideal weight keeps women focused on their bodies and reinforces the construction of women as primarily bodies' (McKinley, 1999: 107). Dieting therefore plays an active role in regulating and reproducing gender power relations. Women's everyday body modification activities ensure that they remain physically unthreatening, and valuable time and energy is concentrated on physical self improvement. The production of 'docile bodies' through disciplinary technologies will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, and the continuous surveillance that dieting women subject themselves (and each other) to will be explored further.

Section 1.4 introduced the commercial nature of the weight loss industry, and the economic significance of what Chernin (1981) refers to as the 'tyranny of slenderness' is considerable. The commercial weight loss industry is worth several million pounds in the UK, and a recent newspaper article estimates the health and beauty industry more generally to be worth approximately £7.4 billion in Britain, and a staggering £100 billion worldwide (Observer Woman Magazine, 7 Oct 2007). Weight Watchers and other similar organisations not only offer a weight loss programme but an entire lifestyle. Dieters can buy a Weight Watchers magazine, branded weighing scales, point calculators and recipe books. The organisation also produces an extensive range of Weight Watchers brand foods, designed to fit in with the eating regime, including snacks, ready meals, and even wine. The dieting and fitness industries portray the body as a 'project', something which can be worked upon and improved, and this discourse of self care and self improvement will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

However, the task of 'self improvement' is a process with no end. If an individual is successful in reaching her target weight then this does not mark the end of her weight loss journey, she must continue monitoring her intake to ensure that she maintains her ideal weight. Physical perfection is a goal which is constantly out of reach, and it is no longer enough simply to be slim, bodies must now be toned and 'perfectly formed' (Guendouzi, 2004). The physical ideal that women work towards is so stringent that there is likely always to be some part of the body which could be 'improved upon', or 'fashioned' in some way.

## 1.7 Culture and gender norms

The role of the media in the perpetuation of the thin ideal is one which has received a great deal of attention. It is no real surprise to learn that dieting is so prevalent, as we are surrounded by messages which encourage this behaviour. From magazine articles advising us on how to 'lose a stone to get into your bikini', websites scrutinising the bodies of 'flabby' celebrities, or adverts for new low fat cereal bars, the message is clear - it is both desirable, and important, to lose weight. If we are overweight then any excess must be lost. If we are already slim then it is imperative that we stay that way, and the way in which to do this is by dieting. Groesz, Levine and Murnen suggest that although women receive their concept of beauty from many sources, 'the loudest and most aggressive purveyors of images and narratives of ideal slender beauty are the mass media', who 'construct a dream world of hopes and high standards that incorporates the glorification of slenderness and weight loss' (Groesz, Levine and Murnen, 2002: 2). Their investigation into the effects of exposure to media images of thin models upon body image led them to conclude that women who are exposed to slender media images experienced a significant decrease in body satisfaction as a result. Their findings 'support the sociocultural perspective that mass media such as fashion magazines and television promote, if not establish, a standard of slender beauty that leads many females to feel badly about their weight and shape' (ibid: 12). However, women are not simply passively absorbing the images that they see in magazines, on television and in advertising. There is evidence that women demonstrate a level of awareness with regard to the physical standards set for them, expressing both cynicism about the 'ideal bodies' portrayed in the media, and a desire to see more realistic portrayals of women in magazines and on television (Grogan, 1999). This awareness of the portrayal of narrow and unrealistic parameters of feminine attractiveness has recently been appropriated for advertising purposes by Dove's 'Campaign for Real Beauty' ([www.campaignforrealbeauty.co.uk](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.co.uk)), which aimed to use a wider range of 'real' (but still conventionally attractive) models to advertise their products. Although Grogan found that women were well aware of the impossible standards set by magazine representations of the female body, her research revealed that women are *still* subject to the feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction that result from attempting to measure up to these ideals. Ussher (1997) also observed a similar awareness among both young and older women of the often unrealistic and unattainable goals of physical perfection that they are expected to strive for.

While the notion of disciplinary practices working to maintain normalised standards of appearance in women goes some way to explain why women participate in dieting behaviour, it seems that this may not be the whole story. As both Ussher and Grogan have shown, women do not simply passively absorb these patriarchal norms of femininity then slavishly work to conform to them, they actively engage with the notion of femininity, and are able to think critically about the body modification activities they undertake. The image of women as 'cultural dupes' who are passive victims of the normalising images in the media is far too simplistic, as dieting behaviour takes place in a complex socio-cultural context, in which women are constantly negotiating their identities in relation to their day to day experiences. Underpinning these experiences are the cultural norms of femininity that I have already discussed, but there is also room for these norms to be critically evaluated, and perhaps even resisted.

Ussher (1997) notes the contradictions of women's experiences of 'doing femininity'. Body modification has a complex relationship to power and oppression, as many women are both aware of, and critical of these gendered norms. Yet despite their awareness of the norms, they still engage in body modification activities which make them complicit in their construction and perpetuation. Furthermore, she argues that many women get pleasure from 'doing femininity', from reading glossy magazines, to enhancing their appearance through clothes and makeup, and asserts that, 'women who act out these regimes of beauty are not simply indoctrinated or brainwashed, but position themselves as expert performers of this complicated masquerade' (Ussher, 1997: 55). The 'art' of femininity is therefore a performance through which women display their skills and their knowledge, and is a process which has the potential to be enjoyed, giving a sense of empowerment.

However, although gender norms are not always experienced as oppressive, they are not always empowering either, and I would agree with Ussher's observation that, 'being (and becoming) 'woman' is not an unequivocally positive process. There is much about femininity that is difficult, contradictory and impossible to achieve' (ibid: 55). The physical transformation expected of women who are overweight is potentially far more problematic than, for example, the application of makeup, or a new hairstyle. Such empowerment can only be experienced, and gender norms can only be enjoyed, if these standards (or something resembling them) are actually *achievable*. If a woman has tried and failed throughout her life to lose weight, in an attempt to align herself more closely with culturally accepted norms of

slenderness, then she may find little to enjoy in the process. In this case the potential for empowerment may be restricted.

So far my discussion of gender norms has been concerned mainly with the cultural construction of standards for women's physical appearance and behaviour, and the practical ramifications for women's experiences of their bodies. This thesis is an analysis of how these gendered norms emerge in and are perpetuated through *interaction*, and the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the relationship between language, gender and identity.

### **1.8 Language, gender and identity**

The empirical chapters of this thesis analyse the day to day interactions between users of the Weight Watchers message boards focussing on the way in which members manage accounts of their weight watching behaviour within the exchanges. While the everyday talk of a group of women may not at first appear to be 'worthy' of such levels of scrutiny, in this section I will explore the significance of these seemingly 'mundane' interactions as a site in which gendered identities are displayed and negotiated, reflecting and perpetuating the societal norms of femininity discussed earlier in the chapter. Maybin suggests that, 'talk is a central part of our lives; through it we carry out activities, negotiate relationships, try to construct understandings about the world around us and develop our own sense of identity' (Maybin, 1996: 27). Language and interaction are therefore central to our sense of self and our understanding of those around us, and the importance of studying everyday interaction will be discussed in the methodology chapter (chapter 3).

Cameron (1998a) proposes that gender should be thought of as an 'act of identity', in which 'one talks like a woman as one way of becoming a woman'. She notes that linguistic research has so far neglected the social and gendered dimensions of interaction, while work in other disciplines has not sufficiently addressed the role of language. It is therefore important to explore the construction of a gendered identity not only at the level of the interaction, but also to take into account the wider social context in which the interactions take place. In the context of a commercial weight loss group, micro-analysis of the interactions must also take into account the cultural norms relating to femininity and societal attitudes towards weight already discussed in this chapter, as well as the specific context of the weight loss organisation, which will be outlined in more detail in chapter 4.

## 1.9 The social construction of identity

The thesis takes a social constructionist approach, which assumes that identity and social categories such as gender are not natural, pre-determined or fixed, but instead are constructed in language and other symbolic practices, and are fluid and constantly negotiable. Burr (2003) describes the role of language in the construction of identity by conceptualising identity as a 'fabric' which is 'woven together' from the different cultural discourses which are available to us. She explains that we orient to these discourses (which include class, gender, age, sexuality, education and occupation) in our interactions with others. However, we are only able to construct our identities from the discursive positions which are available to us, and she notes that, 'for each thread of our identity there is a limited number of discourses on offer out of which we might fashion ourselves' (Burr, 2003: 107).

Similarly, West and Zimmerman (1991) consider gender to be a socially constructed phenomenon. They describe it as an 'activity', so individuals 'do gender', presenting themselves in their social interactions as masculine or feminine through the display of characteristics associated with each gender role. Individuals therefore act in a way which is considered to be 'normal' for someone of their sex, and they describe gender as 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman, 1991: 14). Interactions with others therefore become the place in which individuals construct and negotiate their identities, so language plays an important role in the construction of the image that we project, and the identity that we choose to convey can vary according to the situation we find ourselves in. Our identity is therefore not a fixed state, but emerges and is renewed in interaction.

Butler (1990) also questions the notion that gender (as opposed to the biological classification of sex) is a category which should be treated as given. She describes gender as a *performance*, rather than a set of traits that reside within individuals themselves. She claims that gender 'ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler, 1990: 140, original emphasis).

The idea of *repetition* of gendered behaviour is significant. West and Zimmerman argue that the constant repetition of such gender characteristics leads to them appearing 'natural', and

gives the impression that gender roles and their resulting social implications are simply the result of these predetermined characteristics. In their own words, doing gender involves 'creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender' (ibid: 24). This then has implications for power relations within society, and they suggest that, 'if, in doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing deference, the resultant social order, which supposedly reflects 'natural differences' is a powerful reinforcer and legitimator of hierarchical arrangements' (ibid: 32).

Significantly, if gender is not a pre-determined, fixed category, then this means that it is potentially open to negotiation. Individuals may choose to resist a particular identity by choosing to take up or reject a particular subject position. However, despite this *potential* for flexibility West and Zimmerman note the consequences of failing to conform to our 'assigned' gender role, as 'if we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals - not the institutional arrangements - may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)' (ibid: 33). An individual who fails to (or chooses not to) display the 'correct' behaviour runs the risk of being labelled deviant, so it is therefore important that the display of identity in interactions with others is managed carefully.

### **1.10 Gender and interaction**

In her 1996 work, Cameron calls for 'new ways of conceptualizing the relation between women and men', which do not assume gender to be a natural, pre-existing attribute (Cameron, 1996: 42). More recent work on language use and gender takes the social constructionist perspective discussed above, working from the assumption that gender is something which is not given, but is constructed through interaction. Such an approach 'is sometimes called the dynamic approach because there is an emphasis on dynamic aspects of interaction' (Coates, 2004: 6). Research of this type not only takes into account the form of the language used, but also the function it performs - 'what language users are *accomplishing* through the use of a particular communicative strategy or speech style' (Cameron, 1996: 43).

Much of the work investigating language and gender concentrates upon the differences between the ways men and women communicate in mixed sex groups, and is concerned with the power dynamic within such encounters, but more recently a significant body of research

has attempted to identify the norms of interaction in single-sex groups (e.g. Johnson and Aries, 1998; Coates, 1996). Coates notes that earlier studies of all-female interaction tended to define the language used by women as 'tentative' or 'powerless', but the emphasis in more recent work has been upon the cooperative nature of women's interactions. She suggests that despite this more positive way of defining the form that all-female interactions take, it is important still to ensure that such research is based upon the study of real life interactions, and does not simply reinforce stereotypical views of what 'women's language' is like.

There is evidence to suggest that in single-sex friendship groups men and women talk in general about very different topics. Johnson and Aries observe that, 'close female friends converse more frequently than close male friends about personal and family problems, intimate relationships, doubts and fears, daily activities, and hobbies and shared activities; male friends, on the other hand, discuss sports more frequently than female friends'. They conclude that, 'the major contrast, then, between male friendships and female friendships appears to grow from different orientations toward close relationships. Male friendships involve more communication about matters peripheral to the self; they engage more in sociability than in intimacy. Female friendships encompass personal identities, intimacy, and the immediacy of daily life' (Johnson and Aries, 1998: 217). Coates observed similar gendered differences, but discusses these variations in conversational topics in terms of the distinction between the public and private spheres, suggesting that men are socialised into public discourse, where the goal of interaction is the exchange of information. In contrast, women are socialised into private discourse, in which the goal is not simply information exchange, but 'the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, the reaffirming and strengthening of friendship' (Coates, 1996: 229). This is significant for my own data, as the Weight Watchers message boards are presented as a space where members can get support and encouragement from fellow dieters, so the analysis will be concerned with the solidarity and relational work between the women on the boards.

Although Holmes' (1998) review of language and gender research suggests it is possible to make *some* generalisations about the way in which men and women use language, Cameron recommends that it is 'unhelpful for linguists to continue to use models of gendered speech which imply that masculinity and femininity are monolithic constructs, automatically giving rise to predictable (and utterly different) patterns of verbal interaction' (Cameron, 1998b: 282). Perhaps a more useful way to consider language variation is to use the concept of the community of practice (C of P) (Wenger, 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998), which

considers language as emerging from the practices of the community in which it is taking place. The C of P focuses on the *context* of interaction as based in the community, and 'shows that language should not be studied separately from other social practices, and gender cannot be isolated from the influence of other social variables' (Weatherall, 2002: 64). The C of P, and its relevance from a theoretical and analytical perspective will be discussed in chapter 4.

### **1.11 Interaction, face work and dieting talk**

As the discussion of friendships and communities in the previous section shows, language and interaction serve not only as a means of constructing individual gendered identities, but also as a way in which we negotiate our relationships with others. Maybin observes that, 'talk is used to pursue social relationships; through it intimacy and status are negotiated, and people position themselves, and are positioned, in various ways' (Maybin, 1996: 27). The importance of talk in all-female relationships has already been noted, and there is evidence to suggest that dieting and body size are common topics in all-female interactions. Guendouzi (2004) studied the everyday, naturally-occurring conversations of groups of women of a range of ages, and observed that instances in which they account for body size and consumption are so common that they have become 'phatic routines', exchanges which serve a primarily social function, and are deeply embedded in the everyday interactions between women. Diet talk has also been shown to be common in mother-daughter interactions, and Tannen (2006) describes dieting as one of the 'Big Three' topics (along with hair and clothing) about which mothers most frequently offer their daughters advice and criticism. A number of studies (e.g. Nichter, 2000; Ogle and Damhorst, 2003) have explored the nature of 'dieting talk' between mothers and daughters, but have not looked directly at the interactions themselves, choosing instead to conduct focus groups and interviews in order to find out how girls and their mothers articulate their experiences of attempting to control their bodies.

It seems that talk in general, and specifically talk about dieting and bodies may play an important role in women's construction of their identities, and in their management of their relationships with one another. When considering social relationships the work of Goffman (1967), which is concerned with the 'social order' is particularly useful. Goffman describes self-presentation in terms of 'face', which he defines as the 'positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Goffman, 1967: 5). The term face does not refer to an individual's *physical* face, it 'is something that is not lodged in or on his body, but rather something that is diffusely located in

the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them' (ibid: 7).

He argues that individuals regulate themselves within interactions, sustaining the moral order, and performing *face work*, which attends to the face of the participants in an interaction. Spiers (1998) explains that face work shapes the form that conversational interactions take, suggesting that, 'without face work, talk would probably be extremely direct, specific, fast, and impersonal. But conversation is not like that' (Spiers, 1998: 29).

One way therefore to *explore* the notion of face, is to look at the effect that face management strategies have on interaction, and study the indirect conversational moves used by speakers to protect face. Although Goffman described the types of interactional situations which may threaten face, he did not conduct any detailed analysis of interactional exchanges to explore the way that face work manifests in conversation.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of *politeness* takes Goffman's concept of face, and develops a method of systematically analysing face maintenance strategies in conversation. They define two different types of face – 'negative face', which is the desire to be free, autonomous and unimpeded by others, and 'positive face', which is the desire to be liked, respected and admired by others. Politeness theory asserts that under most circumstances speakers will work to maintain face, both for themselves and others, in order to achieve interactional goals without causing conflict or offence. Brown and Levinson identify a number of speech acts which they describe as intrinsically face threatening to the face of either the speaker or the hearer in a conversation, such as giving advice, expressing criticism, or admitting guilt. They argue that these face threatening acts (FTAs) require interactants to employ *mitigating* strategies in order to minimise the threat to face. They define these as 'negative politeness' (strategies to limit encroachment on the freedom of the hearer), 'positive politeness' (strategies to enhance positive face), and 'off-record politeness' (which involves flouting one of Grice's (1975) conversational maxims and assuming the hearer will understand the inferred meaning). As a result Brown and Levinson claim there are very limited circumstances in which communication can occur *directly* without posing a face threat to those involved, and in many conversational situations speakers will employ these mitigating strategies to attend to the face of the individuals involved in the interaction.

However, although Brown and Levinson's work has been hugely influential, their theorising of politeness has been criticised on a number of counts. One of the main problems is the difficulty in *defining* politeness, and Watts (2003) suggests a distinction between what he calls first and second order politeness. First order politeness (or 'politeness1') refers to the everyday, common understanding of what politeness is, while second order ('politeness2') refers to politeness in the analytical, technical, face management sense. Locher and Watts (2005) propose that Brown and Levinson's work is actually not a theory of politeness at all, but instead is a theory of face work. They suggest that it may be more useful to shift the focus from politeness to *relational work*, as 'politeness is only a relatively small part of relational work and must be seen in relation to other types of interpersonal meaning' (Locher and Watts, 2005: 10). They also question Brown and Levinson's claim that any kind of behaviour is inherently 'polite' or 'impolite', claiming that, 'individuals evaluate certain utterances as polite ... against the structures of expectation evoked within the frame of the interaction' (ibid: 29). Spencer-Oatey supports this focus on context, suggesting that, 'linguistic politeness needs to be studied within the situated social psychological context in which it occurs' (Spencer-Oatey, 2002: 530). The importance of context is particularly clear when considering interactions which take place in non-Western cultures, as Brown and Levinson's model has been shown to be culturally-biased towards an Anglo-American definition of what constitutes politeness (see Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003 among others for a more detailed discussion of cultural bias).

Another criticism of Brown and Levinson's version of politeness is that it focuses on face as an *individual* concern. Although they describe the 'mutual vulnerability' of face, explaining that, 'it is in general in every participant's best interests to maintain each others' faces' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61), it is defined in their work as though it were something 'possessed' by the individual, which can be threatened, damaged or lost. Their discussion of face work also makes it sound like a calculated, strategic move, whereas Goffman's original definition stressed that, 'ordinarily, maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective' (Goffman, 1967: 12).

The need to focus on face as a group accomplishment has been raised by several authors, and Mills proposes 'a more community-based discourse-level model' of politeness (Mills, 2003: 1). The idea that face is an achievement which is 'co-constituted in and constitutive of interaction' (Haugh, 2009: 5) is central to my own approach, and will be returned to in the methodology

chapter (chapter 3), and the subsequent discussion of the Weight Watchers community (chapter 4).

As a potential solution, Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) suggests a return to Goffman's *original* definition of face and face work, which focuses on the maintenance of the interactional order, an approach which emphasises the collaborative nature of face. The joint construction of face is reflected in Goffman's own description of the concept:

one's own face and the face of others are *constructs of the same order*; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved  
(Goffman, 1967: 6 emphasis added)

However, Bargiela-Chiappini claims that the 'theoretical and cultural baggage' attached to the term 'face' poses problems when trying to establish the relationship between interaction and social order, and so instead prefers the term 'polite behaviour' as an alternative to 'face work' since for her, it captures something about the moral order (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003: 1465).

Despite these criticisms, Brown and Levinson's work still provides a useful frame of reference for the exploration of identity and relationship management in interaction. Although the notion of an intrinsically face threatening act is open to debate, the idea that certain types of conversational move have the *potential* to threaten face provides an interesting starting point for analysis. By identifying potential FTAs and examining how these FTAs are mitigated (whether this mitigation is described as politeness, or polite behaviour, or relational work, or face work) over the course of the interaction, it is possible to learn more about the *detail* of the way conversations are managed, and consequently examine the construction of identity, maintenance of relationships, and the preservation of the 'moral order'.

There is existing empirical evidence to suggest that the pressure put upon women to conform to the thin ideal may result in potentially face threatening situations in which they are required to use politeness strategies. Guendouzi observes that,

Given the societal pressures on women to conform to an acceptable physical ideal, talking about body-size and the need to diet can be seen as a discursive site that is likely to produce FTAs and speakers, therefore, may find it necessary to use conversational moves that

attend to their own positive face and rely on listener support. (Guendouzi, 2004: 1638).

So although topics surrounding food, weight and consumption are frequently raised in women's talk, they still have the potential to be damaging to face and require careful interactional management to minimise this face threat.

The topics of face and face work will be returned to in the methodology chapter (chapter 3), and again in chapter 4, where I will outline the social practices on the Weight Watchers message boards which are of particular interest to the analysis, and will discuss the relevance of the concept of face in the online context. As the next chapter will explain, the thesis will investigate the *self-surveillance* practices of the group members, particularly with regard to the management of accountability and identity, and the formation of group solidarity. Goffman's concepts of face and face work are therefore useful analytical tools when exploring how these identities are managed interactionally.

Women's talk appears to be a key place in which gendered behavioural norms are reinforced and reproduced, and the commercial weight loss group is a space where the practices of body modification and self surveillance are particularly foregrounded. Therefore, the final section of this chapter will provide a brief summary of existing studies which have attempted to explore the commercial weight loss experience, and will locate my own research in this body of work.

### **1.12 Researching the commercial weight loss group**

Much of the literature which investigates dieting and weight loss makes use of data from interviews (e.g. Hesse-Biber, 1996; Tyler and Abbott, 1998; Chapman, 1999), focus groups (e.g. Germov and Williams, 1996; 1999), or the analysis of cultural artefacts such as adverts, magazines and weight loss materials (e.g. Bordo, 2003) in order to explore issues surrounding weight management. While all of these studies provide fascinating and illuminating insights into the cultural context of the experience of dieting, and/or of women's own accounts of their experiences, I intend to explore the phenomenon in one specific context where dieting practices occur, the commercial weight loss organisation. Given the huge popularity of groups like Weight Watchers and Slimming World, there have been surprisingly few ethnographic studies of women's experiences of dieting in a commercial weight loss context, and none have investigated the commercial regime in an *online* context. In this section I will provide a brief

overview of ethnographic studies of weight loss in 'real life' commercial groups. However, this review is not exhaustive, and other studies will be discussed later in the thesis at points where they are relevant.

An early study of the supportive nature of commercial weight loss organisations was conducted by Allon (1975). She used a combination of participant observation and open-ended interviews over a period of four years in order to learn more about the experiences of members of such groups, and concluded that, 'weight loss was not the main goal nor the main behaviour which occurred in many diet groups' (Allon, 1975: 68). Allon observed that although the 'intended and formal' purpose of the groups was to aid the weight loss of their members, they also performed an 'unintended and informal' function, providing a space for social interaction between members. While commercial weight loss groups today advertise such peer support as one of the benefits of joining the organisation, it appears that at the time of the study this was not the case. Her findings show that weight loss groups do not only provide practical support, in terms of information and advice, they also provide emotional support and a 'sympathetic ear'.

Allon's work raises some interesting points about the *social* nature of the commercial weight loss organisation. The Weight Watchers regime is based on the notion that weight loss is more effective when carried out as a group activity, rather than on an individual basis, and the ritual of weekly weigh ins and meetings (as well as the very existence of an online Weight Watchers message board) suggest that interaction with fellow dieters is a significant part of the weight loss experience. However, although Allon attended the group as a member for some time, her analysis concentrates mainly on the themes raised in the *interviews* that she conducted. Therefore, although she is concerned with the collective nature of the weight loss experience, she does not analyse members' interactions with one another, instead she analyses them *talking about* these interactions. In my own analysis I intend to explore the way in which this group support manifests *within* the exchanges themselves, which will hopefully provide a unique insight into the social function of the commercial weight loss group.

Martin's (2002) work is notable, because it is a study of the commercial weight loss environment conducted by a male researcher. As already discussed, the membership of these groups is overwhelmingly female, and work which explores the experience and the significance of dieting behaviour tends to come from a female perspective. Martin approaches the commercial weight loss context from an organisational perspective, investigating how Weight

Watchers (along with another two organisations, Overeaters Anonymous, and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) accomplish 'frame alignment' with their members in relation to participation, appearance, and food. Martin studied the organisational materials made available to him, attended group meetings, and conducted interviews with group members, and observes that the narratives of the Weight Watchers members are framed in the vocabulary of the organisation. His findings show that in their narratives, 'members rationally manage the body, food, emotions, and social relationships, avoiding further stigmatization by conforming with cultural appearance norms' (Martin, 2002: 200). Martin's work will be discussed further in chapter 4.

Stinson (2001) conducted a two year ethnographic study of the experience of commercial weight loss group members, attending a group as both a member and a researcher for this time period. In her dual role, Stinson used participant observation methods to observe at first hand the way in which meetings were conducted and the themes which emerged from the interactions within the meetings. Although she does not name the organisation itself, her descriptions of the group meetings and the eating plan the members followed are very similar to those of the Weight Watchers organisation. By paying particular attention to the interactions which occurred between the group members and the group leader, and the way they articulated the experience of being a member of a weight loss organisation, Stinson explored the different ways in which women talk about their bodies and the process of dieting.

While observing the language used by the group members and leaders Stinson identified five different 'concepts of weight loss', or repertoires that individuals draw upon to describe and make sense of their weight loss experiences - self-help, weight loss as work, religion, addiction, and feminism. These themes can be observed to varying degrees in my own data, and Stinson's findings will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, and throughout the empirical chapters. She explains that these five concepts act as resources that the group members can draw upon, and 'provide a common language that members can use to communicate to themselves and to each other what it means to be a woman trying to lose weight' (Stinson, 2001: 50).

Although Stinson offers a detailed account of her own experiences of attending commercial weight loss groups as a member, and offers a valuable insight into the phenomenon of dieting, the author herself identifies potential limitations of the methodology she uses. Her role as an active participant in the meetings meant that when observing it was not possible to record

events in any detail. She relied heavily upon her memory of what occurred during the meeting, along with brief notes made while she was there. As a result, she discusses the concepts that she identifies within the interactions in quite general terms, using brief quotes and examples to illustrate her points. The nature of her data however, means that she is not able to subject the interactions to more rigorous analysis.

Heyes (2006, 2007) attended Weight Watchers meetings for a period of ten months, and through a combination of participant observation and analysis of organisational materials she explored the experience of being a group member. The next chapter (chapter 2) will draw on the work of Michel Foucault on disciplinary technologies to explore the phenomenon of self-surveillance in more detail, and Heyes' work makes an explicit link between Foucault's work and the experience of dieting. Her analysis is particularly concerned with the *appeal* of the process of body modification, and the promise of transformation held by the commercial weight loss regime, and will be discussed in more depth in chapter 2.

More recently, work by Mycroft (2004, 2008) has analysed the exchanges which take place at the 'weigh in' stage of the commercial weight loss meeting, and this study is notable due to its emphasis on the detailed analysis of naturally occurring 'talk-in-interaction'. While Heyes, Allon, Stinson and Martin all conducted their analysis from a perspective as a participant observer, Mycroft was not a member of the groups that she observed. By video recording the interactions which took place during the weekly 'weigh in', she was able to subject the exchanges to rigorous micro-level analysis (using a combination of conversation analysis, discursive psychology and membership categorisation analysis) in order to explore the organisation of weight management practices within interaction. The weekly weigh in plays an important role in the weight loss experience, as it is an opportunity for group members to monitor their progress and to establish whether their week's weight loss efforts have been successful. The study pays particular attention to the delivery of the news of success or failure by the group leader, and the way in which this news is responded to by the dieter. Like Stinson, Mycroft observes that the concept of *control* is one which is portrayed as extremely important to successful weight loss, and that group members often 'account for' any failure to lose weight.

Mycroft's work provides a revealing insight into the moral discourse surrounding food, the process of the weigh in, and the role played by the group leader in the processes of advice-giving and the moral classification of consumption. However, as the exchanges analysed take

place in one to one conversations between the group leader and individual group members, they scrutinise the leader-dieter dynamic but do not reveal anything about the relationship *between the group members* themselves. As the social nature of the commercial weight loss group is cited by Allon (1975) as one of the main reasons to attend such groups, the interaction between group members is a phenomenon worthy of study in its own right. In my own analysis I therefore hope to find out whether this moral discourse emerges from interactions which take place without the presence of a 'professional' group leader, who represents the commercial weight loss organisation.

### **1.13 Summary**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the cultural context in which the Weight Watchers message board interactions take place, and has explored the significance of language and interaction in the construction of a gendered identity. Dieting itself is a gendered activity - women are more likely than men to be judged according to their appearance, *and* they are expected to conform to increasingly stringent appearance norms. There is evidence to suggest that women demonstrate an awareness of the unrealistic nature of these norms, which means that there is the potential for them to resist them. However, the social costs of failing to conform to 'acceptable' standards of 'femininity' are high, and the prevalence of dieting among women suggests that this resistance is not so easy. For many women the processes of self-surveillance, restraint and recording consumption are familiar ones. Such disciplinary behaviours are particularly significant in the context of the commercial weight loss organisation, as the eating regime that members follow requires them to micro-manage their consumption, scrutinising their food intake, and the chapter has described research to date which has studied the commercial weight loss context. The act of confession, and its management within the exchanges on the message boards will be a key theme in the later analytical chapters, and this will be explored in chapter 2. The socio-cultural significance of confession and its role in these disciplinary practices will also be considered in more detail, along with a discussion of the discourses of morality and desire which permeate talk about food and weight. Chapter 2 will also consider in more detail Foucault's work on technologies of the self, which may help to explain more adequately the appeal that the commercial weight loss group has for members, even in the face of poor results, or even several failed weight loss attempts.

## Chapter 2

# Surveillance, Confession and the Commercial Weight Loss Group

*just remember to count the points  
and you'll be fine*

CHUCKYEGG24

### 2.1 Introduction

The thesis so far has outlined the societal norms relating to women's behaviour and appearance, and the role that dieting plays in the pursuit of the feminine ideal. While men also have demands made upon them with regards to portraying 'authentic masculinity' (e.g. Cameron, 1998b; Benwell, 2003), the discussion in the previous chapter shows that fundamental differences between what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour ensure that ultimately women remain subordinate to men. Normative femininity requires women to monitor and modify their appearance, restricting their consumption and limiting their actions, and the vigilance this requires consumes valuable time and energy.

The following chapter will draw on the work of Michel Foucault, and subsequent feminist appropriations of this work, to explain the significance of surveillance, and the link between the micro-practices of confession and wider issues of power. The intersection between food, morality and health will also be considered, and the discussion will explore how the discourse of self-care is appropriated by the commercial weight loss industry.

### 2.2 Femininity and surveillance

'Dominant culture constructs the feminine body as an object to be watched' (McKinley, 1999: 99), and dieting is one of a number of ways in which women work on changing their appearance in order to become more socially acceptable. However, it is one of the more time-consuming 'feminine' activities, as becoming a dieter involves constant, often lifelong, commitment. Dieting women must pay constant attention to the food they consume, they must monitor their intake, making decisions about what they should and should not eat. In the context of the commercial weight loss organisation, this attention to detail becomes even

more intense, as food is not simply rationed by means of portion control, or eating 'good' foods rather than 'bad'. Instead, as chapter 3 will explain in more detail, in the Weight Watchers regime every food is allocated a numerical point value, and each member is permitted to consume a set number of points per day. A Weight Watchers member is taught to scrutinise every minute detail of her consumption, comparing the point value of similar foods, measuring portion sizes, calculating whether a particular snack can be incorporated into her eating plan, or whether an extra biscuit will cause her to exceed her point allowance. Davies notes that weight control discourse is best understood as a form of social control, which 'serves to regulate bodies – especially women's bodies – by a transformation of bodies considered 'overweight', and therefore out of control, undisciplined, deviant, and dangerously unhealthy' (Davies, 1998: 142).

The rigorous restriction and disciplinary practices to which dieters subject themselves result in the production of what Michel Foucault refers to as '*docile bodies*' – a docile body 'may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault, 1979: 134). Foucault's work on modern forms of social control, in particular his discussion of disciplinary practices in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison* (1979) has been adopted by several feminist authors as a framework in which to begin to understand the experience of womanhood (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003). In Foucault's work the body becomes a site in which *power* is wielded, and by imposing punishment based upon discipline (as opposed to violence) upon the body, these bodies become compliant and 'docile'. In the prison environment (as in many other institutions), inmates are subject to severe restrictions upon the space they are allowed to occupy, and the way in which they are able to use their time. Bartky notes that, 'the production of 'docile bodies' requires that an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity, not just their result; this 'micro-physics of power' fragments and partitions the body's time, its space, and its movements' (Bartky, 1990: 63). The parallels with the experience of the dieter (and women more generally) are clear – not only are demands made upon women with regard to their *physical* appearance, but also their attempts to conform to the norms of femininity ensure that a significant amount of women's *time* is occupied in pursuit of these physical ideals. While the inmate in the prison is required to keep to a strict timetable of activities, the dieting woman must restrict her impulse to consume, and must engage in a series of rituals of weighing, measuring and monitoring in order to ensure that she remains on track. Dieting is therefore a *disciplinary* practice, and as this chapter will discuss the regulatory practices that women are subject to, both by themselves and others, work to maintain the *moral order*.

As Bartky observes, 'control this rigid and precise cannot be maintained without a minute and relentless surveillance' (Bartky, 1990: 64), and women's participation in their own surveillance can be explained by Foucault's discussion of disciplining power, in which he introduces the concept of the 'panopticon' (Foucault, 1979: 195-228). The term 'panopticon' refers to Jeremy Bentham's circular prison design, in which inmates are constantly visible to those guarding them. This layout forces inmates to assume that they are under surveillance at all times, regardless of whether guards are actually watching them or not. This then results in 'self policing' behaviour by inmates, without the need for constant supervision by guards. Foucault explains the effectiveness of such an arrangement in controlling the behaviour of inmates:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmates a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.

(Foucault, 1979: 201).

In a series of focus groups conducted with Australian women Germov and Williams (1999) observed that participants reported surveillance behaviours, and use the panopticon metaphor to explain this surveillance, referring more specifically to the 'body panopticon' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 126-127). The focus group data revealed that as well as being subject to the 'male gaze', women themselves also play a significant role in this constant scrutiny of the body. Furthermore, a series of focus groups they conducted with Australian women revealed that not only do women subject *themselves* to continuous self-surveillance, but they also watch and monitor *other* women, subjecting one another to judgement and criticism. Such constant vigilance ensures that they, and others, conform to (or at least make an effort to try to adhere to) societal body norms. The authors suggest that women's monitoring behaviour is a phenomenon which is worthy of further study, as this surveillance of self and others plays a central role in the reinforcement and perpetuation of societal gender norms. It seems therefore that the interactions *between* women may be one place where these surveillance practices can be observed, and this thesis intends to explore the way these practices manifest in the exchanges of an all-female group.

Heyes (2006) notes that in the context of the commercial weight loss organisation even the *name* 'Weight Watchers' is illustrative of the extent of the surveillance that members subject themselves to. She believes that the *voluntary* nature of the organisation is particularly significant: 'As willing participants in a disciplinary technology, dieters measure and scrutinize themselves far more precisely and conscientiously than those who must be educated into more reluctant self-monitoring behaviours. The organised diet program is thus a particularly extreme version of panoptic culture' (Heyes, 2006: 134).

The way in which this power operates is subtle. Women are not necessarily told directly that their bodies are too large or unruly, and they are not physically forced to diet or exercise. Each individual is in control of her own actions, and is free to do as she chooses, but, 'even when individuals think that they are most free, they are in fact in the grip of an insidious power which operates not through direct forms of repression but through less visible strategies of 'normalization' (McNay, 1994: 5). Through continuous exposure to messages about what is considered to be 'feminine', women are made aware of how society *expects* them to behave. Although no physical coercion is involved, failure to conform to the norms of femininity can have serious consequences. As chapter 1 outlined, overweight bodies, and particularly overweight *female* bodies are judged negatively, and individuals who feel that they do not fit with societal ideas of what is 'acceptable' may suffer from low self esteem as a consequence. Like the inmates in the panopticon, women subject themselves and their own behaviour to constant monitoring in order to ensure that they, and their bodies, remain morally acceptable. Any deviations from these norms must be accounted for, and this relates to the discussion in chapter 1 of Goffman's work on the maintenance of the 'moral order'. As the later analytical chapters will show, in their interactions with others women display themselves as morally accountable to prevailing norms.

The body itself then becomes a site on which the norms of acceptable behaviour and appearance are displayed. Rather than applying external force to make women limit their consumption, the power of these societal appearance norms lies in women's *internalisation* of them, which results in them monitoring and imposing restrictions upon *themselves*. Their bodies then reflect the societal expectations made of these individuals. As Butler notes, 'the strategy has been not to enforce a repression of their desires, but to compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence, style and necessity ... In effect, the law is at

once fully manifest and fully latent, for it never appears as external to the bodies it subjects and subjectivates' (Butler, 1990: 135).

Despite the insight offered by Foucault into the role that power plays in the production of 'docile bodies', his work does not deal specifically with *female* bodies. Foucault's discussion of the 'body' refers to both men and women, and the gender neutrality of his writing has been criticised by some, as '... [Foucault's] discussions gloss over the gender configurations of power. As feminists have shown, power has long been masculinist, and a primary target of masculinist power has been the subjugation of women, most especially through their bodies.' (Diamond and Quinby, 1988: xv). Foucault's work therefore fails to directly address the gendered power relations inherent in society, and Bartky argues that, 'to overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed' (Bartky, 1990: 65). Yet although Foucault does not deal specifically with the experience of women, several of the concepts introduced in his work have been taken up by feminist researchers, and have proved invaluable in exploring the way in which power is enacted on women's bodies.

### **2.3 Femininity, discourse and subjectivity**

Chapter 1 (section 1.8) discussed the idea that rather than being a fixed, ascribed category, gender is socially constructed within interaction. Therefore, when discussing 'femininity' it must be remembered that there is no such thing as *one definitive* feminine subjectivity, as femininity is 'a negotiable category which takes its shape as a particular type of identity within contrasting discourses' (Wetherell, 1995: 141). Women's gendered identities and sense of self are constituted within these different discourses, which each have their 'own structure of rights, obligations and possibilities for action, and each carrying identity and power implications' (Burr, 2003: 117). Therefore, what constitutes 'femininity' can mean different things, at different times, to different people, in different situations. The next section (section 2.4) will outline some of the *other* social categories (age, class and ethnicity) which can also have an impact on, and intersect with, women's lived experiences.

Women's subjectivities can therefore be understood as a complex and dynamic interplay between a number of different subject positions (Malson, 1998: 28). These subject positions are constantly changing, and some are more temporary than others, so 'who we are is constantly in flux, always dependent upon the changing flow of positions with negotiate within

social interaction' (Burr, 2003: 120). These subject positions may also contradict one another, and can be occupied or rejected to varying degrees by the same individual at different times. These complexities of meaning, and the contradictory nature of subjectivity means that, 'the processes of constructing and negotiating our own identities will therefore often be ridden with conflict, as we struggle to claim or resist the images available to us through discourse' (ibid: 110). This complexity must be taken into account when considering the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7, as the categorisations under discussion, such as 'femininity', or 'overweight' are fluid concepts which can be ambiguous, inconsistent and difficult to pin down. Therefore, the analysis will pay particular attention to what these women make relevant in their own accounts and interactions, and the subject positions they take on in this context.

Weedon (1997) outlines the social significance of subjective experience with regard to gendered power relations, and the possibilities for resisting these power mechanisms, as 'the ways in which people make sense of their lives is a necessary starting point for understanding how power relations structure society' (Weedon, 1997: 8). Widdicombe (1995) raises the importance of studying *everyday talk* as a means of understanding this subjectivity and its relationship to power and resistance. She favours an ethnomethodological approach, and suggests that, 'in order to understand identity and subjectivity, we need first to identify the relevant discourses and the positions they make available, and then examine the power relations that are facilitated, the historical and structural conditions giving rise to particular discourses and their ideological effects' (Widdicombe, 1995: 107). As chapter 3 will explain in more detail, by grounding the analysis in naturally-occurring interaction, this thesis aims to make the link between the discourses in women's 'mundane' day to day exchanges and the production of ideal and 'authentic' forms of feminine subjectivity, and the analysis will explore the way in which the subject positions available to the users of the message boards are taken up or resisted.

Although there are opportunities for negotiating identity, and an individual can choose to resist a particular subject position, this does not mean that there will be no consequences for doing so. There is an emotional dimension that goes along with these gendered practices, as an individual's sense of self comes from the subject positions they take up, and as a result 'we have an emotional commitment to and investment in our subject positions which goes beyond mere rule following' (Burr, 2003: 124). Similarly, Hollway (2001) observes that individuals are invested in occupying certain positions in discourses, and 'there will be some satisfaction or pay-off or reward for that person' (Hollway, 2001: 278). This helps to explain why women may

be motivated to 'do being feminine', as doing so can have positive benefits, while failure to conform to 'authentic' forms of subjectivity may have emotional consequences, and can result in social sanctions. The discussion in chapter 3 will describe how the ethnomethodological approach employed is particularly useful in: a) understanding individuals' accountability to the 'moral order' (as introduced in chapter 1) that subjectivity produces, and b) locating the analysis of the fluidity of subjectivity within talk-in-interaction.

#### 2.4 Gender, age, class and ethnicity

As the previous section outlines, women's subjectivities are multiple, shifting and potentially contradictory. Women's individual *experiences* of the normalising power of gender norms may vary, yet Gimlin (2008) notes that women's lives are often theorised from a perspective which assumes a homogenous version of 'womanhood'. Other social categories, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and age are also key to an individual's identity as a woman, and Weedon (1987) raises the problem of the idea of 'essential womanhood', suggesting that, 'it could only surface in a pure form outside of the structures of patriarchy ... the structures of patriarchy are not independent of other forms of power – racism, class and heterosexism – which are not reducible to each other' (Weedon, 1997: 10). So as Skeggs notes, 'being, becoming, practising, and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, "races", ages and nations' (Skeggs, 2001:297).

Ethnicity is one significant factor which intersects with gender. However, much of the feminist work on the subject of body image addresses the issue from a white perspective, and has been criticised for failing to take into account the experiences of non-white women (e.g. Buchanan, 1993). There is evidence that different ethnic groups have different attitudes towards bodies and weight, and studies have shown that American and British women of African-Caribbean and Asian descent are less likely than white women to express body dissatisfaction (see Grogan, 1999 for a full review).

In her study of body talk among adolescent girls, Nichter (2000) observes that African-American girls had a 'more fluid, flexible image of beauty', which incorporated style and presentation, as opposed to the 'more static image of beauty as bodily perfection found in white culture' (Nichter, 2000: 178). The literature suggests that as well as reflecting cultural variations in what constitutes 'beauty', these differences in attitude and body esteem may be partly due to the fact that these women's bodies *already* fail to conform to the archetypal

young, slim and, importantly, *white* beauty 'ideal'. This view is supported by Buchanan (1993), who suggests that, 'weight preoccupation is not a central concern for many Black women, but weight is one among many factors that preclude Black women from attaining "beauty" according to the cultural archetype' (Buchanan, 1993: 37).

Like ethnicity, age is a factor which has important implications for women's gendered identities. Older women too may find that their bodies do not conform to dominant standards of youthful beauty, yet there is little evidence that women become *less* satisfied with their bodies as they get older (Grogan, 1999: 130). In fact, a study conducted by Gimlin (2008), which explored women's changing experience of weight management over the lifespan, suggests that the opposite may in fact be true. In interviews with older members of a commercial weight loss group, she found that, 'notions about the physical changes of ageing did not so much diminish older respondents' desire to lose weight as enable them to forgive their departures from normative bodily control and their deviation from (what they saw as) the more exacting appearance standards of youth' (Gimlin, 2008: 188). (Nevertheless, despite these variations, as the women in this study had joined a group with the intention of attempting to lose weight, and had expressed their *desire* to do so, they were certainly not *resisting* these norms.) Similarly, Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson (1999) found that although older women still aspired to be slim, and described concerns about their failure to conform to ideals of physical beauty, they also actively challenged these ideals, resisting the pressure to lose weight. Although they still described themselves as 'overweight', they defined old age as a time when they could 'be free to relax the rules' around food, and constructed weight gain as part of the 'physical decline and deterioration' of old age.

Interestingly, Grogan (1999: 132) suggests the possibility that age related variations in body satisfaction and dieting behaviours may in fact be due in part to the cultural reference points of women of different ages. She points out that older women, who have been exposed to the curvier 'ideals' of the 1950s, may have a different idea of what 'ideal femininity' looks like.

Another social category which shapes women's experiences and identities is socio-economic status. Unlike age and ethnicity, this is not necessarily something which is immediately visible, but as chapter 1 discussed, there has historically been a clear link between social class and physical appearance. In times where food is widely available excess weight is no longer considered to be a sign of prestige, and instead wealth is signified by slenderness in both sexes, but particularly in women. Skeggs (1997) describes how since the end of the nineteenth

century femininity has been an inherently classed sign, a form of 'respectability' which is possessed by upper- and middle-class women, but which 'was never a given' for working-class women. While middle- and upper-class women's bodies were delicate, frail and physically weak, the jobs done by working-class women required them to be robust and strong, qualities which are associated with masculinity. Although class distinctions are less easily identifiable today than they were over a century ago (see Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001 for a discussion of the modern relevance of the categories 'upper-class', 'middle-class' and 'working-class'), the idea that femininity is more readily available to women of a higher socio-economic status still appears to be valid.

LeBesco (2007) observes a link between women's body size and social class, and attributes this in part to changes in the forms of employment and consumption which signify class identity. A move away from manual labour to more sedentary jobs, and the ready availability of cheap junk food, meant that working-class bodies became defined by their corpulence, and she describes fatness as 'a primary mode of working-class rhetoric today' (LeBesco, 2007: 250). She also notes that media representations of the 'non-elite' working class frequently portray them as overweight, lazy, and out of control, and cites the examples of Roseanne Barr and Anna-Nicole Smith as women whose fleshy bodies acted as a constant reminder of their working-class backgrounds, no matter how upwardly mobile they became. LeBesco argues that the negative connotations and shame associated with being overweight, particularly for women, along with the equation of weight with working-class identity, 'serve to discipline women perceived as out of control' (ibid: 251).

Skeggs (1997) agrees that these class distinctions still stand - working-class bodies are defined as unruly and excessive, and working-class women may be less able, or less inclined, to conform to stereotypical feminine physical ideals. She describes femininity as something which working-class women 'try on', but that is 'designed for someone with a different bodily shape' (both metaphorically and literally) something that they can 'do' to acquire cultural capital, without it being something that they *are* (Skeggs, 1997: 100-116). The activity of 'crafting' the body to be more aesthetically pleasing requires time, effort and money. Only those who have the means to be able to devote resources towards the pursuit of thinness (in the form of gym membership, the 'right' foods, or plastic surgery) will be able to achieve the cultural ideal (Fallon, 1990, cited in Grogan, 1999). A class divide also exists in the incidence of clinical eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Although they do cross class

boundaries, conditions relating to disordered eating are historically most commonly associated with young, white, middle-class women (Wolf, 1990).

However, research suggests that class distinctions relating to body size may not be so clear cut. Grogan suggests that, 'the democracy of vision produced by the popular media ... has produced shared body shape ideals that span class divides' (Grogan, 1999: 138). Likewise, it seems that concerns relating to body size may be becoming more prevalent among ethnic minority women (see Hesse-Biber, 1996; Bordo, 2003; Roberts, Cash, Feingold and Johnson, 2006, among others), which suggests a gradual homogenisation of cultural norms around appearance and weight.

Although feminine appearance norms affect all women, there may be variations in the extent to which different groups of women feel compelled to attempt to comply with them. However, despite the relevance of the factors discussed in understanding women's subjectivities and experiences, demographic information about the users of the Weight Watchers message boards was not available when conducting the analysis. The organisation does not make their membership information freely available, so it is not possible to know the ethnicity, age or social class of the members of the organisation, or of the women on the boards. The members of the weekly 'real life' meetings I attended were all white, and although this could simply have been a reflection of the areas in which they were held, women of ethnic minority groups are likely to be underrepresented in the Weight Watchers membership. The women were predominantly middle-aged, although their ages ranged from late teens to late sixties, and the organisation prohibits membership under the age of ten. Their socioeconomic class was less easy to determine, and as Mills (2003) notes, class 'is not an easy variable to analyse, since even now it is difficult to assign women to a class position easily' (Mills, 2003: 182-183), but their payment of a £4.95 weekly membership fee implies a certain level of disposable income. In the absence of definite information about the message board users it is impossible to know these details, and these factors are not explicitly raised or made relevant by the women in their interactions, but it is important to remember that this group does not by any means represent *all* British women and their variety of experiences, and the analysis should be considered in these terms.

## 2.5 Gender norms and women's everyday behaviour

Section 2.2 discussed the significance of surveillance practices in the maintenance of gendered power relations, and the chapter will now consider how these practices emerge in women's day to day lives. McNay suggests that, 'if power generates a multiplicity of effects, then it is only possible to discern these effects by analysing power from below, at its most precise points of operation - a '*microphysics*' of power. The human body is the most specific point at which the microstrategies of power can be observed' (McNay, 1994: 91). By observing the *micro level* behaviours of women, the way in which they control their actions in order to conform to norms of femininity, it is possible to learn more about the way this normalising power works.

In order to learn more about women's self-surveillance practices Spitzack (1990) conducted a series of interviews with fifty women over a period of five years, in order to 'see how everyday women encounter and live the discourses of weight loss and health' (Spitzack, 1990: 5). Although Spitzack's work does not observe women's actual *practices*, she explores the way that women articulate their experiences of self-surveillance, and her research makes some valuable observations about the way these practices manifest in women's talk. The interviews took an 'open-ended topical' format, covering three main topics – cultural standards for female appearance, body alteration activities, and the influence of others on body perception. Spitzack identified themes which emerged during the interviews, paying particular attention to language choices, metaphors and imagery used by participants. The narrative structure which participants used while describing their experiences was also analysed. The study also included an analysis of literature produced by the weight loss industry, including dieting manuals, exercise guides, and advertising for diets and low-calorie foods.

Analysis of the dieting literature, and of women's contributions to the interviews, revealed that, 'women define their bodies as excessive, deviant, untrustworthy, and in need of surveillance and control' (ibid: 58). Spitzack observed that women internalised societal norms of feminine behaviour, and monitored themselves constantly. She concludes that the process of self-regulation is central to women's experiences of dieting, and notes that this regulation takes place through '*confession of excess*', where women confess their failure to conform to internalised behavioural norms of restraint and bodily monitoring. When women behave in a way that could be considered to be 'unfeminine', either by breaking a diet, or by otherwise failing to keep their appetites in check, they *admit* to doing so, thereby signalling awareness both of gendered norms and their own transgression of them. Thus, confession appears to be

one way in which the panoptic nature of dieting manifests in interactions. By 'confessing excess', women are not only informing others that they have committed an act which fails to conform to the norms of feminine behaviour, but also that they are subjecting themselves to surveillance and do not consider their behaviour to be acceptable. Confession therefore plays an important role in the perpetuation of prevailing norms. While Spitzack's observations of the role of confession are based on interview data, in my own analysis I will explore the occurrence and management of confession in *naturally occurring* interactions. By analysing in detail the way in which such confessions operate at the (micro) level of interaction, it will therefore be possible to gain a greater understanding of one of the ways in which normalising power is maintained. As confession has been shown to play an important role in the maintenance of gendered power relations, the following section will consider the wider social significance of the phenomenon of confession, and its role in the commercial weight loss context.

## 2.6 Confession, religion and Weight Watchers

The act of confession can be observed throughout public and private life, in situations as diverse as the courtroom, journal writing, counselling sessions, or television talk shows. As Foucault observes,

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.

(Foucault, 1978: 59)

The formal act of confession is traditionally associated with organised religion - the confession of sins is one of the cornerstones of the Roman Catholic faith, and parallels can be drawn between religion and dieting practices. Indeed, Barthes describes the quasi-religious nature of dieting, suggesting that, 'going on a diet has all the characteristics of a conversion. With all the same problems of lapsing, and then returning to the conversion. With certain books that are like gospels' (Barthes, 1985: 33). While Christianity follows the teachings of the Bible, Weight Watchers has its own doctrine, its own set of rules to be followed and principles to be embraced. Foucault states that Christianity is what he describes as a 'salvation religion', one which 'imposed a set of conditions and rules of behaviour for a certain transformation of the

self' (Foucault, 1988: 40). Similarly, the Weight Watchers regime holds the promise of transformation, salvation from the identity (and body) of an overweight, 'bad woman'. The organisation posits that all that is required in order to achieve this change is to accept and to follow the guidelines and rules imposed by Weight Watchers. As Foucault points out,

The duty to accept a set of obligations, to hold certain books as permanent truth, to accept authoritarian decisions in matters of truth, not only to believe certain things but to show that one believes, and to accept institutional authority are all characteristic of Christianity.

(ibid: 40)

This is also the case for commercial weight loss group members, who are expected to take on board the dietary guidelines provided by the organisation, and to show their commitment to the regime. Members have several opportunities to demonstrate this commitment, by following the eating plan, attending regular group meetings, purchasing branded goods, and visiting the organisation's website. The interactions on the Weight Watchers message boards, which will be the subject of the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7, are one space in which this commitment is demonstrated.

Stinson observes that although dieting is not a formal religion, religious terminology permeates the interactions between Weight Watchers members, noting that, 'religious references, some more direct than others, occur frequently as group members discuss the challenges of losing weight. Temptation, sacrifice, and guilt are common themes. Though rarely mentioned explicitly, notions of sin lie close to the surface as food and eating are dichotomized into good and bad. Because temptation is omnipresent, the threat of falling from grace is constant' (Stinson, 2001: 121). The moral classification of food is central to the occurrence of confession on the message boards, as this informs what types of consumption are considered to be acceptable, and which are regarded to be transgressions, and therefore worthy of confession. Stinson also suggests that eventually succumbing to temptation is inevitable, which means that, 'consequently, guilt, confession, and forgiveness are important dynamics underlying much of what occurs in the group's discussion' (Stinson, 2001: 123). However, Stinson observed that only *selected* elements of religion are actually incorporated into the way members talk about their dieting experience, as, 'although the group emphasizes notions of temptation, sacrifice, guilt and surveillance, it simultaneously downplays ritual, community and emotion' (ibid: 53).

Spitzack's (1990) discussion of the importance of confession among dieting women also notes that several religious concepts are incorporated into women's talk on weight, dieting and food. As well as confession, themes such as guilt, temptation, sin and salvation frequently occur. She suggests that by confessing excess, women are acknowledging behavioural norms, as, 'a recounting of wrongs ... assumes knowledge of correct or morally acceptable thoughts and behaviours' (Spitzack, 1990: 59). So by monitoring themselves, and confessing failure, women are again perpetuating the societal appearance and behaviour norms which have the power to oppress them. Similarly, in focus groups conducted with dieting women, Germov and Williams found that guilt was a common theme in discussions about dieting. They note that, 'this was either due to succumbing to the temptation to eat nondiet foods, or the failure to lose weight and achieve the ideal body shape' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 122). Moral themes permeate talk about food and the body, this will be explored in the analytical chapters and the moral framework around food and its consumption will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## **2.7 Food, morality and desire**

Within our day to day interactions the discourse of morality is pervasive. As Bergmann observes, it is 'omnipresent in everyday life; it is so deeply intertwined with everyday discourse that the interlocutors hardly ever recognize their doings as moral business' (Bergmann, 1998: 281). This moral discourse can be clearly observed throughout talk about weight and dieting. The moral judgements ascribed to bodies of different sizes have already been discussed in chapter 1, and these evaluations are also routinely applied to food (and those consuming it). Just as the fleshy, 'overweight' body is seen to be excessive, immoral and out of control, high calorie foods like chocolate and cakes are considered to be indulgent, sinful and transgressive. The previous chapter has outlined the frequency of dieting talk in all-female groups, and moral talk of this kind permeates the interactions of commercial weight loss group members (as observed by Stinson, 2001; Mycroft, 2008, among others).

Moral meaning has been attached to appetite and consumption throughout history (Coveney, 2006). While the precise meaning ascribed to food has changed according to the cultural norms of the time, restraint and denial have consistently been seen to be 'holy', while gluttony is 'sinful'. Prose (2003) notes that although gluttony has 'ceased to be a spiritual transgression', and is no longer seen to be a 'crime against God' which will lead to banishment

to hell, the current cultural preoccupations with dieting, obesity, food and nutrition are clear (Prose, 2003: 4).

Control of the diet is seen to be a strategy to resist the 'temptations of the flesh' (Turner, 1982: 26), and Meadow and Weiss (1992) observe the sexualisation of women's experiences of food. The interrelationship between food, sin and sexuality is also noted by Bordo, whose analysis of the portrayal of consumption in advertising, literature and film reveals that, 'when women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite' (Bordo, 2003: 110). Desire is something which women are expected to control, and they must instead try to achieve a 'cool' relationship to food. The woman who develops this casual relationship with food 'is not starving herself (an obsession, indicating the continuing power of food), but neither is she desperately and shamefully binging in some private corner' (Bordo, 2003: 100). However, the emotional power that food holds over women makes this type of nonchalance very difficult to achieve. As Bordo notes, women have a particular relationship with food, particularly those classed as 'comfort foods': 'Emotional heights, intensity, love and thrills: it is women who habitually seek such experiences from food and who are most likely to be overwhelmed by their relationship to food, to find it dangerous and frightening (especially rich, fattening, soothing food like icecream)' (Bordo, 2003: 108). The 'shameful' nature of women's consumption is appropriated by the advertising industry, who market food products in ways which 'encourage women to feel guilt and shame not only about their bodies but also about their appetites and their ability to control them' (Wilson and Blackhurst, 1999: 115). The construction of foods as shameful and tempting, and the tension between desire and prohibition can be observed in the way foods are marketed. In fact, a high street chocolate shop even produces a range of chocolates by the name of 'Eden', which explicitly acknowledges and plays on the common understanding of chocolate as 'sinful' and 'alluring', and uses images of Adam and Eve which immediately invoke moral themes of temptation and fall from grace (see appendix 1 for an example of the packaging). The empirical analysis in chapter 5 will show that chocolate is a food which is routinely constructed as 'bad' on the Weight Watchers message boards.

Stinson observes that the discussion of temptation is interesting in the context of a Weight Watchers group, as 'the simple choice that members face when tempted by imaginary food is to entirely abstain, or completely give in and overindulge. Any possibility of a middle ground is lost, which is particularly striking given that the organization preaches moderation' (Stinson,

2001: 128). As chapter 4 will discuss in more detail, it is possible to observe the moral classification of food on the message boards, despite the Weight Watchers claim that 'no food is forbidden'. While it should theoretically be possible to incorporate any type of food into the diet within moderation, group members appear to draw upon cultural resources surrounding the moral classification of food, and consider certain foods to be off-limits. This is also reflected in the marketing of Weight Watchers branded products - they produce lower point values of 'bad' foods, and promote them as a 'guilt free indulgence' (see appendix 1 for an example). These foods are portrayed as holding great power over women, and they are constructed as eliciting desire which makes the choice to consume them in moderation difficult, if not impossible. The moral classification of food, and the way in which women manage difficulties arising from the temptation this food provides will be addressed in the later empirical chapters.

The notion of temptation is a relevant one, and is bound up with cultural understandings of desire. In his discussion of the Christian church's treatment of sexuality, Foucault describes how desire itself became considered to be worthy of confession, '...shifting the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings - so difficult to perceive and formulate - of desire' (Foucault, 1978: 19-20). Similarly, not only are women expected to exercise restraint when it comes to the consumption of food, they are also not supposed to take pleasure from consumption of 'bad' foods, or to even possess the inclination to consume them. Women are expected to curb their appetites, both sexually and (perhaps to an even greater extent) when eating, and failure to do this is worthy of confession. As Foucault notes, 'an imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse.' (Foucault, 1978: 21). Therefore, it is not necessary for a woman to *eat* a 'bad' food to transgress, as even being *tempted* to do so is confessable.

Mycroft (2008) explored the moral construction of foods in the context of the 'weigh in' stage of the commercial weight loss group meeting, and found that both group members and group leaders 'constructed the availability of 'bad' food as *treats* for 'good' eating behaviour (including avoiding them), along with feelings of guilt and shame' (Mycroft, 2008: 1047). So 'bad' food is on one hand something which is 'naughty' and 'sinful', but is also used to reward 'good' behaviour. In this seemingly contradictory context, the notions of restraint and moderation become particularly important, as 'bad food is okay if it can be controlled' (ibid: 1047).

Themes of desire, temptation, sin and transgression therefore appear to be very important in understanding the experience of body transformation through weight management. Bergmann notes that, 'morality is constructed in and through social interaction, and the analysis of morality has to focus, accordingly, on the intricacies of everyday discourse' (Bergmann, 1998: 286). The later empirical chapters will therefore explore the moral framework surrounding food, and will analyse how members of the message boards offer accounts of their consumption in their everyday exchanges, constructing both foods and themselves in moral terms.

## 2.8 The promise of confession

The act of confession exposes an individual to a potential loss of face, as admitting to transgression exposes their behaviour as deviant and lacking self-control. However, my own data, along with that of previous studies of commercial weight loss groups, suggests that the practice of confession is common in the weight management context. The normative nature of practices of confession raises questions about the *function* that confession performs in this context, and so this section will consider what authors on confession have claimed about the *experience* of confessing transgression. Foucault suggest that confession, 'produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation' (Foucault, 1978: 62). Confession provides relief from the burden of the *guilt* experienced following a transgression, Stinson observes that in a Weight Watchers context, 'public confession is a useful and relatively easy way to relieve stress for individual members' (Stinson, 2001: 136). The cathartic nature of confession is also noted by Todd, whose discussion of confession in a therapeutic context concludes that, 'the patient unburdens himself of his secret and feels cleansed of all guilt and sin and is then able to feel restored and reconciled in community' (Todd, 1985: 46).

The redemptive qualities of confession are also important. In the context of the commercial weight loss group, the confession of a transgression offers an individual the opportunity to be rehabilitated back into the eating regime. Confession can act as a space in which the confessor can re-state her *commitment* to the regime, and express her intention to make amends for her transgression. In the Weight Watchers context, confessions can play a significant role in the maintenance of group norms, making group members aware of what is expected of them, but they also illustrate the importance of sticking with the regime, that one lapse does not mean

that all is lost. Transgressions are accepted (and perhaps expected), but it is important to be seen to get 'back on track'. As Gold and Weiner note, 'by voluntarily confessing and showing remorse, a transgressor can demonstrate that the codes of the group have been internalized and are still important ... A transgressor is not rejected when stepping over the line unless there is an expectation that this will remain the case, and it is inferred that the moral code of the group has been rejected' (Gold and Weiner, 2000: 299).

There is evidence to suggest that in the context of Weight Watchers *group meetings*, confession does indeed play an important role in reinforcing commitment to the ideals and values of the organisation. Stinson notes that, 'traditionally, it is through confession that sinners receive forgiveness... members of the weight loss group do not literally receive forgiveness for their sins. But nonetheless, a sort of forgiveness is experienced as members admit their transgressions to the group and simultaneously reaffirm their commitment to follow the rules in the future' (Stinson, 2001: 136). Confession is thus a vehicle for the reclamation of an identity as a 'good weight watcher' after committing a transgression. Spitzack (1990) suggests that even outside the context of a weight loss organisation, diet related confessions within everyday interactions between women act as a tool for rehabilitation. By confessing overeating or diet breaking, the confessor is able to be absolved of her sin, and re-establish her role as a 'good dieter' and a 'good woman'. Gold and Weiner observe that when a confession occurs, 'the moral character of the offender is recovered' (Gold and Weiner, 2000: 292), and describe confession as an effective way of altering the perceptions of others. By confessing consumption, a group member is able to wipe her slate clean, and reposition herself as a 'good weight watcher'. This can also have the effect of enhancing a shared common identity between group members. Stinson suggests that, 'public confession bonds the group together, as members reassert their commitment to group norms and thereby highlight and strengthen the moral boundaries surrounding the group' (Stinson, 1990: 59). Confession therefore plays an important role in the development of a group identity, and the creation of solidarity between the members of the group.

Another way that confession can be solidarity-forming in the Weight Watchers context is by creating (the impression of) *intimacy* between group members. By confessing a transgression a confessor exposes her weaknesses and lays herself open to criticism. Confession therefore implies the presence of *trust* between group members. Hymer suggests that, 'confession fulfils a spiritual hunger in us. It allows us to achieve intimacy with others and, thereby, to realize that we are no longer isolated and alone' (Hymer, 1996: 1). The intimacy that is created by

confession has emotional benefits to those involved, as, 'intimate relationships have the power to comfort us, making us feel secure in the confidant's emotional embrace' (ibid: 231). The act of confession is potentially threatening to face, but there are also potential benefits in terms of aligning with prevailing norms, the relief of guilt, and the relational work performed by the ritual of the confessional exchange.

## 2.9 Confession and power

Despite the potential benefits of confession, both on the individual confessor and on the group as a whole, Foucault argues that as a method for the production of truth, the act of confession is 'thoroughly imbued with relations of power'. The confessions in the context of the message boards play an important role in the self-monitoring behaviours of the women in the group, and similar confessional behaviours can be observed, particularly in women, throughout wider society. Confession is therefore central to the reinforcement and perpetuation of the thin ideal, as it, 'reestablishes the order of the dominant by extracting from women nonreciprocal and self-referential disclosures which, in the same move, reprimand women for stepping outside the parameters of femininity and endorse prevailing images of women' (Spitzack, 1990: 62). By confessing what they consider to be a transgression, group members are taking on board, accepting, and reaffirming the cultural norms of restraint and control to which women are expected to conform. Stinson also notes the role that confession plays in surveillance, which she describes as a 'critical tool for keeping members in line' (Stinson, 2001: 123). However, due to the immediate emotional benefits of confession, it is seen to be something which is freeing to the confessor, rather than oppressive. As Foucault explains, 'the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface' (Foucault, 1978: 60).

In the context of the commercial weight loss group, Stinson observes that, 'new members are socialised into the group and its procedures as they listen to members confess ... At the same time, other group members are reinforced in their beliefs that there are good and bad ways of eating' (ibid: 136). Confession therefore plays an important role in establishing and maintaining gendered norms regarding eating behaviour, and also makes new Weight Watchers members aware of these. Spitzack also notes the role that this type of confession plays in reinforcing and perpetuating the norms of behaviour expected from women in

general, saying that this 'underscores the power of normative bases of judgement, for implicit in the act of confession is a promise to realign thoughts and actions with predominant social values' (Spitzack, 1990: 60). In other words, the confession of consumption is one way in which the 'rules' about what is considered to be acceptable behaviour for women within society are established and reinforced. Stinson explains that, 'a recounting of wrongs, in other words, assumes knowledge of correct or morally acceptable thoughts or behaviours' (Stinson, 1990: 59).

## 2.10 Self knowledge and care of the self

As noted in chapter 1, the equation of weight with health has important implications for what is expected of each individual in what Foucault refers to as a 'neoliberal' society. The Weight Watchers regime draws on the discourses of self-care and self-actualisation, and can be thought of as a 'technology of the self'. Foucault argued that technologies of the self (which co-exist alongside the 'technologies of domination' discussed earlier in the chapter) 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (Foucault, 1988: 18).

As McLaren notes, 'care of the self included self-knowledge, but was also concerned with bodily practices.... Dietetics involves close attention to what one eats, how one eats, and how it affects one's body' (McLaren, 2002: 148). In the current cultural context of the 'obesity epidemic', food choice and the pursuit of slimness are closely bound up in discourses of health and wellbeing. Rothblum (1994) notes that the overweight body is so closely associated with excess and deviance that it is almost impossible to conceive of a fat person as not being unwell, but she warns of the danger of failing to take other factors, such as economic status, into account when making judgements about a link between body size and health. As obesity is constructed as a 'problem', consequently dieting is increasingly positioned as a 'cure' - a way to achieve a 'healthy' (i.e. non obese) body (Fraser, 1994). However, as Burns and Gavey (2008) note, the relationship between weight control and health is not as straightforward as it may seem. In fact, they observe that in the pursuit of the *appearance* of health (i.e. slenderness), women actually engaged in behaviours which were harmful to them.

The Weight Watchers regime involves intense monitoring of daily consumption by weighing and measuring food, avoiding 'bad' foods, and recording everything eaten in a diary. Self-care is bound up with issues of food choice, and 'the practice for the development of the 'good' eater is adherence to food choice based on nutritional principles with the purpose of recognising oneself as a moral and 'good' citizen' (Coveney, 2006: 90). The Weight Watchers regime can be thought of as a technology of the self, which through the rigorous control of consumption, the counting and recording points, offers the promise of self-transformation into an 'ethical subject'. The theme of transformation is one which is foregrounded in talk about dieting, and the transformative promise of the weight loss regime is part of its appeal. This will be discussed further in chapter 4, which will consider the organisation's use of 'success stories' as a marketing tool (also see appendix 5).

Stinson (2001) observes that one of the main themes emerging from women's weight loss talk is one of 'self-help'. When explaining their reasons for joining the organisation, many group members described a wish to change bad eating habits, and Stinson suggests that, 'ultimately members are motivated by a desire for enhanced health and self-improvement' (Stinson, 2001: 51). Although she does not explicitly make this link, the idea of weight loss as self-help is reminiscent of these neo-liberal attitudes towards health. The weight loss meetings provide group members with the information and support that they need in order to be able to minimise the risks to their own health, and leaves them equipped to 'help themselves'. By making this behaviour an individual 'responsibility', and an act of 'self care', this downplays the social constraints and issues of gender power that are at play in the dieting context.

Heyes (2007) explicitly considers the commercial weight loss experience in terms of Foucault's work on governmentality. Through participant observation as a member of Weight Watchers, Heyes, like Stinson, identifies how the organisation adopts the rhetoric of care of the self, framing dieting as a process of skill cultivation and self-knowledge. By moving away from an emphasis on self discipline (and the resulting 'docile bodies'), the organisation invests the eating regime with the promise of transformation. Heyes is keen to stress that this interpretation does not constitute an *endorsement* of the commercial weight loss regime, but explains that in order to be able to reject the normalising practices inherent in the regime, it is necessary to understand the simultaneously disciplinary and enabling nature of the practices in which members are engaged.

Similarly, Stinson (2001) observes that another way the commercial weight loss regime positions itself as empowering is through the appropriation of the discourse of '*feminism* or more accurately, a kind of pseudo-, liberal feminism' (Stinson, 2001: 55). She suggests that at first glance this may appear somewhat incongruous, given feminism's condemnation of the 'tyranny of slenderness' and criticism of the role played in this by the weight loss industry. Yet, despite this she notes that the organisation's way of dealing with this conflict is to 'adopt some of the language and general themes of feminism, but simultaneously to co-opt, subvert, and twist them to suit [their] purpose' (ibid: 56). She claims that these techniques are used to appeal to an overwhelmingly female membership who belong to a generation who have taken on board many of the values and beliefs of feminism, but they simultaneously justify weight loss as an appropriate and necessary course of action.

While Stinson observes that, 'the feminist critique of the weight loss industry and of the cultural obsession of thinness has the potential, if taken seriously by enough women, to undermine the organization's very existence' (ibid: 55), this does not tend to happen. Instead, weight loss is repositioned as an empowering 'self-care' activity. Bordo notes this contradiction, describing diet and exercise as, 'practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of power and control' (Bordo, 1993/2003: 27). My own analysis will explore the way in which discourses of self care and self mastery are employed in the message board exchanges, particularly in relation to the management of reports of failed weight loss.

### **2.11 The potential for resistance**

The *anonymity* of panoptical disciplinary power is problematic from a feminist perspective. As Bartky notes, 'the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular' (Bartky, 1990: 74). This then has implications for women's ability to resist the norms of femininity, because it is not clear where such norms actually come from. In fact, 'the absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural' (ibid: 75). How can women free themselves from the constraints of feminine norms, when they themselves are implicit in their enforcement? Bartky also expresses concern that women may be unwilling to resist such cultural norms, not only because such resistance may deprive them on the 'rewards of compliance', but also because a

rejection of cultural definitions of femininity also involves a rejection of her own gendered identity which requires her to 'unlearn' how to be feminine. She suggests that, 'any political project that aims to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation' (ibid: 77).

However, other authors see the view of such normalisation as 'perpetual and exhaustive' (ibid: 80) to be an unnecessarily negative one, and Bartky herself cites examples of 'a number of oppositional discourses and practices' which question dominant ideals about what constitutes femininity (ibid: 82). As women are ultimately in control of their actions, then theoretically they are also in a position to be able to resist the disciplinary gaze, and refuse to conform to the thin ideal. While wholehearted rejection of the norms of femininity can have serious negative consequences for a woman, it does not follow that all women completely buy into the disciplinary culture, and it certainly does not mean that they are unaware of their part in the production of their own 'docile bodies'. Foucault notes that, 'where there is power there is resistance', but he observes that such resistance does not involve a 'single locus of great Refusal', rather there are numerous points of resistance at which individuals or groups reject the demands made upon them (Foucault, 1978:95-96). Such points of resistance may appear to be relatively minor, but collectively, over a period of time, they show that the hold of such power is not necessarily absolute.

Spitzack's (1990) work aimed to investigate the way in which women aligned themselves with the discourses of weight loss and health, and to identify any points of 'resistance, digression, rearticulation, rethinking, and tension' (Spitzack, 1990: 181). However, although she found that women's talk about their weight and appearance demonstrated *insightfulness* into the disciplinary practices and gendered standards to which they were subjected, ultimately the power of normalisation is strong, and through confession they are still encouraged to 'remind themselves of frail morality, to explain their behaviour and seek forgiveness, to embrace an identity characterized by deviance, and to suffer' (ibid: 80).

Germov and Williams (1999) observed that their focus group research 'uncovered an alternative discourse of size acceptance by participants who had rejected the thin ideal..', although such resistance was mainly observed in women who had made the decision to stop dieting, or those who 'were trying to be size accepting, but occasionally lapsed and sporadically dieted'. They conclude that the women who took part in their research show that,

'not all bodies are so 'docile' and that the concept of the body panopticon does not preclude the potential for some women to reject the thin ideal and resist the disciplining gaze'. Women are able to form 'alternative discourses' which then 'challenge the dominant discourse' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 127). While it is unlikely that women who are currently dieting and have chosen to join a weight loss organisation will express *satisfaction* with their bodies (as the very reason for them joining is to lose weight), this does not mean that members will unquestioningly accept the demands made upon them and their own bodies.

## 2.12 Summary

This chapter has further outlined the wider socio-cultural context within which dieting behaviour occurs. While chapter 1 described the pressure that women are under to conform to socially defined norms of 'feminine' appearance and behaviour (requiring them to subject themselves to constant scrutiny and 'self-improvement'), this chapter has explored in more detail the complexities of gendered subjectivities, the cultural significance of the micro-level practices to which women are expected to subject themselves, and how these practices are inextricably bound up with power.

The later analytical chapters will consider the way in which these norms of femininity are constructed and perpetuated through the interactions. One of the most explicit ways that women engage in surveillance on the message boards is through confession of transgression. Chapters 5 and 6 will explore empirically what is considered to be confessable in this context, and will examine the management of confessions among group members. Chapter 7 further explores the seemingly empowering and transformative appeal of the commercial weight loss regime, as observed by both Heyes and Stinson. The rhetoric of self care and self knowledge is most apparent in situations where members have experienced unexpected (and perhaps, from their perspective, undeserved) failure.

As the commercial weight loss group is a shared experience, the relationship between the group members is an important factor, and therefore the management of interaction *between* group members provides the focus for my own analysis. The rationale for choosing to analyse naturally-occurring interaction, and for subjecting it to rigorous turn by turn analysis will be discussed in more detail in the the following methodology chapter (chapter 3). Chapter 3 will also describe the approaches to collecting and analysing the online message board data. By analysing the message board threads in this context, I intend to find out more about the way

these 'disciplinary technologies' operate, and in particular the way in which surveillance behaviours manifest in interactions between dieting women.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have described the wider social context in which body modification activities take place, and outlined the societal pressure put upon women to engage in self-surveillance practices. The overall aim of the thesis is to explore the way these macro-level issues of gender and power manifest in micro-level, 'mundane' interactions, and will do this by examining instances of everyday 'talk' about weight management in the context of an online weight loss message board.

This methodology chapter will provide an account of the research process, and is divided into two main sections:

The first section (Research design and data collection) will explain the suitability of an ethnographic, interaction-based approach as a means of exploring the topic in question. This section will also address the practical issues involved in conducting the research, including the methods of data collection and the initial sampling strategy. The study of online data raises a number of ethical considerations, and this section also contains a discussion of these issues. The nature of online spaces is considered, particularly with regard to expectations of privacy and anonymity by users of this type of message board. In this section I will also reflect on my own role in the research, and my position as a non-participating attendee of group meetings and user of the Weight Watchers site.

The second section of the chapter (Data analysis) provides an overview of the analytical methods used in chapters 5, 6 and 7. A hybrid discourse analytic method was employed, and this section will explain the theoretical rationale behind this choice of approach.

## 3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

### Ethnography and 'netnography'

Chapter 2 notes that research exploring issues surrounding women's bodies, eating and dieting has been carried out using a variety of methods, including interviews (e.g. Wetherall, 1996; Nichter, 2000), focus groups (e.g. Germov and Williams, 1996), and the analysis of cultural artefacts like adverts and magazines (e.g. Bordo, 1993/2003). While each of these studies provides a valuable insight into women's experiences of embodiment and self-regulation, focus groups and interviews generate data consisting of women's *retrospective* accounts of their actions, rather than the actions as they happen. Several authors (e.g. Taylor, 2002; Fielding, 2008) have noted the value of observing social phenomena in a naturalistic setting, rather than one which is artificially produced by the researcher. By taking an ethnographic approach and studying *naturally-occurring* interaction as it happens, this thesis aims to find out more about how the gendered norms relating to food consumption, morality and self-surveillance discussed in chapters 1 and 2 manifest in *everyday* exchanges.

As discussed in chapter 1, the thesis takes a social constructionist approach to gender and identity, assuming that the central concepts already introduced, such as gender, overweight, or 'good' behaviour are not fixed, value free ascriptions, but instead are best understood as 'a routine, methodological, and recurring accomplishment' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). In other words, gender is not something we essentially *are*, but something we *do*, which is fluid and dynamic, emerging from social and interactional practices, and (importantly for the analysis) is *constructed* and negotiated through our interaction with others. As gender and body reduction practices are routinely accomplished through interaction, the goal of the thesis is to provide an insight into the way in which societal norms surrounding femininity and gendered identity are enacted through everyday talk. Guendouzi notes the importance of 'talk' as a site in which individuals discursively construct their own sense of gendered 'self', explaining that, 'conversations thus can be seen as an interactional site in which speakers enact social roles and negotiate self-images' (Guendouzi, 2004: 1636-7).

To gather naturally-occurring interactional data it was first necessary to find a place where talk of this kind may be taking place. Studies of women's casual talk (e.g. Guendouzi, 2004, among others) show that talk about bodies, weight and diet can be observed in all-female exchanges in a variety of situations, but I chose to concentrate on exchanges taking place in a commercial

weight loss context. In doing so I hoped to gather data in which these topics were the *main focus* of the interaction, and where women were able to speak at length about their experience of their bodies and their day-to-day eating practices.

Several of the ethnographic studies of commercial weight loss groups (e.g. Stinson, 2002; Heyes, 2007) have been conducted by researchers who are already participating members of the groups they study. As I am not, and have never been, a member of a weight loss organisation, this was not a feasible course of action. Instead, via an introduction by an acquaintance I approached the leader of a local branch of Weight Watchers and asked for permission to attend their group meetings in a research capacity. My own role and its impact on the research process will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter.

The Weight Watchers organisation also maintains a website (see appendix 3), which provides an online resource for members containing practical information about the eating regime, advice and inspiration, and a message board and chat room where members can interact with one another. Although traditionally ethnographic enquiry has mainly been concerned with the study of face to face practices, the rapid growth of the internet as a site of social engagement means that this research methodology is being increasingly used in an online context, an approach Kozinets (1997, 2001) has coined 'netnography' (see also Nelson and Otnes, 2005 for a further example of netnographic research).

The data collection methods will be described in more detail in the following section, and the next chapter (chapter 4) will provide a full description of the findings of my offline fieldwork in the commercial weight loss group context, including observations during group meetings, interviews and informal conversations with key informants, and analysis of organisational literature. The chapter will also provide a netnographic overview of the Weight Watchers website and will establish the users of the online message boards as members of an online, brand oriented Community of Practice. Chapter 4 'sets the scene' for the chapters 5, 6 and 7, which focus in more detail on the exchanges taking place on the online message boards. Each chapter examines the way talk about weight loss is managed within the interactions on the boards, and explores the nature of the online space as a site of disciplinary power where social practices of identity management occur.

The following description of the data collection process is divided into two main sections, which are concerned with the practical details of gathering 'offline' and 'online' data.

However, as Orgad (2009) notes, the distinction between the online and offline domain is becoming increasingly blurred. Although the empirical analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7 concentrates on the interactions taking place *online*, the analysis is also informed by the data gathered offline. My offline observations provided me with the information required to make sense of the message board exchanges, where members talked about the details of the Weight Watchers eating regime, and their experiences at group meetings. As chapter 4 will discuss at greater length, the activity of weight watching takes place across both the online and offline domains, and the two worlds are highly integrated. Therefore, the data collection process reflects this, an approach which is consistent with other ethnographic studies of online communities (for example Kozinets, 2001, who conducted ethnographic observations of Star Trek conventions while simultaneously studying online fan forums).

### 'Offline' data collection and data analysis

#### ***Gaining access***

As previously noted, I was not a member of a weight loss group, so in order for me to begin my ethnographic enquiry it was necessary for me to establish contact with a group to negotiate access. While this could potentially have been problematic, Bryman suggests the use of friends and contacts as a means of gaining access to a 'closed setting' (Bryman, 2001: 295). When I embarked upon the research project several friends and acquaintances had mentioned that they were currently following a weight loss regime, had done so in the past, or knew someone who was. This gave me several potential avenues to pursue, and I began by contacting a local Weight Watchers group leader whose details had been given to me by a 'friend of a friend of a friend'. I also approached a local Slimming World group by similar means, as I felt that it would be useful to observe the meetings of more than one organisation in case there were significant differences between the two. My attempt to secure access from these 'gatekeepers' was successful, and both group leaders granted me permission to attend group meetings in a research capacity, as an observer. Although I had never met either of the group leaders or any of the group members before starting the research, I feel that gaining access through more informal and 'personal' channels helped me to gain the trust of those involved.

#### ***Preparation for observations: Interview and organisational literature***

At this point, to ensure that my lack of first-hand experience of the commercial weight loss environment did not pose any unforeseen difficulties I conducted a formal interview with a key

informant in order to gather information. This informant was an acquaintance who had previously been a member of both Weight Watchers and Slimming World, who I approached when embarking on the research project. The interview took a semi-structured format, as this approach enabled me to ask specific questions about the weight loss regimes and meetings, but was still 'open' enough for the interviewee to be free to offer her own account of her dieting experiences, and to raise any points that *she* felt to be particularly significant. Therefore, the main focus of the interview was on her description of the details of the eating plans, and of the procedures followed in the weekly meetings run by the organisation. Due to their cultural prominence I was already familiar with the organisations in question to a certain extent, but the interview provided me with invaluable information about the finer details of the eating regimes, the structure of the group meetings, and what I could expect to find when I began the fieldwork stage of the research.

In addition, the interviewee also spoke about her reasons for joining the weight loss organisations, why she eventually chose to leave, and about her experiences with food and her weight more generally. Although these topics were beyond the scope of the main objective of the interview, they gave me an insight into some of the concerns and tensions that she had experienced in her dieting 'career'. Although the data gathered in this interview only represented the views and experiences of one woman, it was possible at this stage to start to identify narrative themes which may be relevant to the study of weight management.

Before embarking on the observational stage of the project, I also familiarised myself further with the finer details of the Weight Watchers regime by reading copies of the publications which the organisation issues to new members. I collected other forms of official literature from a variety of sources, including copies of the Weight Watchers monthly magazine, and copies of leaflets handed out during group meetings, several of which were kindly donated by friends and acquaintances who had attended groups in the past (these will be discussed in chapter 4, see appendix 2 for examples). Although at this stage of the project the precise focus of the research was not yet fully defined, it was possible to start to identify a number of themes which occurred repeatedly in the organisational documentation (for example, vigilance, monitoring, morality, the pursuit of transformation), which reflect the ideals of the organisation and the regime it promotes.

### ***Meeting observations***

Observations took place in a total of eleven one-hour meetings in two groups over a period of seven weeks. One group (Slimming World) was observed for four weeks, while the other (Weight Watchers) was observed for seven. Although the two organisations promote different eating regimes, the structure of the meetings was broadly similar, and by attending the meetings myself, instead of relying on interview accounts, I was able to observe what took place in both organisations first-hand. As I was not participating in the meetings as a member, I was free to make detailed notes about what occurred in the meetings, and I gathered data about the layout of the room, the structure of the meetings, the group members, and the content of the sessions. Although the topics under discussion varied week by week, by making a note of what occurred in each meeting it was possible to start to identify commonly recurring themes, many of which were consistent with those I had previously observed in the organisational literature, and raised interesting points from which to begin the later analysis. These themes, and the meetings themselves, will be described in more detail in the next chapter (chapter 4).

As well as attending the groups as an observer, my long-term goal had initially been to obtain permission to collect interactional data during the weekly meetings, to be analysed alongside the online data described in the next section. As my research interest lies in the study of interaction, to subject the exchanges in the group meetings to the rigorous turn by turn analysis required it would have been necessary to capture the dialogue fully and produce a detailed transcription. This would involve the use of audio or video equipment to record the exchanges, so at this stage it was necessary to obtain formal permission from the Weight Watchers organisation, but in this case the 'gatekeepers' did not grant me the necessary access. Both of the group leaders and all members of their groups were keen to take part in the research and were happy to give their consent to be recorded, but after several weeks of negotiation the management of both Slimming World and Weight Watchers declined permission to record the group meetings. Slimming World's management also informed me that they did not allow any research to take place in their meetings, and so at that stage I stopped my observations immediately. The response from Weight Watchers was slightly more encouraging, as they were happy for me to attend the meetings and to continue to observe what took place, but their unwillingness to grant permission for recording presented a problem as observation alone would not provide the detailed interactional data that I required. As I had forged links with group leaders and group members who were all eager to take part in the research, other alternative forms of data collection such as focus groups or

interviews with group members were briefly considered. However, ultimately these were not pursued as I felt the more 'artificial' setting would not be compatible with my focus on naturally occurring, everyday exchanges. Weight Watchers were also reluctant to provide me with any statistical information about the number of meetings taking place across the country, the number of members, or any demographic information about their membership. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they were also unwilling to divulge any statistics regarding the success rates of the Weight Watchers regime. Heyes (2007: 142) reports experiencing similar difficulties when trying to obtain statistical data from Weight Watchers about the effectiveness of their eating plan, but the organisation does not collate (or does not release) this information.

I continued to attend the weekly Weight Watchers meetings as an observer, but in the meantime my initial analysis of the online message board threads, which will be discussed later in the chapter, indicated that the data already gathered provided several potentially rich avenues of exploration. My research interests lay in the exchanges between women who were following a commercial eating regime, rather than in the role of the group leader, or the structure of the meetings. While the interactions in the group meetings would have provided some very interesting data, and would be worthy of study in their own right, the scope for studying the relationship between members of the group was limited. Attending the meetings gave me an invaluable insight into the Weight Watchers regime, and how the regime and its members orient to the cultural norms discussed in chapters 1 and 2; but within the structured, formal setting of a weekly meeting the group members themselves were given only a limited opportunity to contribute. The majority of the input in the meeting setting came from the group leader, who provided the primary focus, guiding the discussion and controlling the topics discussed. The meetings were run to a tight schedule, and followed a very similar pattern each week. While group members were encouraged to take part in the interaction, within the meeting itself there was little interaction between group members. Their contributions were mediated by, and were often solicited by, the group leader. Group members tended therefore to ask questions about the eating plan, or to respond to direct questions asked by the group leader, and the discussions which took place were frequently dominated by one or two more outspoken members of the group. This guided, structured dynamic was very different to that present in the online message board context, which will be introduced in the next section, and discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

### *Interviews with group members and other dieting women*

Attending the group meetings as an observer also gave me the opportunity to speak to several of the women who were members of the groups. Each session began with a half hour period where members are weighed individually (a process which will be described in more detail in the next chapter). After being weighed, the women would sit and chat with one another while waiting for the meeting to begin. During this time I conducted informal, open ended interviews, either with individuals, pairs or small groups of members. After introducing myself and explaining my role as a researcher, I initiated a conversation by asking how long they had been attending the group meetings. Instead of approaching the conversations with a set 'agenda', I chose to allow each member to raise the topics she felt to be relevant, and the women were happy to talk about their own experiences of the weight loss organisation and the group meetings. As these interviews were opportunistic, and were reliant on members arriving to the sessions early, I was not able to speak to every member of each group, but I conducted interviews with nine individual women. I spoke to some of these members more than once, and under these circumstances I would ask them how their diet had gone that week. To make these encounters as relaxed and 'chat' like as possible, I did not record our exchanges, and did not make any notes until after we had finished speaking, but did soon afterwards so that I could remember as much detail as possible.

As well as interviewing group members at these weekly meetings, I also spoke to a number of women who were not members of these groups during the course of the project. As dieting is so prevalent among women, many people I spoke to about my research shared stories with me about their own experiences with food, their bodies, attending meetings, and following diets. My understanding of the phenomenon of weight management was therefore informed by numerous informal conversations with women who I met at various stages of the research process, who shared their own dieting experiences with me. As the discussions in these encounters were led by the women themselves, then patterns emerging in the topics that they made relevant raised a number of potential avenues for the focus of the analysis of the message board data.

### 'Online' data collection

The second part of the data collection process took place online, and employed a similar ethnographic (or netnographic) approach on the Weight Watchers website (see appendix 3, [www.weightwatchers.co.uk](http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk)). As in the 'offline' data collection, the data gathered provided a

useful source of information about the organisation's eating regime and ideals, and helped to identify potential topics of interest for the later analysis. Throughout the research process I regularly visited the site, and subscribed to the Weight Watchers weekly email newsletter (which contains recipe ideas, weight loss tips and inspirational stories).

The organisation's website acts as an advertisement to potential new members, and so the homepage contains information about the special membership offers that are available, and there are areas where visitors can find out more about Weight Watchers ('How Weight Watchers Works'), locate their nearest meeting, or sign up to the eating plan. However, the site is also designed as a resource to be used by existing members. The commercial nature of the organisation is reflected in the 'Shop' section, where visitors to the site can purchase branded publications, foods and other products.

The rest of the site content is split into four main sections, including 'Food and Recipes' (which provides advice about different foods, supermarket shopping, and eating out), 'Fitness and Health' (which gives ideas for exercise activities, and explains the 'science' of weight loss), and 'Success Stories' (which displays a number of 'case studies' of members who have successfully lost weight, including information about themselves and photographs). The part of the website which is most significant for this thesis is the 'Community' section (see appendix 6), which provides a link to the organisation's online message boards. The boards have been set up and are maintained by the Weight Watchers organisation, and they act as a space in which members are able to discuss their dieting experience, ask for help or information, and can offer advice to one another. More specific discussion about the social practices taking place on the boards will be covered in chapter 4, but this chapter will provide some basic information about the structure of the message boards and the posts on them.

Unlike the offline context, there was no need to negotiate access to the online community, as the Weight Watchers website is a publicly accessible space with no gatekeepers. The public/private nature of online spaces is addressed in the discussion of research ethics later in the chapter. At the time of data collection there were 12 different boards on the site (there are currently 20), and each one is aimed at a specific sub-group of users. These include a student board, a 'Golden Years' board for more mature users, and boards for users at different stages of their weight loss. The number of boards on the site, and the volume of posts on each board, meant that I potentially had access to a vast amount of data.

While the ready availability of data has obvious benefits, Catterall and Maclaran cite the sheer volume of data as one of the potential *difficulties* faced when conducting online research. They explain that, 'there may just be too much available ... the researcher may have to restrict the period covered by the analysis or decide to only follow certain conversational threads or specific themes' (Catterall and Maclaran, 2001: 231). The specific details of the analytical method used in the thesis will be described in section 3.3 (Data analysis), and Buttny notes that the smaller sample sizes typically employed by qualitative approaches like conversational analysis enable 'a more intensive analysis of the dynamics of social interaction' (Buttny, 1993: 55). Likewise, Potter and Wetherell argue that, 'because one is interested in language use ... the success of a study is *not* in the least dependent on sample size. It is *not* the case that a larger sample necessarily indicates a more painstaking or worthwhile piece of research' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 161). It became apparent at a very early stage that to be able to subject the exchanges on the message boards to the required level of scrutiny, it was necessary to construct a data set of manageable size. The sampling strategies employed are outlined in the next section.

#### Initial sampling strategy

The online data set was collected from the Weight Watchers message board archive in November 2004. Due to the volume of interaction on the message boards, it was decided to begin with a sample taken over a 24 hour period, and then either refine the sample or gather more data if required. I had been reading messages on the boards on a regular basis since embarking on the research, but wished to avoid selecting a sample on the basis of the content of any of the posts, or by deciding on a specific day of the week or a sample period with a particularly low or high number of postings. The sampling strategy was therefore left to chance, and the date chosen was exactly one month prior to the date that data collection began (which itself was determined solely by my own availability). The one month time period was purely arbitrary, but it would have been impractical to collect data in 'real time'. This would have resulted in the collection of partial message threads, as threads on the boards are often 'active' and receive contributions for up to a week. This strategy ensured that each message thread in the sample was 'closed', and group members were no longer adding further posts.

Therefore, the initial data set comprises of all the message threads *started* over a 24 hour period (midnight to midnight) on a date in October 2004 (although as full threads have been

analysed some contributions may have been added outside this 24 hour period). The date has been removed from the message threads to further ensure the anonymity of the message board users (see section below for a discussion of issues of anonymity). Each message thread was saved as a separate webpage, and labelled with the time of the first post and the title of the message.

This strategy generated a huge amount of data, so in order to narrow down the data set I made the decision to select *one* message board to subject to further analysis. The message board selected was the 'New Community Users' (NCU) board. This board was chosen because it is by far the most widely used board, generating the highest number of posts each day, and despite its title it is not simply used by new users. While other boards, such as the 'Student Lounge', or 'Golden Years' boards are aimed at a specific subgroup of the organisation's members, the NCU board attracts posts from a wide range of members at all stages of the weight loss process. These range from those who are genuinely new users, to those who have been using the boards for a long period of time and have posted several thousand messages. Several members appear to post on this board in addition to posting on another, more specific board, and so this board seems to be more representative of the message board users as a whole than those boards which are aimed at a more narrow audience. One member actually described this board in one of her posts as 'more of a miscellaneous board', and this illustrates perfectly the way in which it is used by members.

During the data collection period *422 message threads* were started on the NCU board, resulting in a total of *2219 individual posts* by *260 group members*. Although no formal analysis was carried out on message threads on other message boards or on other days, I read multiple threads on every board for a number of months before and after, as well as during the data collection period. As well as being a way to familiarise myself with the types of interactions taking place on the message boards, this was done in order to ensure that the data collected from the NCU board was broadly representative of the posts on the site as a whole and was not significantly different to the posts made on the other boards.

#### The message board: Users and structure

Despite their links to the organisation, it is not necessary to be a member of Weight Watchers to access the site or the message boards. No registration or subscription is required and it is free to use. Although the boards are used to discuss the Weight Watchers eating plan, and are

introduced on the website as a source of support intended to be used alongside attendance at weekly meetings, this is not compulsory. While no information is available about the percentage of message board users who are 'paid up' members of the organisation, the board posts indicate that a number of board users are following the organisation's eating plan independently, and are not currently attending meetings (although they are likely to have done so in the past).

In contrast to the organised weekly meetings, the interactions which take place on the Weight Watchers message boards are controlled by the group members themselves, and there is no group leader on the boards. The boards are moderated by the organisation, in order to deal with offensive or inflammatory posts, but there is no visible moderator presence within the interactions. On some online sites moderation is carried out by individuals who are active members of the community, who therefore have some control over what is permissible on the boards. However, on the Weight Watchers site there is no formal hierarchy, so officially this is constructed as an egalitarian environment where all users (theoretically) have equal status to one another.

The exchanges on the boards are asynchronous, the interactions do not take place in 'real time' and users are free to access threads and make contributions to them at any time. Each message thread is started by an original poster (sometimes referred to as OP), and group members can then reply. This means that members are able to choose whether or not they want to contribute to a particular discussion, and have the option to ignore any threads they are not interested in. Unlike the group meetings, which are subject to time constraints, it is possible for longer exchanges to take place, and for more individuals to take part in the exchanges. It is also not strictly necessary for the interactions to stay 'on topic', so group members are able to raise topics which are important to them, rather than being limited to those imposed by the Weight Watchers organisation. Users of the message boards are therefore free to negotiate their own identities and relationships within the threads without the constraints imposed by the meeting format.

There are a number of structural features specific to the message board environment, and an example of a message post is explained below:

<p>CHATTERBOX (b)</p>  (c) <p>13 st 7 lb 11 st 13 lb 10 st 0 lb (d)</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">334</a> (e)</p>	<p>[date] 09:04:01 (a) (g) report this post   ground rules</p> <p>I've had the ready prepared ones in minted gravy and they work out about 13pts so i reckon maybe 10pts for the lamb shank.</p> <p>Hope this helps</p> <p>..... *") ..... (..)*Sarah* (f)</p> <p>It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop - Confucius</p>
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Each post on the message board states the date and time it was posted (a), and every message also includes the 'public profile' of the poster. This is found on the left hand side of the post, and includes information about the individual who has posted the message. This section includes their username (b), icons to represent their hobbies and interests (c), information about their starting weight, current weight and goal weight (d), and the number of posts that they have made recently (e). It is up to each group member to decide whether they wish to reveal details about their weight and interests, but the vast majority of members do choose to display this information on their profiles. Some group members also display a 'signature' at the bottom of each of their messages (f), which is added automatically to the bottom of any posts they make. These signatures vary, but may contain motivational messages or statements of commitment, weigh in results or goals, and may also act as a signature in the traditional sense, including the name of the poster.

I made the decision to present the message threads in the empirical chapters in their original form, as they would be displayed on the message board. The posts have been reproduced as faithfully as possible with regard to the structure and content of the online environment, displaying the full message posts, including members' signatures (the steps taken to anonymise the data are outlined below). The posts act as a display of identity which provides part of the context for the message they post. When their content is relevant these specific features will be discussed further in the analysis.

Ethical considerations: Consent

Some ethical issues arise from the use of these kind of online interactions as data. Sanders notes that, 'the ethics of covert non-participant observation through the Internet has been debated vigorously since the mid-1990s and continues to be an unresolved issue for

researchers' (Sanders, 2005: 71). One of the main issues of contention is whether or not the online domain constitutes a public or private space. Although online exchanges are conducted in a very visible way, and are often freely available to all, the individuals taking part in the interactions do so from the privacy of their own homes. There is therefore a fundamental contradiction between the public nature of the exchanges and the private location from which they arise. In such a situation what is important is the notion of perceived privacy, to what extent do participants believe that their interactions take place within the public domain, and how much privacy can they reasonably expect as a result?

The public/private nature of online message boards has important implications for whether informed consent is required from participants. However, after consulting several sets of guidelines relating to research conducted online, it was still not possible to obtain any explicit guidelines about the use of this particular type of data in research, and whether it is necessary ethically to obtain the informed consent of each participant. The guidelines provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (2002) suggest that the requirement for informed consent depends upon the perceived privacy of the space being studied - if users of a site feel that they are interacting in a private space, then it should be treated as one and consent is required. The guidelines do not specify which particular types of interactions or online spaces should be considered to be private, or exactly how to establish whether they are considered to be so, but offer a series of issues to consider when reaching this decision. They describe them as 'guidelines - not 'recipes'', and suggest that 'the issues raised by Internet research are *ethical* problems precisely because they evoke more than one ethically defensible response to a specific dilemma or problem. *Ambiguity, uncertainty, and disagreement are inevitable*' (AoIR, 2002: 3-4).

The AoIR guidelines suggest that in order to determine the 'ethical expectations ... established by the venue' researchers should take into account specific features of the site in question (ibid: 4-5). There are several features of this particular message board which indicate that both the weight loss organisation, and the users of the site itself, feel that the board is in fact a public space.

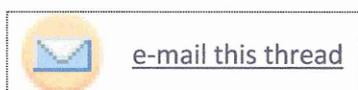
At the time of data collection, the Weight Watchers website incorporated a chat room facility, as well as the message boards upon which the sample exchanges take place (this chat room has since been removed from the site). In order to access the chat room it was necessary to register your details on the website, and be issued with a username and password. In contrast

to the private exchanges in the chat room, the message boards are publicly accessible, no password is required, and posts can be read by anyone using the website. Therefore, users of the chat room would have a greater expectation of privacy than those using the message boards. While the study of online interactions has been likened to that of 'overheard' conversations in a public place, perhaps a more appropriate comparison in this context would be that of a 'real life' message board. The online boards perform a similar role, and are used for posting messages intended to be made publicly available and widely read. The messages are then stored in a publicly accessible archive for several months.

The organisation's privacy policy actually explicitly states to users:

You should be aware that any information shared in a public forum such as a message board, bulletin board or recipe swap or through our Public Profile feature is public information and may be seen or collected by third parties that do not adhere to our Privacy Policy. You should think carefully before disclosing any information in any public forum, or through the Public Profile feature, on our Website ([www.weightwatchers.co.uk/legal/privacy.aspx](http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk/legal/privacy.aspx))

Each message thread displays an icon (shown below, see appendix 7 for an example of a message thread) which enables the thread to be sent by email to people outside the group. This acts as a constant reminder to users of the site that their interactions are not only visible to others, but can also be disseminated to a wider audience.



There are also features of the exchanges themselves that suggest that users of the message boards do not consider themselves to be in a private space. There are occasions within interactions where members arrange to continue particular threads somewhere private, using email or the secure chat room, explicitly acknowledging the public nature of the space in which they are interacting.

The AoIR guidelines summarise that, 'the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent etc.' (ibid: 5). Based on the factors outlined above, it is reasonable to conclude that

the message boards are not perceived to be a private space, and it is therefore not necessary to obtain informed consent from individual participants or from the hosting organisation.

#### Ethical considerations: Anonymity

Although there is no requirement to obtain consent from participants, great care was taken to treat the message board users with the same level of respect and consideration that would be afforded to participants in an 'offline' setting. Every effort has been taken to ensure that all interactions in the data set remain anonymous, in order to protect the individual users of the site. While users of the message boards do so under the guise of a username, Stommel (2008) notes the importance of usernames (or 'nicknames') as a display of identity by those interacting online. Therefore, although message board members are not using their 'real' names, they may still be identifiable by their username, particularly if they use the same name on another site, or if their choice of username displays personal information, such as their name or date of birth. For this reason each group member posting in the threads selected for analysis was allocated a pseudonym to further ensure their anonymity. However, as Stommel's work suggests that an individual's username is so closely bound up with their identity, care was taken to ensure that the pseudonym chosen reflected the 'spirit' of the original username as far as possible. For example, 'BritneyLover' may be changed to 'SpearsFan', or 'Debra74' may become '1973Debbie'.

Any further personal information in message threads (e.g. references to places of employment, or family members) was made anonymous, and the date of the posts was removed, as unlike the information about the *time* of posting, the date provides no useful information for the analysis. Finally, steps were taken to ensure that the original message threads cannot be accessed by entering text into an internet search engine, or by searching on the Weight Watchers site itself.

As ethical concerns of confidentiality meant that every effort was taken to ensure that the identities of group members remained anonymous, it was also necessary to decide whether or not to explicitly name the organisation that was the subject of the study. While some authors (e.g. Heyes, 2007) openly refer to the organisation, others (e.g. Stinson, 2001) go to great lengths to avoid using the name 'Weight Watchers'. However, the extent of the organisation's renown, and its prominence in popular culture, means that it is easily identifiable to anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the weight loss industry. As reading Stinson's work shows,

the position of Weight Watchers as the most popular and longest established weight loss organisation in both the UK and USA makes concealing its identity incredibly difficult, if not impossible. The specific features of the language of the regime (like 'points', references to the organisation's food products etc.) which permeate the interactions of group members are also very revealing, so in making the decision to name the Weight Watchers organisation I was able to discuss the specific details of the weight loss experience emerging from the exchanges without being unnecessarily cryptic or vague.

### My role as researcher

The online nature of the interactions also has a profound impact on my role as a researcher. While in a 'real life' ethnographic situation the presence of the researcher is known, in an online environment the researcher is able to remain hidden, observing interactions without the knowledge of those taking part. Although conducting research in the sinister sounding role of 'lurker' (someone who reads the message boards but does not actively contribute) is potentially ethically problematic, there is evidence to suggest that a large number of visitors to message boards are doing exactly the same thing (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Chen, 2004). The act of lurking has been shown to be an important part of the process of joining an online community. It is impossible to tell how many members read the message boards without posting messages themselves, but lurking seems to be an important form of 'peripheral participation' (Lueg, 2000: 5), and the discussions on the boards which mention the activity of lurking suggest that it is happily tolerated in this context. As the message boards are intended to be a source of both information and inspiration users of the site are able to use it simply as a resource, they are under no obligation to contribute. While my reasons for accessing the site (to study interaction) may be different from those of a lurker who uses the site to obtain information about the eating regime, the features of the site already discussed clearly define the site as a public space in which lurking behaviour is expected and accepted.

I chose not to announce my presence on the message boards, as this would not have been a viable way to obtain the informed consent of users of the site. The number of group members using the site, the quick turnover of users, and the huge number of message threads generated would have made this impossible. If I was to post a message explaining the nature of my research, then it would not be possible to ensure that it would be read by those whose interactions I went on to analyse, as several users of the site posted messages only very occasionally, and were not present on the message boards throughout the whole day. I felt

that to announce myself would serve only to disrupt the exchanges taking place on the boards, and that any attempt to secure consent from such a large and constantly changing group of individuals would inevitably be unsuccessful.

Some researchers investigating online communities choose to join and actively participate in the group that they are studying, or to study a group of which they are already a member (e.g. Baym, 1998 among others). As I have already discussed, joining a 'real life' Weight Watchers group as a member would not have been an option, but this would not necessarily have been the case in the online context. The lack of face to face contact in the online interactions would mean that the group members would not be aware of my body size, but I felt that it would be ethically indefensible for me to play an active role on the message boards, making posts and participating in group discussions, due to the deception involved.

Therefore, as in the group meetings, my role in the online context was one of non-participant observer. In contrast, Stinson's (2001) study of 'real life' commercial weight loss group meetings, as discussed in the previous chapter (chapter 2) was conducted from the perspective of an actively participating member of the group. However, as Stinson herself notes, and Deacon *et al* (1999) discuss, there is a delicate balance in the ethnographic setting between observation and participation. While greater participation can lead to a richness of data and a form of understanding that cannot be gathered by observation alone, the act of participating can alter the perceptions of the researcher, and can make them less able to fully record and interpret the events around them. Therefore, what is 'lost' in terms of my lack of immersion and involvement in the activities I am studying is 'gained' in terms of critical perspective as an observer. The extent of my personal involvement in the research is a topic I will return to in the discussion chapter (chapter 8).

Chrisler (1996) describes problems that she experienced when, as a 'normal' weight woman, she conducted research involving 'overweight' women. She reports that she encountered hostility and suspicion from the women she interviewed as soon as she revealed that she had never been overweight herself. However, my own experience of observing weight loss groups and speaking with individual members has been completely different. Each time I attended a meeting I was made to feel incredibly welcome and accepted by everyone present, and my own weight has never been raised as an issue or even commented upon. Group members were also happy to talk at length about their own experiences of dieting on an individual basis, and this may reflect the normative nature of 'body talk' as a conversational topic for women

and girls (Wetherell, 1996; Guendouzi, 2004). Although I was unable to obtain informed consent from the users of the Weight Watchers website, the willingness of the 'offline' group members to share their experiences, and to agree to their interactions being recorded in a 'real life' context also helped me to resolve any concerns I had about the ethical issues involved with the collection of online data.

### 'Talk' online

The significance of interaction as a site for the construction of identity and the management of relationships has already been discussed, but much of the work in this area (e.g. Coates, 1996; Guendouzi, 2004) is concerned with *face-to-face* conversations. Although it has been noted that the distinction between online and offline activity is an increasingly blurred one, for the purposes of analysis it is important to note that there are still some fundamental differences between the online and offline context. The discussion of analytical method which follows refers mainly to literature which deals with 'talk' which occurs in a face-to-face context. While the theories and methods used are still extremely relevant in an online environment, it must be remembered that in the message board context the 'talk-in-interaction' takes a written and graphic form.

From an analytical perspective, the study of online exchanges has some clear practical benefits. When analysing face to face interactions non-verbal cues such as posture, facial expression or tone may be lost during the process of transcription, leaving the analyst with only a partial picture of the interaction to interpret. To paraphrase Toolan (1996: 5), the act of reducing an interactional event to 'text' separates it from its 'context'. In contrast, individuals communicating in an online context do not have access to these bodily non-verbal cues, and as such must express themselves solely through the posts that they make on the message boards, conveying *all* meaning through their choice of language and graphic signs. Other non-language markers such as emoticons may be used, but these remain available to the analyst in the same context as the original recipient of the message, so no meaning is lost. Similarly, the asynchronous, ordered nature of online interactions mean that each 'turn' in the interaction is very clear, so there is no overlap where participants talk over one another. As no decisions need to be made regarding the relevance of particular elements of an interaction for transcription, this results in more 'complete' data for analysis (see Mann and Stewart, 2000: 22-23 for further discussion of transcription bias).

Some of the characteristics specific to the online context have already been addressed, and the message board interactions will be described in more detail in the next chapter (chapter 4). It is not the intention of this thesis to present a *comparison* of the online and offline interactions of Weight Watchers members, but when features emerge from the interactions which appear to be unique to online interaction this will be discussed in the analysis. Orgad (2009) suggests that some online researchers fall into the trap of treating online data as somehow less 'authentic' than its offline equivalent, but although data gathered in face-to-face group meetings is used to inform the thesis, the online interactions are treated as worthy of study in their own right. This view is supported by Denzin, who observes in his study of an online support discussion group that, 'like everyday talk, cybertext discourse is contextual, immediate, and grounded in the concrete specifics of the interactional situation' (Denzin, 1999: 112). As the empirical chapters will show, the message board exchanges provide a rich source of interactional data, within which women negotiate their identities in relation to socially prescribed norms of femininity, articulating their experiences of self surveillance, and their attempts to regulate their bodies and actions.

To understand the way in which cultural understandings of femininity are constructed and perpetuated through everyday online weight management talk, it was necessary to conduct a detailed analysis of the exchanges taking place on the message boards. Throughout the exchanges group members are engaged in the construction of identity and relationships, both as individuals and as a group of 'weight watchers', and the task of the analysis is to try to unpick how this is accomplished. The data analysis methods will be outlined in the following section.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

#### **Initial coding**

Despite the steps taken to restrict the size of the data set described earlier in the chapter, it was still necessary to reduce the sample further in order to select threads for analysis. As the discourse analytic method employed required message threads to be scrutinised in great detail it was not possible to subject every thread to this level of analysis. In order to select a subset of data for in-depth examination, it was necessary to identify the threads which would be most helpful in exploring the topics of interest to the thesis.

The first stage of this process involved repeatedly reading and re-reading the message threads in the data set in order to begin to identify the types of social activities being performed in the exchanges. As described earlier in the chapter, I spent a period of several months reading the threads on the message boards, and as a result was already quite familiar with the kinds of subjects raised on the boards. A large number of the message threads (132 of 422 threads) did not contain any talk which related in any way to the Weight Watchers regime, food or weight loss. Although these threads were very interesting in terms of their role in relationship building between members of the community, my primary interest lay in the weight management practices on the boards, and so these threads were disregarded.

The remaining message threads were then coded according to the topics covered and the types of social activities (e.g. advice giving, information seeking, or progress reporting) contained within them. This coding was carried out electronically, using NVivo software, but it did not seem to be particularly appropriate or useful to attempt to impose a rigid coding system onto the rich and nuanced data, so I chose not to use it to conduct the main analysis. Instead I used the software to store the data electronically, and used the coded posts as markers to navigate the data set.

While the message threads were coded in order to obtain an overall picture of the content and social activities of the interactions on the boards, it was never my intention to generate robust statistical information about the frequency of particular types of posts. Therefore, although there are occasional references in the analysis to how many examples of a particular social activity can be found in the data set, this only serves to offer some context. A statement that (for example) 9 of the 2219 posts in the data set contained a report of success is not a claim that members of this community report success 0.4% percent of the time, but instead is provided as an indication of the comparative frequency or rarity of particular phenomena. The focus of the analysis is the way in which these phenomena *manifest* in the posts, and this is addressed in the next stage of the analysis.

Both the coding and the subsequent selection of message threads for further analysis were primarily data-driven. Although I knew that I had a general interest in the way that women talked about dieting, food and their bodies, the specific social practices chosen for analysis arose from the interactions themselves. The analytical themes were also informed by the theoretical and empirical literature I was reading concerning societal norms around gender, consumption and morality. This combination of a 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approach to

research is also reflected in the analytical method employed, which will be discussed in the next section. It became apparent that there was a clear link to be drawn between the socially sanctioned norms of 'femininity' outlined in the feminist literature (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993/2003) and the interactions in my data set. The emergence of these themes was particularly salient in members' reports of their *progress* on the message boards, especially if they were reporting a transgression or failure to lose weight. Chapter 2 outlined the social significance of confession of transgression in some detail, and Stinson (2001) notes that through the confession of 'bad' behaviour, weight loss group members reinforce ideas about what is considered to be 'acceptable'. As theoretical discussions of confession argue that it plays a central role in the perpetuation of norms of 'feminine' behaviour, the interactional management of threads containing these themes seemed to be an interesting point from which to begin the analysis.

The subtlety and complexity of the interactions on the message boards meant that while useful for narrowing down the data set and identifying potential analytical themes, the coding process could only provide limited insight into the content of the message posts. Therefore, a more intuitive, flexible approach was required for the next stage of the analysis. The analytical method, and its suitability as a means of studying the language used in everyday interaction will be discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

### The analytical method

The data analysis takes an ethnomethodological approach which considers language to be a 'dynamic, constructive and constitutive medium' (Wooffitt, 2008: 441) worthy of closer scrutiny. The social constructionist approach of the thesis has already been discussed (see earlier in this chapter, and chapter 1), and as the preceding literature review chapters (chapters 1 and 2) have discussed in some detail, the activity of weight management is closely bound up with cultural conceptions of femininity and morality. This section will outline the analytic method employed to explore the way that gendered identities and morally accountable bodies are constructed through interaction.

Danziger (1997) suggests that social constructionism can be broadly divided into two main forms: 'dark', which is influenced by Foucault's preoccupations with social structures and power, and sees the constructive nature as bound up with these wider social and institutional forces, and 'light', which is concerned with the social construction taking place in people's

everyday interaction (or what Burr, 2003, calls 'macro' and 'micro' constructionism). He notes that despite their difference in focus, these two approaches are not incompatible, and the aim of the thesis is to make the link between macro level issues of gender, power and moral accountability, and the 'mundane' interactional activities that women engage in on a day to day basis.

The idea that everyday, small-scale activities construct and perpetuate social norms is not a new one, and Heyes notes that her own experience as a member of a commercial weight loss group convinced her of 'the need for nuanced micro-analysis of the 'politics of the ordinary'-the plethora of everyday practices that form our *habitus*, and that are held in place by hundreds of tiny instantiations' (Heyes, 2007: 67). Yet although Heyes describes her analysis as taking place at the 'micro-level', her observations (and those of other authors like Stinson, 2001) are mainly concerned with identifying the general categories of social behaviour, but do not go as far as investigating how these social behaviours are *managed* in the *detail of interaction*. In turning my attention to the management of interaction in the commercial weight loss context, and by subjecting the exchanges between group members to more rigorous and detailed examination, I aim to add an extra 'layer' of analysis which can complement this existing work. In practical terms my approach shares more in common with that of Guendouzi (2004) and Mycroft (2008), among others, whose work aims to reveal how these social practices can be observed in the *detail* of interaction. It was therefore necessary for me to employ an analytic method which provided the tools to subject the data to the required level of scrutiny, while still taking into account the wider social context in which the interactions take place.

Although the term discourse analysis (DA) is notoriously difficult to define (Potter, 2004 identifies at least four distinct forms, each emerging from a different disciplinary area), it is nevertheless a useful analytical method to examine the social construction of identity and gendered power relations. As discussed, the analysis is concerned with the *constructive* nature of everyday talk, and DA in its various forms 'focuses attention on the processes whereby the social world is constructed and maintained' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 2).

The message threads were analysed using a hybrid discourse analytic method similar to the one employed by Guendouzi (2004), who shares Wetherell's (1998) view that an eclectic approach, taking into account both context and interaction, is most suitable for the study of naturally occurring everyday talk.

Guendouzi also observes that while the interdisciplinarity of this type of approach is its great strength, it also makes describing the methodological framework a somewhat complex task. The method used incorporates concepts from both conversation analysis (CA) and discursive psychology (DP) which provide a way to explore how identity, accountability and community are constructed in the interaction. It also draws on the work of Goffman, Brown and Levinson, and Foucault, among others. This section will further outline the main analytical approaches which are employed throughout the interactional analysis chapters (chapters 5, 6 and 7), and will further explain the rationale behind the use of a multidisciplinary approach.

### Conversation analysis (CA) and discursive psychology (DP)

Conversation analysis as a method originally emerged from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and is concerned with the sequential analysis of naturally-occurring talk. Discursive psychologists often cite CA and ethnomethodology as a key resource for the development of theory and analytical method in DP (e.g. Edwards, 1997), so they are complementary to one another (even though they are often used in the service of exploring different disciplinary topics and concerns) as they share the common view of language as *social action*.

CA starts from the understanding that the everyday practices that make up Goffman's concept of the 'social order' of interaction as discussed in chapter 1, 'make social action and interaction, mutual sense-making, and social reality construction possible' (Heritage, 2004: 222). CA considers everyday 'talk-in-interaction' to be worthy of study in *its own right*, not simply, 'a window through which we can view other social processes or broader sociological variables' (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 21).

My own analysis shares the ethnomethodological orientation described by Heritage, and mainly draws on the method of CA as a way in to explore the structural, turn by turn nature of the interactions between group members. One of the main aims of CA is to, 'discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus being on how *sequences* of actions are generated' (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 14). By examining what group members make relevant in their talk, and what they orient to in their conversational turns, the analysis aims to explore the interactional management of social activities on the Weight Watchers message boards.

Most CA analysis examines 'talk' in the oral sense, but the exchanges in my data set take the form of online written message posts. This distinction has been noted in other studies of online interaction, and like Sneijder and te Molder, my analysis will 'analyse online conversation as everyday talk-in-interaction' (Sneijder and te Molder, 2004: 603, original emphasis). However, these authors acknowledge that there may be 'methodological consequences' of analysing written, asynchronous exchanges using methods developed to deal with transcriptions of recorded 'real life' talk, and the analysis will bear this distinction in mind. So, for example, turn-taking, which is 'one of the core ideas of the CA enterprise' (ten Have, 2007: 128) takes a somewhat different form in an online situation where participants are not co-present, and are more freely able to make contributions without waiting for others to finish speaking, or without having to make attempts to actively claim the floor. Due to the asynchronous nature of the interactions, group members are also able to respond to turns *other* than the most recent turn, or to multiple turns at once. Despite this distinction, CA still provides a useful framework from which to explore the way that accounts are constructed through talk (Buttny, 1993), and to analyse the overall structure of the interactions, the interactional management of the exchange through turn-taking, and participants' orientation to previous posts.

While CA is a detailed and rigorous methodology, its utility or relevance in exploring wider societal or cultural concerns has been questioned. Speer notes that, 'critics often raise the objection that CA – as a 'micro' approach to talk-in-interaction that limits itself to the study of members' perspectives and the analysis of short extracts – cannot account for the ways in which gender norms and 'wider, macro power structures' exert a determining effect on action' (Speer, 2005: 19). Hutchby (1999) also notes that CA has been criticised for its failure to engage with the macro level social and cultural context in which talk is taking place. However, both Speer and Hutchby argue that CA can in fact reveal much about power as an 'emergent outcome' of the organisation of interaction:

By focusing on the oriented-to structures of talk-in-interaction and their consequences in terms of the structural distribution of discursive resources, conversation analysts can succeed in making visible what for conventional sociologists is the awkwardly *invisible* concept of power.

(Hutchby, 1999: 92)

Hutchby notes a reluctance on the part of some conversation analysts to address concerns of power, focussing instead solely on the micro level organisation of interactions, but in my own

analysis, by employing a hybrid method, my aim is to make these links between talk-in-interaction and macro level societal power relations more explicit.

Kitzinger (2000) supports the view that the use of CA is not necessarily incompatible with a critical viewpoint. In fact, she suggests that the study of talk-in-interaction can reveal much about the way that societal power operates and is reproduced. She describes it as a method in which, 'people are understood not simply as victims of an all-powerful social order but also as agents actively engaged in methodical and sanctioned procedures for producing or resisting, colluding with or transgressing, the taken-for-granted social world' (Kitzinger, 2000: 168). Buttny (1993) similarly argues that social control should be conceived of as an emergent feature of social interaction, as through offering accounts of their actions individuals 'orient to and actively respond to the regulative function of the rules' (Buttny, 1993: 23).

Discursive psychology (DP) offers a useful framework to explore the management of issues of accountability and identity, which are central to these women's talk about their dieting experiences. One of the primary aims of DP is to provide a view of discourse as functional and action-oriented, as a counter to the traditional psychological interpretation of discourse as reflective of pre-existing attitudes and psychological states, so it is interested in the *constructive* nature of discourse. Discursive psychology is concerned with the examination of 'psychological topics' in interaction, and explores how matters of agency and identity emerge and are constructed in interaction in the course of accomplishing social action, like providing accounts, asking questions and constructing responsibility. It therefore encourages us to explore the construction of agency in group members' message posts, to examine, 'the ways in which different discursive strategies attribute agency – and, therefore, responsibility (and often blame)' (Stainton Rogers, 2004: 33). Stainton Rogers demonstrates that a study of discourse can be used to unpick the construction of 'authentic identity' (which in the case of my data would be 'authentic femininity' or an identity as an 'authentic weight watcher'), and to explore the operation of the regulatory strategies operating through gender.

Wetherell describes discursive psychology as, 'concerned with members' methods and the logic of accountability while describing also the collective and social patterning of background normative conceptions' (Wetherell, 1998: 405). These 'normative conceptions' are what Wetherell and Potter refer to as 'interpretative repertoires', frameworks of meaning which form the 'building blocks used for manufacturing versions of actions, self and social structures in talk' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992: 91). Interpretative repertoires are taken for granted

assumptions which form the basis of our 'common sense' cultural understanding, and are drawn on in our interactions with others, 'to promote some position in the context of the talk' (Antaki, 1994: 121).

In her work on women's talk about weight Guendouzi found that, 'participants in conversations that involve topics of body-size must adopt an interactional stance (subject-position) in relation to the social ideal, a process that results in discursive practices that reinforce and reproduce the social ideal' (Guendouzi, 2004: 1639). My own analysis will explore these discursive practices, and will consider how group members' interactions create subject positions which perpetuate norms around gender and body management. The interactional management of identity in relation to social norms also relates to the work of Goffman, which was introduced in chapter 1.

### Face and face management

As chapter 1 discussed, Goffman's (1959) concept of face is particularly relevant to the examination of the construction of identity and the performance of relational work in interaction. However, although Goffman introduced face management as an activity which occurs in interaction, his work did not actually go as far as analysing how these strategies manifest in the detail of *talk*. Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness expanded Goffman's observations and developed a way to *analyse* the concept in face in interaction, by identifying 'face threatening acts' (FTAs), and by examining the conversational strategies that speakers use to mitigate this potential threat to face. Brown and Levinson's model has been subject to a great deal of criticism (also outlined in more detail in chapter 1), not least for failing to take the cultural context of interactional sequences into account, with its Western perspective rendering it ethnocentric (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). Their interpretation of the concept of 'face' has also been questioned, as in their work they treat it as an individual attribute which must be 'protected'. In a review of studies of face Haugh argues that, 'face goes beyond such threats to the individual's self image in three important ways. Firstly, face can involve an awareness of one's position within a network of relationships. Secondly face can be associated with groups as well as individuals. And thirdly, face may be given or gained as well as sacrificed among other things, rather than being simply lost or saved' (Haugh, 2009: 2).

The nature of face as a group accomplishment is one which is particularly relevant to my data, and the analysis will therefore explore the nature of face, as Arundale (2009) suggests, as jointly achieved and emerging through interaction. As discussed in chapter 1, although Brown and Levinson's view of face as an individual attribute which can be lost or damaged may be misleading, their discussion of FTAs and 'facework' (strategies which mitigate potential threats to face) still raises some points of interest for the analysis. Several of the social activities which take place on the message boards (for example confession, or advice giving) are specifically identified by Brown and Levinson as FTAs, and an analysis of the interactional *management* of these exchanges should provide an interesting insight into the management of identity in this context. Politeness (or 'relational work', Locher and Watts, 2005) as a feature of the interactions on the Weight Watchers message boards will be explored in more detail in the next chapter (chapter 4), and chapter 4 will also consider the relevance of the notion of 'face' in the online context, where group members are not physically *co-present*.

Although Goffman's work on face deals with relationships mainly at the level of *interaction*, Giddens proposes that his ideas can also provide an insight into the workings of society on a wider level, suggesting that, 'Goffman's writings contribute much more to an understanding of the 'macro-structural' properties than Goffman supposed ... this very insight means seeking to connect in a direct way Goffman's analyses of co-presence with mechanisms of social reproduction across time and space' (Giddens, 1988: 277). As previously stated, the analysis will consider the interactions in the data set at both the micro and macro level, and the macro-level significance of the interactions in the data set will be addressed in the final section of this discussion.

#### Feminist/Foucauldian discourse analysis

The analysis is constantly mindful of the wider cultural environment in which the exchanges take place. While the analytical methods discussed so far can identify and explore (for example) the face management and accounting strategies taking place in the interactions, the full social importance of these conversations can only be appreciated by taking into account the context in which they are occurring. While from an analytical perspective the interactional management of a phenomenon like confession may be interesting in its own right, my analysis is also concerned with *why* it is relevant and/or important that confession, or some other social activity, is occurring in the exchanges. Therefore the analysis also considers the macro-level issues of gender and power discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Gill observes that, 'feminists

have been able to use discourse analysis to explore a range of questions concerning the reproduction of gender power relations' (Gill, 1995: 167), and my analysis aims to identify links between the fine detail of the talk-in-interaction, and its role in both reflecting and perpetuating societal gender norms.

### 3.4 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design, and has described the ethnographic approach to data collection. I have discussed the significance of 'talk-in-interaction' in relational work and the construction of identity, and explained the rationale for choosing to examine everyday talk in a commercial weight loss setting. The chapter has also addressed some of the practical and ethical issues involved with the use of online interactions as data, and has described the form and structure of the online exchanges.

The chapter has also discussed how a hybrid analytic methodology provides an appropriate framework for the analysis of talk as social action. By employing a discourse analytic method incorporating concepts from a range of approaches, which considers both the 'micro' (interactional) level and the 'macro' (cultural) level, the thesis aims to uncover 'the connections between people's accounts of themselves in everyday talk, and broader social and cultural beliefs and values' (Wetherell, 1996: 36).

Chapter 4 provides an examination of the local context of the commercial weight loss organisation, which sets the scene for the interactional analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7. In this chapter I will present a summary of my observations in the field, outlining the social practices that Weight Watchers members engage in at group meetings and online. The chapter will also consider the *community* aspect of the Weight Watchers regime. The notion of community in an *online* context will be addressed, and the chapter will explore the usefulness of the concepts of the community of practice and brand community as ways of understanding the group of users of the message boards.

# Chapter 4: The Weight Watchers Community

*I love weight watchers*

JPLAWSON

## 4.1 Introduction

The thesis so far has outlined the societal pressure put upon women to engage in practices of self surveillance, and has discussed the importance of *interaction* as a site where social norms are constructed and reproduced. The preceding methodology chapter (chapter 3) described the data collection strategy, and explained the rationale for studying the exchanges between members of a commercial weight loss group. The chapter also outlined the analytical method used in chapters 5, 6 and 7, which explore the exchanges on the Weight Watchers message boards in more detail. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a link between the macro-level context of societal gender norms and the micro-level context of the interactions, by considering the *local context* of the Weight Watchers message board community where these exchanges take place.

The chapter will begin by exploring the notion of *community* in more detail. The group members are engaged in the 'common endeavour' of self regulation, and the concept of the community of practice (C of P) may be a useful way to understand this group of Weight Watchers members and the social practices taking place in their message board interactions. The thesis will also take into account the *commercial* nature of the Weight Watchers organisation, and as one of the defining features of message board participation is commitment to both the organisation and the eating regime, the members may also be thought of as a 'brand community'.

The chapter will then provide an introduction to the Weight Watchers organisation and eating regime, and will outline the findings of my ethnographic observations of the organisational context, in order to set the scene for the analytical chapters ahead. I will describe the Weight Watchers regime and the structure and content of the weekly group meetings. The chapter will then consider the specific online message board context in which the interactions analysed

in chapters 5, 6 and 7 take place. I will consider the notion of community in an *online* context, and describe the social practices engaged in by the online message board community.

The final section of the chapter will return to the discussion of Goffman's work on face management which began in chapters 1 and 3. This section explores the notion of face management in the online context, and will consider the relevance of the concept of 'face' in a situation where the interactants are not co-present.

#### 4.2 The Weight Watchers community

The community aspect of the Weight Watchers regime is one which is promoted by the organisation as helpful to weight loss, and so the community performs a central role in the body modification practices engaged in by its members. As noted in chapter 1, as well as constructing our own identity as individuals, our interactions also negotiate our relationships with others, so the exchanges on the message boards are equally important in the formation of a community identity. This section will introduce two key theoretical approaches to understanding the notion of community in the message board context, the *community of practice* (C of P) (Wenger, 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; 1998), and the *brand community* (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

##### The community of practice

The Weight Watchers message boards constitute what could be defined as a 'community of practice', a concept which was incorporated into sociolinguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 490), who describe it as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor'.

Within the field of sociolinguistics, the C of P has mainly been used to examine the construction of gender, and 'this approach suggests that 'gender' is constituted through negotiated norms and practices, *within particular communities*; it has thus emphasised the need to investigate *situated constructions* of gender' (Stapleton, 2001: 461, original emphasis). Chapter 1 discussed the importance of *interaction* as productive of gendered identities, and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet propose a view of language and gender which sees them as grounded in and emerging through the 'practices' of the community. The Weight Watchers message boards are an interesting site in which to observe the construction of gender, as the

users of the boards are all engaged in dieting, an activity which is considered to be particularly 'feminine' and productive of gender power relations. The construction of gender is one which is fluid, constantly changing, and the C of P therefore provides a useful framework within which to explore the construction of both group and individual identity on the boards.

Practice theory is also helpful as an analytic tool because it provides a link between the micro-level linguistic interaction between the group members, and the wider social context in which it takes place (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999: 181). In the context of the Weight Watchers organisation there is a set of wider sociocultural ideals around gendered norms within which the interactions take place, as well as more specific beliefs relating to the eating regime to which members subscribe. The ideals and social practices of the community are reflected and perpetuated in the interactions which take place on the message boards.

In the context of the Weight Watchers message boards, gender is a particularly significant factor, as the group is made up entirely of women, and they are engaged in an activity (dieting) which is typically 'feminine'. The practices of self surveillance discussed in chapter 2 can be thought of as a *collaborative* and *interactional* activity, and so the C of P becomes particularly significant in this context, as individual and group identities are constructed through the interactions between members of these groups.

Graham (2007) suggests that a C of P framework is particularly appropriate when studying interactions in an *online* context, due to the dynamic nature of these communities. This approach is also well suited to the investigation of *face management* on the message boards, as what is considered to be 'polite' is 'interpersonal and intersubjective' (Graham, 2007: 747), and is dependent upon the interactional norms of the community and context in which the interaction takes place.

Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) discuss the usefulness of the C of P for analysis in ethnographic research, and explore the similarities and differences between C of Ps and comparable concepts such as social networks, social identities, and speech communities. They conclude that the C of P is distinguishable from these other concepts by the emphasis it places upon *practice*, which Eckert and McConnell-Ginet define as the 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations' within the group (ibid: 490). The term was first established by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their work on learning, which draws on ideas from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn

how to behave through observing others, and 'model' their own behaviour based on their observations. Lave and Wenger's theory takes this idea a step further, suggesting that learning takes place not just through observation, but through social *participation*.

Wenger describes social participation as 'a process of learning and of knowing', consisting of four main components – 1) *Meaning*: our individual and collective ability to experience the world as meaningful, 2) *Practice*: the shared resources and perspectives that can sustain mutual action, 3) *Community*: the social context in which our endeavours are considered to be legitimate, and our involvement in them signals competence, and 4) *Identity*: how the process of learning 'changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities' (Wenger, 1998: 5). Therefore, when Wenger talks about 'participation', he does not simply mean the act of doing things with other people, but he expands his definition to 'a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (ibid: 4). In other words, our involvement in a C of P informs the way we see both ourselves and the world around us, and how we interpret and represent our actions and identities, and practices 'emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavour' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 490).

Holmes and Meyerhoff outline Wenger's three 'crucial dimensions' of a C of P, the first of which is *mutual engagement*, the idea that members of a C of P must have 'regular and mutually defining interaction' (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999: 179). The amount of 'traffic' on the online message boards means that Weight Watchers members interact with one another extremely frequently, although because of the large size of the group these exchanges may take place between different members at different times. As discussed in chapter 3, the extent of this engagement can vary, as in this context members can post as infrequently as they wish (if they choose to do so at all), yet still be considered to be members of the group.

The next dimension of the C of P is *joint engagement*, a term which refers to the 'practice' element of the phrase, and Holmes and Meyerhoff note the difficulty posed by the lack of a clear definition of what exactly constitutes a 'shared goal' (ibid: 175). In the case of the message boards, all of the group members are engaged in the same activity, which is following the Weight Watchers regime and attempting to lose weight, but the physical acts of food preparation and consumption, for example, take place 'offline'. Lueg (2000) raises the problem of identifying the 'action' in a virtual C of P in his study of an online group set up to

discuss body art. He suggests that the importance of 'bodily experience' in the group's activities is problematic when defining the group as a community of practice, as the 'joint enterprise' in which they are engaged does not take place 'online', which is where they interact. However, despite the potential difficulty involved in 'bridging the gap' between online and offline behaviour, he eventually concludes that the online group *can* be defined as an online (or 'virtual') C of P, as it meets many of the criteria (such as self selection, common interests and shared motivations) defined by Hildreth *et al* (2000).

On the Weight Watchers message boards, I would argue that the online/offline distinction is less problematic, because as the remainder of the chapter will show in the commercial weight loss context the division between the two domains is somewhat blurred. Although the physical acts of food preparation, eating and exercise are carried out offline, and in private, body reduction is not a straightforwardly 'individual' endeavour. As the later analytical chapters will demonstrate in more detail, self surveillance is a collaborative activity, which is achieved through interaction. Being a 'good weight watcher' requires the constant monitoring and recording of consumption, an activity which takes place online as well as off. The whole point of the boards is to enable members to become 'better weight watchers', so as well as monitoring their own consumption, message board users must also help others in their effort to do so, offering information, support and advice when required. Online acts of self-surveillance, which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, include requests for the point values of foods, reports of progress, and confessions of transgression. Through these practices members construct themselves as accountable to the community and to the regime, and show that they are subjecting themselves and their actions to the required level of scrutiny. This is really not so different from what happens in the 'real life' group meetings (whose C of P status Lueg, 2000, would be unlikely to question), where members engage in the day to day act of weight watching individually, but meet at regular intervals to monitor progress and to discuss the regime. Therefore, arguably the activity of self surveillance could be considered to be one of the shared endeavours on the message boards.

Another way in which group members can align themselves with an identity as a 'good weight watcher' is by engaging in the creation of a supportive and friendly online environment, where members develop meaningful relationships with one another. As the discussion of the social practices on the message boards later in the chapter will show, members discuss several non-Weight Watchers related topics, so it is unlikely that the group members see the function of the boards as *simply* a means of maximising their weight loss (through for example the sharing

of recipes, or information about the point values of foods). The 'social' nature of Weight Watchers membership was explained to me by several of the members who attended the 'real life' weekly meetings, one of whom remarked that she would still attend the weekly weigh in even if she knew she had gained a lot of weight, so that she could 'meet up with the girls and have a natter'.

The social function of the boards is therefore important to the members, they are a space in which they can engage in 'meaningful' interaction with like-minded people, and the exchange of personal information on the boards suggests that a sense of intimacy is important for at least some of the users of the boards. Therefore, *another* common 'goal' of the message board community is the creation of solidarity between group members. These two 'shared endeavours' are not entirely separate, and in fact share a circular relationship, as the solidary nature of the message boards enhances the surveillance practices taking place on them, while in turn the act of surveillance results in social practices which strengthen solidarity.

However, the amiable nature of the Weight Watchers message boards is not an essential component of ALL C of Ps. As Wenger explains, 'connotations of peaceful coexistence, mutual support, or interpersonal allegiance are not assumed.... In some communities of practice, conflict and misery can even constitute the core characteristic of a shared practice' (Wenger, 1998: 77). So although in this case the group members are maintaining a supportive space in which to interact, it is not solely the display of understanding and friendship which defines the group as a C of P, this is simply one of the joint enterprises in which they are engaged.

It is important to note that although there are many positive benefits to participating in a community with shared ideals, and engaging in interaction which is supportive, friendly and cultivates solidarity between women, any analysis must also take into account the wider cultural context in which these exchanges take place. Therefore, although the group members may find the day to day experience of interacting the message boards to be enjoyable, this experience must also be contextualised as a part of the cultural 'machinery' which enforces societal gender norms, and compels women to engage in costly and time-consuming body modification in the pursuit of 'self improvement'. A fundamental tension exists between the 'positive' aspects of the weight loss experience (such as the formation of relationships, social support, and the potential for 'empowerment' discussed in chapter 2), and the feminist perspective that dieting is ultimately a form of social control which is harmful to women, disempowering them and undermining their position in society, as chapters 1 and 2 discussed

in some detail. Therefore, although instances of support (for example) may be positive in *this local context*, their role in the perpetuation of 'acceptable' behaviour and appearance norms will also be considered in the analysis.

The third and final 'crucial dimension' discussed by Holmes and Meyerhoff is a *shared repertoire*, of 'joint resources for negotiating meaning', which are accumulated over time and include 'linguistic resources such as specialized terminology and linguistic routines' (ibid: 176). The exchanges on the Weight Watchers boards clearly indicate a shared repertoire, which can be seen in specialist terminology relating to the regime, like 'points', 'weigh in' (which will both be described in more detail later in the chapter), or the 'Wendy plan' (a way of redistributing weekly consumption, which will be discussed in chapter 7's analysis). Similarly, it is possible to identify various 'linguistic routines', including the 'ritual' reporting of progress, which will be discussed later in the chapter and will provide the focus for the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Therefore, it seems that the online Weight Watchers community *can* be defined as a C of P, as it fulfils the criteria of regular interaction, shared resources, and a joint enterprise. Each individual simultaneously belongs to numerous different C of Ps, without necessarily being conscious of the fact. As Wenger explains, 'communities of practice are everywhere' but 'they are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons they are also quite familiar. Most communities of practice do not have a name and do not issue membership cards' (Wenger, 1998: 6-7). The Weight Watchers boards are an interesting example of a C of P, because they DO have a strong identity, and its users are a defined and easily identifiable group. Group members would probably identify themselves as 'dieters' or 'weight watchers', and the community itself has been established in quite a formal way. The members of the group have registered with the site in order to be able to post on the boards, and the space in which they are interacting is an official one affiliated to the Weight Watchers organisation. The 'brand community', which will be outlined in the next section, is a concept which addresses the *commercial* nature of the Weight Watchers experience.

### The brand community

The term brand community was coined by Muniz and O'Guinn to describe 'a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001: 412). They argue that while commercialism is regularly

cited as one of the reasons for the disintegration of 'traditional' community, 'consumers seek communal affiliation and are likely to foster it wherever they can'. Due to the pervasiveness of consumption in today's society, contemporary communities will inevitably arise around affiliation to consumer goods, and they warn that in order to fully understand the phenomenon of community it is important to address the concept of the brand community (ibid: 426).

Considering the message board community in this way acknowledges the commercial nature of the Weight Watchers organisation, and consequently the online community of members who subscribe to the regime. In his study of a Weight Watchers group, Martin (2002) notes the significance of the *organisation* to members' recounting of their experiences, because, 'as the language of the organisations becomes meaningful to individuals for explaining lived experience and is adopted in sense-making activities, that language becomes a vehicle through which individuals become tied to the organisations' (Martin, 2002: 200). Therefore, the interactions of the women in my own data must be interpreted within the *context* in which they occur, taking into account the ideals and vocabulary of the Weight Watchers organisation.

Even though the community is an autonomous and self-governing group of individuals, the space in which they are interacting is owned by the Weight Watchers organisation. The message boards were set up and designed by Weight Watchers, and are accessed via the organisation's website. The commercial weight loss business is highly lucrative, the Weight Watchers brand is a well established and well known one, and the eating regime is among the most popular both in the UK and worldwide. The organisation gains vast amounts of income from subscriptions to weekly meetings and online resources, as well as through the sale of branded merchandise such as magazines, books, and foodstuffs.

Although access to the Weight Watchers message boards is free and unlimited, all of those who post on the boards are following the Weight Watchers eating regime. Of these, a significant proportion pay a regular fee to obtain access to details of the eating regime and to receive regular support in the form of weekly 'real life' group meetings or an online equivalent known as the 'esource'. Some users of the boards also report purchasing Weight Watchers branded food, drink, magazines, point calculators or weighing scales. Therefore, despite the fact that the message boards do not generate any income directly, they act as a valuable marketing tool for the organisation. By providing a space in which group members are able to support and encourage one another in their weight loss endeavour, the organisation

encourages commitment to the Weight Watchers brand. If members remain committed to the weight loss project, and keep faith that the Weight Watchers regime is an effective way to lose weight, then this generates further revenue for the organisation.

In their work Muniz and O'Guinn identify three main characteristics which define a community. The first of these is 'consciousness of kind' which is 'the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community ... a shared knowing of belonging'. The second is 'the presence of shared rituals and traditions', and the third 'a sense of moral responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001: 413). They observe all three of these characteristics in the brand community, noting that, 'members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another' (ibid: 418). Such connection can be observed on the Weight Watchers message boards – members have chosen to follow the organisation's eating regime over the other alternatives available, and they express loyalty towards the organisation, adopting its practices and technologies. Group members also express a common understanding, something which cannot be appreciated by those who are not committed to following the Weight Watchers regime. Muniz and O'Guinn note that, 'the shared consciousness of brand communities is also informed by an explicitly commercial and competitive marketplace ethos' (ibid: 419) – members may define themselves according to the commercial choice they have made (Weight Watchers, rather than its main competitor Slimming World).

Muniz and O'Guinn observed the presence of rituals and traditions which were engaged in by members of the brand community. While the types of rituals they discuss include improvised actions such as greetings exchanged between owners of the same car, the rituals of the Weight Watchers brand community are for the most part dictated by the organisation itself. Commitment to the Weight Watchers brand (and regime) involves a considerable investment of time and effort, and members follow prescribed actions on a day to day basis, so many of these rituals are arguably already in place, defined by the organisation as part of branded practices. These will be addressed later in the chapter, but the ritual of point counting, for example, is unique to the Weight Watchers regime, and is therefore a distinctive feature of the social practices of the community.

The authors observe that the final characteristic of community, a sense of moral responsibility, is evident in two main forms – the integration and retention of members, and assisting fellow members in the proper use of the brand. Again, the message boards fulfil the criteria for a brand community, as the main purpose of the Weight Watchers message boards is to help members in their efforts to follow the Weight Watchers eating regime by offering information, advice and encouragement. As the analysis in chapter 7 will show, community members work together in the message board interactions to maintain group loyalty to the Weight Watchers regime, even in the face of poor weight loss results. The Weight Watchers message boards provide members with the opportunity to interact with other individuals who share their commitment to the regime, and as such they foster loyalty to both the organisation and the body modification practices it promotes. The commercial nature of the weight loss endeavour is not the main focus of the thesis, but talk about the organisation and the regime permeates the exchanges on the boards. Therefore, when appropriate the analysis will draw upon work on brand communities in order to explore members' relationship with the Weight Watchers brand, particularly with regard to the expression of commitment to the eating regime and to the organisation.

This section has described the concepts of the community of practice and the brand community, and has outlined the relevance of these approaches to understanding the Weight Watchers message board community. Members of this community are engaged in body reduction practices which can be observed in part within the interactions on the message boards. The exchanges on the boards also encourage solidarity between group members and commitment to the Weight Watchers regime, and this serves to intensify the self surveillance activities carried out by community members. The next section will provide a more detailed introduction to the Weight Watchers organisation, and will outline the activities and social practices that being a 'weight watcher' involves.

#### **4.3 The Weight Watchers organisation and regime**

Weight Watchers was established in the USA in 1963, and the first UK group was opened four years later. Since then, the organisation has grown to be one of the most popular commercial weight loss groups worldwide, and currently has over 1.5 million members in 30 countries. In the UK alone, there are over 7,000 meetings held each week ([www.weightwatchers.co.uk](http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk)). Although Weight Watchers do not make demographic information about their members public, it is estimated that around 95 percent are women (Lowe *et al*, 2008).

There are no clear rules for eligibility, and Weight Watchers do not specify how 'overweight' new members must be to be accepted. Their guidelines list a number of groups who are not permitted to join (including pregnant women, individuals diagnosed with a clinical eating disorder, and children under 10, <http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk/about/his/health.aspx>), and advises those with health problems to consult their doctor before embarking on the regime. Weight Watchers specify that you should make sure you are not underweight (with a BMI of under 20) before joining, but even individuals who fall into the recognised 'healthy' BMI range of 20-25 are considered eligible for membership. The BMI calculator on the organisation's website ([http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk/health/asm/calc\\_bmi.aspx](http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk/health/asm/calc_bmi.aspx)) advises potential members with a BMI of 22 or above that 'you might feel that losing a few pounds could improve your energy, overall health, and self esteem'. It seems therefore that the main criterion for membership is not necessarily related to health, instead it is the *desire* to lose weight. The initial goal weight loss set for each member is 10% of their body weight.

The Weight Watchers regime is based on a 'points' system, where a portion of each food is allocated a numerical value. The precise details of the points system are a closely-guarded secret, but point values are based on the number of calories and amount of saturated fat a food contains. On joining the organisation, each new member pays a registration fee (this was £8 at the time the fieldwork took place), they are weighed, and are given a daily point allocation according to their current weight (on average around 20 points per day, the regime also allows members to earn 'bonus points' by exercising). They are given a bag containing three books - a shopping guide, which contains a list of point values of foods to be cooked and eaten at home, an eating out guide, which provides the point values of meals in popular restaurants and takeaways, and a journal, so they are able to record their daily intake. These books act as a resource for members to monitor their consumption, and to ensure that they adhere to the eating regime. The Weight Watchers website also features an 'online' points calculator, where members can calculate the point values of their meals, and keep a detailed record of the food they eat each day. The regime is promoted on the basis that 'no food is forbidden', and members are free to eat whatever types of food they like, as long as they stick precisely to their allocated number of points. Weight Watchers explicitly positions the eating plan as an 'anti-diet', using the advertising slogan 'Stop dieting. Start living'.

#### 4.4 The Weight Watchers meetings

In the online exchanges analysed in chapters 5, 6 and 7, group members often discuss their experiences at group meetings. This section will describe my observations of the weekly Weight Watchers meetings, in order to contextualise the message threads later in the thesis. The Weight Watchers online message boards will be discussed in more detail in sections 4.5 and 4.6.

The commercial weight loss model is based around the idea that attempts to lose weight are more successful if they are conducted in *groups*. Weight Watchers members pay a weekly fee (£4.95 at the time of the fieldwork) to attend local group meetings, or to gain access to the 'Esource', an online equivalent, to obtain encouragement, help and support with losing weight. The meetings are held across the country, in local halls and community centres, and last approximately one hour. Each session is run by a group 'leader', who is usually a Weight Watchers member who has achieved their goal weight. Although Weight Watchers and similar organisations are open to both men and women, both of the groups I attended had an all-female membership, and were run by female group leaders. Each group had between 12 and 25 attendees, although this varied from week to week. Members ranged in age from late teens to mid-late sixties. Most of the women attended meetings alone, but some came with a workmate or family member (mother and daughter or two sisters). Some of the members had babies or young children, and on some weeks they brought them along to the meeting with them.

##### Tracking progress - The weigh in

Right before the meeting, you'll be weighed privately and confidentially by the meeting's Leader or helper. The weigh-in is a way to help you track your progress and stay accountable to yourself. After the weigh-in, you'll also get guidance on setting a goal that's right for you.

(What Happens at a Meeting? - Weight Watchers website)

The meeting consists of two main stages. During the first half hour of the meeting group members arrive for their weekly 'weigh in', which is used to regularly monitor progress. Upon arrival members queue up, pay their attendance fee, and await their turn on the scales. The weigh in is conducted in private, behind a screen, and the group leader keeps a record of the result on each members' card. While they waited for the weigh in members chatted to one

another in the queue, and many removed their shoes, and sometimes other clothing, in order to reduce their weight as much as possible.

I always wait until afterwards to have my tea, but it means I'm sat here starving till half eight!

(Sylvia, group member)

Several of the women I spoke to took measures of this kind to achieve a successful weigh in result, including wearing the lightest clothes in their wardrobe (one woman even admitted to weighing her jeans to find the lightest pair), cutting down on food on the day of the meeting, or even going to the toilet immediately before joining the weigh in queue.

The weigh in result is extremely important to group members, and some members attend for the sole purpose of getting weighed. The weigh in results of the women I spoke to ranged from a loss of three pounds, to a gain of two pounds, and although the weigh in process is confidential, most members seemed happy to share their progress, good or bad, with one another. If someone reached a target weight, then a bell was rung to signify their success. Conversely, if a member had gained weight then they were given the opportunity to keep a 'food diary' for a week, and have it checked by the group leader to try to find out why they had been unsuccessful.

### The meeting

Staying is more important than getting weighed. It is a fact that members who stay to class are more successful than those who don't! You will get ideas, support, praise and help and have lots of fun! DON'T MISS OUT!

(Group handout)

The second half hour of the meeting is an optional one, members can choose to leave immediately after their weigh in. However, most of the women in the groups I attended opted to stay for the group session, which changes from week to week and is conducted by the group leader. After being weighed in, members took to their seats which were arranged in semi-circular rows, and would talk to each other (and to me) while they waited for the weigh in to be completed. The group leader then announced the names of weight watchers who had successfully reached milestone targets, awarding '7' stickers to members who had lost a total

of half a stone, and keyrings to those who had reached their 10% target. (The overall structure of the meetings was broadly similar in the Slimming World meetings I attended, but in these groups the focus on progress was made even more explicit, as the group leader announced the amount of weight lost by each group member individually, while the rest of the group applauded them. If someone had not been successful in losing weight, or had 'stayed the same', the leader would announce their total weight loss instead).

You get lots of ideas. Last week we did Ready Steady Cook, and we had to y'know come up with recipes using all different ingredients. So it gives you ideas about what to do.

(Dawn, group member)

After these announcements, the group leader gave a short talk on a topic related to food and weight loss. This changed every week, and dealt with topics as varied as how to 'cope' with cheese ('because some of us are scared of cheese'), ideas for low point breakfasts, and how to stay motivated throughout the weight loss journey. These talks were light-hearted in tone, and group members were encouraged to contribute. The leader would often bring samples of Weight Watchers branded products for the group to try, and there were always a number of books, magazines and foods available for them to buy if they wished. The meetings ended with a question and answer session, where members were able to raise any problems they had encountered, and could receive support and advice. An initial answer was provided by the group leader, but she would often throw the question open to the group. Members gave their own advice for dealing with particular situations, sharing their own experiences, and providing tips about low point foods and where to buy them. Like the earlier talk, although group members raised problems that they had experienced, the discussions were generally light-hearted and jokey in tone.

### Support and motivation

The group leader played a central role in directing the discussion in the session, answering questions, and motivating group members. Stinson (2001: 70) notes that in the commercial weight loss context the tone of the meetings can be dependent on the personality or *style* of the group leader. There were some visible differences between the two leaders I observed – one was a little more formal, while the other was more relaxed, and seemed to have a more 'friendly' relationship with the group members. However, Stinson also observes that despite any individual differences, each group leader works within the 'needs and agenda' of the

weight loss organisation. As the leaders I observed were employed by different organisations, it is difficult to tell whether these differences in style may be due to organisational differences, but their approaches also shared a number of similarities, and the leaders appeared to play an almost identical role, performing the same motivational function, albeit in a different style.

It's good, because she's been there. So she can give us advice, and she's knows what it's like. And she knows you have ups and downs.

(Dawn, group member)

Both leaders used a number of strategies to motivate group members. Both organisations employ members who have successfully reached their target weight as group leaders, and on several occasions leaders referred to their *own* weight loss experiences. One leader showed the group a 'pre-Weight Watchers' photograph of herself at the beginning of each session, and outlined the ways that following the plan had improved her quality of life. (She also explained that she was still following the Weight Watchers plan, and would occasionally attend meetings run by another leader as a member, reflecting the lifelong nature of the weight loss endeavour). There was also a mysterious lump on the table at the front of the room throughout each meeting. When I asked one of the women in the group about it, she informed me that it was a physical representation of two pounds of fat (the amount of weight that the Weight Watchers regime defines as a sensible and achievable weekly goal), which was left there to remind members what the weight they were losing looked like.

As well as offering information and advice verbally, leaders also regularly handed out leaflets giving advice on a variety of specific topics, from how to choose a low point meal in an Italian restaurant to how to be confident in your bikini on holiday. The subject matter of many of these leaflets was aimed squarely at a female audience, and some examples can be seen in appendix 2.

Please remember I WILL ALWAYS BE HERE FOR YOU! I am only on the end of the phone – Please call me if you are struggling and need a helping hand.

(Group handout)

At the end of every meeting, the leader wished the group members good luck with the week ahead, but the support offered is not confined to the weekly meetings. The leaders provided the members with their telephone number, so that they are able to contact them if they need

help during the week. Similarly, leaders would telephone members who had been upset by a weight gain, or write to congratulate individuals on successful weight loss, in order to maintain their motivation commitment to the regime.

### The commercial weight loss brand

The Weight Watchers organisation also produces a range of products which are available for both members and non-members to buy, and both meetings had a table set up in one corner where members could buy branded products. These products include a monthly magazine (which contains weight loss tips, stories and recipes), a series of cookbooks, electronic equipment like point calculators and scales, and a wide range of branded foods and drinks, including ready meals, snack bars, desserts and wine (see appendix 1 for an example of an advertisement for a Weight Watchers product).

All our foods and drinks are taste-tested against full fat alternatives, meaning you don't have to compromise your taste buds, or your good intentions!

(Shop - Weight Watchers website)

I refuse to stock biccies or anything else so my munchie attacks are limited to WW bars!

(LAURAPD, New Community Users message board)

The Weight Watchers food and drink is offered as a 'more virtuous' alternative to regular brands. During the meetings the Weight Watchers leader frequently referred to these branded products when suggesting solutions to problems posed by group members. She also kept the group informed about any special offers relating to these items, either at the meetings or in supermarkets.

As discussed in chapter 3, the Weight Watchers organisation also provides members with a website (see appendix 3), where they can obtain information about the eating regime, buy these Weight Watchers products, get ideas for recipes, and read member 'success stories' (see appendix 5 for an example). Most significantly for this thesis, the website also provides access to an online Weight Watchers 'community' (see appendix 6), where members can interact with one another remotely. The interactions analysed in chapters 5, 6 and 7 all take place on the

online Weight Watchers message boards, so the next section will describe the message boards in more detail, and will consider the *online* characteristics of the message board community.

#### 4.5 The online message board community

The review of the literature in section 4.2 suggests that both the community of practice and brand community are useful ways to conceptualise the Weight Watchers message board community, as each one offers some insight into the social practices taking place on the boards. The rest of the chapter will provide a more specific description of the social practices taking place on the *message boards*, and will discuss how these practices, and their management in interaction, relate to aims and ideals of the Weight Watchers organisation and to the practice of self surveillance more generally.

This discussion will also address the online nature of the message board interactions. While the computer-mediated characteristics of the exchanges will not be the *primary* focus of the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7, the exchanges cannot be analysed without taking the online context into account. The remote nature of both the interactions themselves, and the way in which the community is formed and maintained will affect the way in which members are able to interact with one another. Therefore, features of the exchanges which are specific to the online context will be discussed as they arise, and the significance of the remote, text based nature of the exchanges will be considered throughout, particularly with regard to face management online, which will be discussed in more detail in section 4.7.

#### Communities online

When considering the online community, it is important to note that critics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (e.g. Putnam, 2000) have questioned whether it is possible for a 'real' community to exist online at all. They claim that society is becoming fragmented as a result of the increase in online interaction, and that CMC groups are inferior to so called 'real-life' communities. As CMC is physically remote and involves no face to face contact, this interaction is considered by some to be emotionally distant and superficial. Chenault (1998) reports that CMC interactions are widely seen to be 'casual, temporary, false and lacking deep (or any) emotion', but despite the claims of Kiesler *et al* (1991) among others, that online interactions lack social cues and are therefore impersonal, many studies present evidence that emotional and social interaction is often one of the main reasons for using CMC.

This view is shared by Wellman and Gulia, who assert individuals' online relationships are 'much like most of the ones they develop in their 'real life' communities' (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 186). There are numerous studies of online groups (e.g. Baym, 1995, 1997, 2000; Cherny, 1999, among many others) which identify several features which would be considered to be defining of communities. These studies suggest that online communities are no different to those in the 'real' world, the only difference being that in the online community initial contact is established via a computer, not face to face.

Studies of CMC suggest that people of a social nature will also use *online* spaces to interact socially, and see them as a way in which to meet a wider range of people with similar interests and viewpoints (e.g. Wellman and Gulia, 1999). The idea of what constitutes community has gradually evolved, and in many cases CMC forms a part of the social network of an individual, who is a member of several different types of community, specific to their multiple needs and interests. Online communities act as a natural progression of the 'offline' notion of community, expanding the range of people with whom it is possible to interact and to share ideas, thoughts and feelings. While some online interactions are superficial, this is often the case in many of our face-to-face relationships, and there is plenty of evidence of tightly-knit online communities offering help, guidance and emotional support. Although there are numerous examples of online groups which have been *specifically established* to offer social support to users (e.g. Mickelson, 1997; King and Moreggi, 1998 among others, also see Tanis, 2007 for a more detailed discussion of the potential benefits, and drawbacks, of online social support groups), there is evidence to suggest that in many cases online groups may be supportive even when they are not designed with this purpose specifically in mind (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). In fact, 'the level of concern for fellow participants in Internet forums is remarkable ... There is a higher degree of feeling connected than would be expected from interpersonal relating devoid of body language and other non-verbal cues' (King and Moreggi, 1998: 81).

As noted, Wellman and Gulia (1999) observe that in online communities feelings of closeness tend to be based around shared *interests*, rather than shared social characteristics such as gender or socio-economic status. In the context of the Weight Watchers message boards, although the members of the community also all happen to be female, their shared 'interest' is the activity of body reduction, and a commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. In the Weight Watchers context, a member may not have a close friend or family member who

understands the regime or shares the weight loss project, with whom she can discuss her weight loss experience on a daily basis. Yet on the message boards she is able to interact with hundreds of other women who are in a similar situation, and who understand what she is going through, no matter how geographically remote they may be, and so they provide members with access to other people with whom they have something in common. Therefore, although the notion of community online is contested, there is evidence that the users of message boards and similar spaces get similar benefits from interacting with others online as they do offline. The remainder of the chapter will discuss the day to day business of community membership, from joining the message board community, to contributing to the exchanges taking place on the boards.

### Becoming a community member

The message boards can be used by anyone who has access to the Weight Watchers website, it is not necessary to be a member of the organisation or to attend weekly meetings. It is not even strictly necessary to be following the Weight Watchers regime, but given that it is the main focus of the exchanges on the message boards, there would be no real reason to join if you were not. Anyone can read the content of the boards, but in order to post messages members must 'sign up' by creating an account and selecting a unique 'username' which is used to identify their posts (the significance of usernames and the features of the message posts were discussed in chapter 3).

Becoming a member of a community of practice 'inevitably involves the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence' (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999: 174), new members need to learn how to behave appropriately in that context. Similarly, Baym discusses the formation of online community identity in terms of 'folklore' – a set of shared interests, assumptions and traditions which play a central role in the maintenance of a strong group identity and in defining 'ways of doing things' in the group. She observes that, 'computer-mediated groups share the topics around which they organize, the system that links them, and the communication that passes between them' (Baym, 1997: 103).

In their discussion of the formation of social norms in online groups, Postmes, Spears and Lea suggest that for many groups the lack of 'extraneous and historical' identity cues means that, 'the properties of the group and behaviour within it (the formation of social norms of conduct and of social identity itself) need to be inferred from others' and one's own actions and the

responses to them' (Postmes, Spears and Lea, 2000: 345). It is possible (but unlikely) that all new members familiarise themselves with the conventions of the message boards by 'lurking' on the site before posting. Lurking, the act of reading the messages on a site but not participating, was discussed in chapter 3. This is one form of 'peripheral participation' in online interaction, and studies of the membership of online groups suggest that as many as 90% of the users of some message boards may be lurkers (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). Members who lurk are (virtually) present, but are not actively contributing, yet by reading the posts they are still participating (albeit in a passive way) in the C of P. In his work on online C of Ps, Lueg suggests that, 'from a communities-of-practice perspective, lurking may be regarded as peripheral participation and posting own articles resembles participation and is indeed constituent for becoming a full member of a newsgroup' (Lueg, 2000: 5). While peripheral membership only requires members to *read* the message boards, in order to become full members of the C of P, users must also *contribute* to the discussions. It seems therefore that although new members can learn the community norms through passive observation, it is more likely that the competence of newcomers can be explained by the similarity of the message board environment to the wider social norms that they are already familiar with.

Although in this context members may be new to the *Weight Watchers message boards*, the exchanges on the boards do not take place in a cultural vacuum. As discussed in chapter 1, the gendered societal norms of self regulation are familiar to all women, and dieting is a common topic in all-female conversation. It is likely then that all of the women on the boards will have experience of talking about weight loss in some context, and as they are all following the regime (and not always for the first time) many will already be familiar with the norms and conventions of the organisation. Therefore, while some of the elements specific to the online message boards may be unfamiliar, their previous experiences will have equipped the women who join the site with many of the interactional skills that they need in order to be able to act appropriately in this environment. The next section will provide an outline of the types of exchanges taking place on the Weight Watchers message boards.

## 4.6 The message board interactions

### Commitment to the Weight Watchers regime

how fab is this diet!  
(HELENP, New Community Users board)

As mentioned in section 3.2, in contrast to the 'real life' Weight Watchers meetings, the message boards have no leader to impose the topic under discussion and to guide the interaction. Therefore, in the online context group members are free to raise any topic that they choose, and use the boards as they wish (within reason). However, despite the absence of an official representative of the organisation, one of the key norms of the group appears to be a commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. As discussed in chapter 3, although there is no visible moderator presence on the message boards, the message threads *are* moderated, and the site contains a statement that any posts which may be considered offensive will be deleted. Therefore, it is possible that any messages which openly question the regime could be removed by the organisation, but it is equally possible that such criticism simply rarely occurs. The tone on the message boards is mostly very positive, and members express their commitment to the regime in a number of ways which will be discussed further in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

### Social support

As the topics discussed on the message board are chosen by the board users, the members themselves have control over the form that these interactions take, and it is these exchanges which define the C of P. However, there are some elements of the social practices on the message boards which are predefined to an extent by the organisation's description of the boards on their introduction on the website:

Whether you're sharing your success or a recipe or two, this is the place to make new friends and become inspired.

(Community - Weight Watchers website)

In this short statement, the organisation constructs the message boards as a 'happy' space for members to share with one another. As the Weight Watchers organisation is based upon the central tenet that the key to successful weight loss is support and encouragement from others,

these social practices are in-keeping with the defined function of the boards as a source of help and support. By describing the site as 'the place to make new friends', the organisation defines the boards as a place in which to form close relationships with others through interaction. As the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7 will show, throughout the exchanges users of the board interact in ways which facilitate the formation of friendly and supportive relationships between members of the group.

### Self-disclosure

One of the main ways in which group members cultivate a sense of community is through *self-disclosure*. The practice of self-disclosure plays an important role in the formation of group solidarity, and the relational benefits and gendered nature of this type of exchange were discussed in chapter 1. One way that community members do this is by sharing personal information about themselves, from their age, their occupation, their likes and dislikes, and even the car that they drive.

What's everyone's favourite Karaoke song? We always end up singing Copa Cabana!

(Rebecca21, New Community Users board)

There are a number of message threads on the boards which are solely concerned with 'chat' between group members, and in fact over one third of the threads in the data set are concerned entirely with topics which have no connection to food, dieting or the Weight Watchers regime. These cover a wide range of subjects, including films and TV, relationships and sex, work, holidays, and even Christmas shopping. By giving personal information about themselves, and sharing their own likes, dislikes and opinions, group members are able to learn more about one another, making interactions less impersonal and anonymous. The importance of day to day 'chat' in the formation of an identity as a competent online community member is noted by Rheingold, who observes that, 'it is hard to distinguish idle talk from serious context-setting. In a virtual community, idle talk *is* context-setting. Idle talk is where people learn what kind of person you are, why you should be trusted or mistrusted, what interests you' (Rheingold, 2000: 54). In this sense, online 'talk' is much the same as face to face interaction.

Similarly, as discussed in chapter 3, individuals may choose to include a 'signature' which appears at the bottom of each of their posts giving details about their lives and personalities.

On the Weight Watchers message board, several members use this signature space to give information about their weight loss goals and their progress to date, and many include motivational statements which display their commitment to the Weight Watchers organisation (or 'brand'). An example is shown below (some information has been removed or changed to protect anonymity):

---

XKaren ♥  
Believe in yourself xxxx  
GOAL achieved [date]  
New target = 10.3 by xmas - MET II  
New target = 9.9 by [date]  
Don't make a bad day a bad week !!!!!  
[location] MEET – [date]

---

The efforts that group members go to in order to assert their individual identities in an online context counter concerns expressed by early authors on the topic of CMC (e.g. Kiesler *et al*, 1991) that the remote nature of online interactions would lead to deindividuation. They suggested that the anonymity of online exchanges would remove the need for self-regulation and self-awareness, resulting in uninhibited and assertive messages. However, it seems that users of the Weight Watchers message boards (along with the members of many other online communities) actively seek to minimise this anonymity, and display none of the disinhibition that Kiesler *et al* predicted. It seems that many group members make an effort to get to know one another personally, and use the message boards as a space for social interaction which does not directly relate to the Weight Watchers regime. This is much the same as the weekly group meetings that I observed, where group members would sit and chat with one another after they had been weighed. In the online context however, there are no clear 'boundaries' between this 'idle talk' and regime-focussed interaction, and group members are free to raise topics and contribute to them whenever they like.

#### Light-heartedness and humour

As previously mentioned, another feature of the interactions which was common to both the online and offline contexts is the maintenance of a positive tone, and the posts on the boards are mostly friendly and jovial in nature. Although there are occasional expressions of downheartedness and despair, the majority of the exchanges in both contexts are light-hearted and upbeat, and joking and humour are common in the community.

God does move in mysterious ways. There I was just thinking that something sweet after my sandwich would be nice, then while routing thru my handbag, I found a bent, slightly manky looking WW Chocolate crisp bar. Thank You (Looks towards ceiling)  
(Yikes99!, New Community Users board)

Do you think a slice of CARROT cake counts as one of my portions of fruit/veg for the day (lol)!!??  
(Miss Musical, New Community Users board)

In her own study of an online community of soap opera fans Baym observes a similar use of humour, which she notes, 'helps to create a friendly and open environment that encourages participants to leap in and voice their own opinions' (Baym, 1997: 113). Chapter 6 will discuss the social functions of humour in more detail, and will explore the use of humour in the context of *confessions* on the boards. The analysis will show that the humour occurring in my data set *does* create a sense of community between group members, but that in this context it plays a more complex role, performing a number of different functions simultaneously. Baym explains that the use of humour is so common in online groups that specific conventions have emerged as a way of acknowledging humour, and the use of acronyms such as 'LOL' ('laughing out loud') and 'ROFL' ('rolling on the floor laughing') are widespread.

#### Information seeking and giving

Although a significant number of the message threads did not relate to the body modification project in any way, the remaining two thirds of the message threads in the data set were concerned with topics relating to food, the body, and the Weight Watchers regime. As the organisation explicitly cites the message boards as a source of information, it is not surprising that information seeking and giving are common practices in the community. Studies of other online communities have shown that they can be a very useful source of information, 'because they provide access to many more people who tend to be different from ourselves, who might also have access to different (potentially superior) resources' (Joinson, 2003: 145). In an online environment an individual is able to access a far greater number of others who share their specific interest, which increases the chance that someone will have the knowledge that they need. Baym describes this process of knowledge sharing as one of 'pooling' insight, which results in the 'creation of a vast body of public knowledge and opinions to which all group members share access' (Baym, 1997: 115), and this shared knowledge is instrumental in the

formation of a common group identity. While Lampel and Bhalla (2007) assert that online 'gift giving' in the form of advice and information is not necessarily *entirely* altruistic, and may be motivated instead by a desire to acquire personal status within the online community, this does not negate the beneficial effect that the dissemination of knowledge has upon the group as a whole.

hi. pls could someone let me know the average points for a fillet steak – so quite small. thanks

(MissSquishy, New Community Users board)

Several of the message threads on the boards contain requests for information from group members, and most of these refer specifically to the details of the Weight Watchers regime, particularly the point values of particular foods. Such requests are worthy of note, because those following the regime should already have access to this information, as it is provided by the organisation. Sometimes a reason is given for the request (for example because a poster is at work and is not able to access her information pack, or because a particular product is new and she is confused about how to calculate the point value), but on many occasions such requests are made without any justification. However, rather than suggesting that those posting questions should simply 'look up' the answer for themselves, group members appear to be happy to answer such queries. Requests for information are addressed to the group as a whole, and are always answered, often very quickly. As well as point information, group members also post recipe ideas, information about where to buy certain foods, and tips about exercise. The sharing of information serves to create solidarity between group members, and reinforces the status of the community as a means of aiding successful weight loss.

### Progress reporting

The discussion of the online message boards has already discussed the solidarity-forming function performed by self-disclosure in the Weight Watchers community. However, there is one specific form of self disclosure, the sharing of *progress*, which has not yet been discussed. While not all of the group members choose to share their progress with other members of the group, these reports are a common social practice on the boards. Reports of progress play a key role in reinforcing the reputation of the community as a source of help and support in the weight loss endeavour, and by sharing their progress members make themselves accountable to the group, underlining the *community* nature of the activity of weight watching.

wi result!!! another 3lbs off, omg!

(BRIONY12, New Community Users board)

Oh I am such a nightmare at this diet thing. I've just scoffed and I mean scoffed a WHOLE packet of fruit pastilles

(LOOBY001, New Community Users board)

Community members routinely post messages sharing the results of their weekly weigh-in, and although some members do report *successful* weight losses, these are outnumbered by reports of failed weight loss. Similarly, group members rarely post messages detailing how *well* they are doing at following the eating regime, and confessions of transgression are far more common.

This is perhaps to be expected, as reporting failure, rather than success, is consistent with social politeness norms of modesty and self effacement, and there is evidence to suggest that individuals who downplay their achievements and avoid boasting about their successes are more highly regarded (Sedikides, Gregg and Hart, 2007). Research also shows that women in particular often find ways of mitigating their own success in interaction, and that self deprecation, rather than self promotion, is normative (and more accepted) in women (Tannen, 1990; Miller, Cooke, Tsang and Morgan, 1992). Yet rather than simply reflecting a lack of self confidence in their abilities and achievements, women's self deprecating conversational style can also be seen as an interaction management strategy, a means of 'maintaining connections with others' (Brown, Uebelacker and Heatherington, 1998). It seems that the function of the message boards as a source of help and support, combined with societal and community norms of modesty and self deprecation, make 'negative' progress reports more likely to occur in this context (McSevery, Grainger and Doherty, 2006). The interactional management of social practices relating to the discussion of progress, particularly the confession of transgression and failed weight loss, will be the subject of the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

As discussed in chapter 3, the analysis is particularly concerned with the management of *face* in the exchanges, and the next section (section 4.7) will consider the solidary nature of the message boards in more detail, and will discuss the relevance of the notion of *face management* in the online context.

#### 4.7 'Face' online

This section will consider the significance of face management in an online environment, where those interacting are not physically co-present. Goffman's work is based on interaction which takes place in a face to face context, and when he wrote about face work in the 1960s, the idea that people would one day conduct rich and intimate relationships via computers would be unthinkable. However, as chapter 1 discussed, although Goffman's work deals primarily with co-presence, the notion of 'face' is not a physical one, and there is evidence to suggest that face and face management are equally relevant in an online setting.

A number of studies have explored face management or politeness online. In his analysis of *impoliteness* in the interactions of an email community, Graham suggests that the online environment brings its own expectations of what is considered to be polite behaviour, and 'the norms for interaction within the community of practice merge with the norms of (polite) interaction within the computer medium to create a unique set of expectations for what constitutes polite behaviour in a computer-mediated setting' (Graham, 2007: 742).

Harrison (2000) explores the use of face management strategies in an online discussion group drawing on Brown and Levinson's definition of politeness (as discussed in chapter 3). She identifies a number of potentially face-threatening acts which occur within online interactions (including requests, invitations, criticism, disagreement and advice), and observes positive politeness (or face management) strategies which are employed to mitigate these threats to face. For example, the nature of the discussion group means that it is often necessary for members to disagree with one another. In order to avoid hostility within the group, members use positive politeness strategies such as expressing their interest in a point which has been made before stating their disagreement, or reducing the authoritative nature of their disagreeing post through hedging. Positive politeness is also used throughout the exchanges, 'to create a generally positive atmosphere rather than to mitigate a specific face-threatening act' (Harrison, 2000: 77). Harrison notes the importance of politeness within the group concluding that, 'the many instances [of politeness] reinforce each other, promoting discussion in a safe environment and acting to strengthen the group' (ibid: 78). Similarly, Harrison and Barlow (2009) identified politeness strategies in instances of advice giving in an online arthritis support group. Participants in the group mitigated any potential face threat posed by the act of advice giving by issuing advice *indirectly*, and offering narratives of their *own* experiences. They note that as well as maintaining individual face, these strategies also promote *group* face,

as because the advice is shared with the whole group, 'the positive politeness strategies contribute to reducing the social distance among all the group members' (Harrison and Barlow, 2009: 107).

Baym notes that in the online context 'politeness is a criterion of communicative competence that keeps posts from standing out as particularly bad' (Baym, 1997: 117). While Baym's discussion of politeness appears to refer to the 'everyday' definition of the term (what Watts, 2003 would call politeness 1), and she does not specifically discuss face management, she points to the supportive, solidary and 'friendly' nature of the community. Baym notes that in the soap opera fan community politeness and respect for fellow members appears to be the *central* group norm, and conflict is avoided, yet this is not the case in all online communities. She observes that similar discussion groups on other topics do not foster this supportive, cooperative environment, and members 'hurl insults over the most minor of disagreements' (ibid: 118). Similar norms of mutual support and respect appear to exist on the Weight Watchers message boards – conflict is avoided and posts are positive, supportive and encouraging in nature. As discussed in chapters 1 and 3, face can be thought of as jointly achieved through interaction, and can be associated with groups as well as individuals (Haugh, 2009; Arundale, 2009), and this group identity will be taken into account in the analysis.

Face management strategies can also be observed in the measures that community members use to compensate for areas in which online communication is lacking, such as visual feedback. These measures ensure that those communicating online are able to understand one another, and Reid (1996) describes the conventions used by online messaging users to introduce a physical dimension to their interactions, giving descriptions of physical actions and expressions which serve to clarify the intent and meaning of any verbal statements. Similarly, conventions have evolved in order to express emotion in an online context. Baym notes that, 'the computer medium seems at first glance to eliminate just these kinds of cues, but given time, participants respond to this deprivation by creating new ways to convey crucial metacommunicative information. Emoticons (or 'smiley faces') are pictorial representations of emotional expressions using punctuation marks' (Baym, 1997: 111). Although the medium is not ideally suited to the expression of emotion, rather than forgo this element users instead adapt the way they interact, finding new ways in which to convey emotional and non-verbal content (although Graham, 2007, notes that the range of emotions permitted by the use of emoticons is somewhat limited). Golato and Taleghani-Nikazm explicitly describe these interactional resources as face management strategies, suggesting that by using emoticons in

online interaction, 'participants display their orientation to their co-participant's face and support social solidarity' (Golato and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006: 318).

It seems then that the notion of face management is equally relevant in an online context. Although face management occurs *throughout* interaction, as noted in chapter 1 talk about food, dieting and weight exposes women to potential face threat (Guendouzi, 2004). The discussion of progress on the message boards is a practice which is particularly significant in terms of the self-surveillance project, and which is also interesting as an interactional activity in terms of face management, and this will be explored in the analytical chapters (chapters 5, 6 and 7).

#### 4.8 Summary

This chapter has discussed the usefulness of the concepts of the community of practice and brand community as a way of understanding the group of online Weight Watchers message board users. The C of P provides an important link between the interactional construction of group and individual identities and the wider social context in which the interactions take place, and the brand community takes into account the commercial nature of the Weight Watchers regime. The online nature of the interactions was also considered, and it appears that all three elements are helpful in understanding the context in which the exchanges in the data set take place. Therefore, when the term 'community' is used in the later analysis, the definition will be informed by all three concepts, and will refer to an online, brand-oriented, community of practice.

The chapter also provided an ethnographic and netnographic overview of the Weight Watchers organisation and the online message boards, outlining the social practices that members engage in. One of the ways in members use the message boards is to discuss their day to day experiences as 'weight watchers'. As chapter 1 shows, self disclosure has been shown to perform an important relational function in all-female talk, and while the phenomenon is not *exclusive* to women's talk, it is far more common as a way of constructing and maintaining personal relationships than it is in all-male groups (DeCapua, Berkowitz and Boxer, 2006). As the Weight Watchers regime is target-focussed, any talk about the regime inevitably results in discussions of *progress*. Reports of lapses or *failure* are considerably more frequent on the boards than reports of success, and these reports are consistent with the

requirements of the Weight Watchers regime for members to constantly monitor their consumption, and to regularly measure their progress by weighing themselves.

Each of the remaining chapters will use empirical analysis of message threads to explore the interactional management of situations which are defined by members as problematic. These message threads have the potential to undermine members' identities as 'good weight watchers' or 'good women', and the analysis will explore how face management is achieved in the exchanges. The analysis aims to understand the way in which cultural understandings of femininity are constructed and perpetuated through everyday weight management talk, and how the 'confession of excess' contributes to the formation of solidarity between group members, reinforcing the community nature of the weight watching project.

## Chapter 5: Confessing transgression

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the most commonly occurring type of post relating to progress on the message boards, the routine confession of transgression. As chapter 2 outlined, confession is a particularly significant practice in women's experiences of self-surveillance, because it is through the reporting of transgression that gendered norms are reinforced. As Foucault (1978) notes, the act of confession is closely bound up with issues of disciplinary power, and by confessing 'bad' behaviour group members perpetuate ideas about what is considered to be 'acceptable', and show that they are engaged in the self-surveillance practices the Weight Watchers regime (and society more general) requires of them (Stinson, 2001).

Stinson (2001) observes that in the context of a 'real life' weight loss group meeting, the act of confession is often prompted by the group leader. However as chapter 4 discussed, on the message boards, there is no group leader present, and community members are free to discuss whatever topics they choose. While in a face to face setting a group member may be required to account for weight gain, or may be observed consuming a food that they shouldn't, none of this information is available to the members on the online group, so there is no *requirement* for members to confess transgression. Yet 74 of the message threads in the data set contained at least one instance of confession, and the users of the message boards choose to confess their transgressions without being prompted to do so. Weight watching and self surveillance are *community* activities, and in confessing group members display their accountability to both societal and group cultural norms.

As chapter 2 discussed, the consumption of food is a *moral* issue. The analysis in this chapter will consider what behaviour can be considered to be *confessable* in this context, and will then explore the detailed way in which confessional posts are managed within the exchanges. As previously discussed, Brown and Levinson (1987) describe the act of confession as intrinsically face threatening, and by 'confessing excess' (Spitzack, 1990) group members construct themselves as indulgent, excessive and out of control. As their behaviour contravenes broader cultural norms of feminine behaviour, confessing group members align themselves with

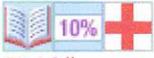
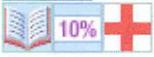
identities as 'bad women' who have failed to exercise the necessary levels of self restraint. Guendouzi notes that in the face to face confession of transgression speakers may 'find it necessary to use conversational moves that attend to their own positive face and rely on listener support' (Guendouzi, 2004: 1638). The analysis will therefore pay particular attention to the face management strategies employed in the confessional posts, and the interactional management of the confession sequence. This includes the strategies employed to mitigate threats to positive face (in sympathetic and encouraging responses), and negative face (in advice giving and reprimands).

Finally, the analysis will consider whether, given its frequency, confession of transgression can even be considered to be face threatening in this context. The analysis will show that confession presents members with an opportunity to display their expertise about the Weight Watchers regime, and to demonstrate their commitment to the self surveillance project.

## 5.2 The confession sequence

As discussed in chapter 4, the practice of weight watching is a *community* activity. In confessing a transgression, a weight watcher makes herself answerable to her fellow group members, and appeals to them for help. The group then responds to the initial confessional post, offering information, advice and support. When considering confession therefore, it is necessary to consider the whole exchange, and so the analysis later in the chapter will consider the full confession sequence.

The following message thread is an example of a confessional exchange on the boards. Although the content and structure of the confessions in the data set vary, there are some features which are commonly found in the confessional threads, and this section will describe a 'typical' confession:

Message Thread 1:		P0ints please
1.01	<p><a href="#">claire2002</a>    17 st 0 lb  13 st 5.5 lb  11 st 10 lb  Recent Posts: <a href="#">3690</a></p>	<p><b>10:03:56</b></p> <p>You know those part bake baguettes... how many points are they?</p> <p>naughtily I succumbed to a bacon buttie, didn't realise it was a baguette... Oooops!</p> <p>I know the bacon is 3points, I thought about 5 for the baguette and 1/2 for the brown sauce</p> <p>what do you think?</p> <p>claire  .....  Claire!  whatever you can conceive and believe, you can achieve</p> <p>We all came in on different ships,  but we are in the same boat now.  Martin Luther King, Jr.</p>
1.02	<p><a href="#">CHEEKYCHOPS</a>    16 st 6 lb  11 st 2.5 lb  10 st 0 lb  Recent Posts: <a href="#">35</a></p>	<p><b>10:07:42</b></p> <p>I have a feeling they're 6pts. I know the little petit pains are 1.5 ea from tesco.</p> <p>Chops x  .....  [website]</p>
1.03	<p><a href="#">claire2002</a>    17 st 0 lb  13 st 5.5 lb  11 st 10 lb  Recent Posts: <a href="#">3690</a></p>	<p><b>29/10/2004 10:22:30</b></p> <p>thanks for that.</p> <p>I should have enough for dinner this eve... soup for me at lunchtime!!</p> <p>and trip to the gym  .....  Claire!  whatever you can conceive and believe, you can achieve</p> <p>We all came in on different ships,  but we are in the same boat now.  Martin Luther King, Jr.</p>

This thread will be returned to later in the chapter, where it will be analysed in more detail, but in this message thread it is possible to see the main 'stages' of a confessional exchange. claire2002's post (post 1.01) reports a transgression ('naughtily I succumbed to a bacon butty'), and asks her fellow group members for their help in providing information about the point value of the food she has consumed. CHEEKYCHOPS's reply (post 1.02) gives the information she asks for, offering claire2002 the opportunity to 'rehabilitate' herself back into the regime, and this rehabilitation is explicitly stated in claire2002's final post (post 1.03), where she resolves to eat only soup at lunchtime and go to the gym to compensate for her consumption.

This example demonstrates how the practice of confession operates in the group context – a transgression occurs, the transgressor demonstrates her accountability to the group by confessing, she may experience 'forgiveness', then she can be rehabilitated back into the regime and continues with the weight loss project. As the analysis in the rest of the thesis will illustrate, there is considerable variety in the form that confessional exchanges can take, and in the way that they are managed in the interaction, but each one involves the acknowledgement of behaviour that is in some way 'unacceptable', sharing the transgression with the group, followed by rehabilitation or renewed commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. Although I have described this as a confession 'sequence', these elements do not necessarily happen in a set order, as the later analysis will show. Before the practice of confession is explored in more detail, the chapter will first consider what is confessable in the Weight Watchers message board context.

### 5.3 What is confessable?

Stinson notes that in the commercial weight loss group context, 'public confession bonds the group together, as members reassert their commitment to group norms and thereby highlight and strengthen the moral boundaries surrounding the group' (Stinson, 1990: 59). Therefore, analysis of the confessional threads in the data set can potentially provide a valuable insight into matters which are of particular significance to members of the community. As the message boards provide a space in which to discuss the Weight Watchers regime, it is not surprising that many of the threads on the boards are concerned with discussions about food, and the consumption of food. Throughout the interactions relating to this topic, and particularly in confessions of consumption, it is possible to observe the *moral classification* of food, a phenomenon which is consistent with the observations made by Mycroft (2008), among others.

The moral classification of food does not occur exclusively among members of Weight Watchers, or even those who are dieting, as throughout history our societal conceptions of food are closely linked with morality (Coveney, 2006, also see chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of this). Stinson (2001) observes that the religious discourses permeating weight loss talk describe weight gain as a result of weakness of spirit and succumbing to temptation. Within this religious framework food poses a particular danger, it exposes the dieter to temptation because it is desirable and therefore difficult to resist. These temptations of the flesh, and confession of any subsequent fall from grace, are common among talk about food,

dieting, and weight loss, and can be observed throughout the data set. The moral framework surrounding food and consumption, and the resulting implications regarding the character of the individual consuming it, will be explored in more detail in the analysis.

Eating 'bad' foods

The following post by JPLAWSON (post 2.01) illustrates the binary classification of foods by the message board members, who commonly divide foods into 'good' and 'bad', or 'naughty' (the use of the term 'naughty' in talk about actions involving food and consumption will be discussed later in the chapter):

<p>2.01</p> <p><b>JPLAWSON</b></p>  <p>11 st 6 lb 9 st 13 lb 9 st 0 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">4250</a></p>	<p><b>POLL</b></p> <p><b>12:51:38</b></p> <p>Do you prefer:</p> <p>Large amounts of low point (good) food. or Small amounts of high point (naughty) food.</p> <p>..... Love &amp; XXXX Jenny</p> <p>See My Pics: [web address removed]</p>
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This moral classification of food is not confined to the message board users, or even to the Weight Watchers organisation, but is something which occurs throughout society in general. Lupton interrogates the cultural meanings of these classifications, suggesting that "good' food is often described as nourishing and 'good for you', but is also indicative of self-control and concern for one's health, while 'bad' food is bad for one's health and on a deeper level of meaning is a sign of moral weakness' (Lupton, 1996: 27). As a society, not only do we make moral judgements about the food itself, but also about the person who eats it. So the type of food that an individual chooses to consume also gives an indication of their character, and the unrestrained consumption of 'bad' food marks them as deviant. This attribution of morality can be observed in the following post:

Message Thread 3:		I've been bad
3.01	<p><b>SPEARFAN53</b></p>  <p>13 sty 0 lb 12 sty 1.2 lb 9 sty 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">99</a></p>	<p><b>12:54:01</b></p> <p>I just had chicken korma and pilau rice and it can to a whopping 14 points. It was nice, but now I'm thinking it wasn't THAT nice!!</p> <p>.....</p> <p>wk 1 - 5lb wk 2 - 6lb wk 3 - 2.4lb</p>
3.02	<p><b>CATWOMAN</b></p>  <p>17 st 0 lb 16 st 13 lb 9 st 1 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">175</a></p>	<p><b>12:59:15</b></p> <p>Bet it'll taste nice compared to what you will be having for tea!! lol!!</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Wk 1 = -1 :-) Wk 2 = STS (been ill) Wk 3 =</p> <p>Have booked New Year - Going to [location]. Will look like size of a house in thermals and jumpers under big coat though! - Goal; 14st 9 by 30th Dec.</p>
3.03	<p><b>SPEARFAN53</b></p>  <p>13 st 0 lb 12 st 1.2 lb 9 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">99</a></p>	<p><b>13:00:08</b></p> <p>You're not kidding!! lmao</p> <p>.....</p> <p>wk 1 - 5lb wk 2 - 6lb wk 3 - 2.4lb</p>

In her message (post 3.01), SPEARFAN53 constructs her post as a confession in the subject line, where she describes herself as being 'bad'. By ascribing the moral judgement to herself, rather than what she has consumed, the focus is placed on her own behaviour and morality, rather than on the nature of the food she has eaten. She admits to enjoying the curry, but her comment 'but now I'm thinking it wasn't THAT nice!!' raises an interesting point about the 'balancing act' that Weight Watchers members engage in whilst monitoring their consumption. In order to stick to the eating regime, members must 'make up for' any moments of excess, in order to ensure that their consumption remains 'on target', and in her reply (post 3.02) CATWOMAN makes the assumption SPEARFAN53 will compensate for the 'whopping' point value of her consumption by limiting her intake later in the day. SPEARFAN53's response (post 3.03), 'you're not kidding', indicates her agreement with the suggested course of action. The solutions presented focus on the self-disciplinary nature of the weight loss project, and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. They frequently involve 'redressing the balance' by reducing future consumption, or by exercising to 'earn back' excess points.

While SPEARFAN53 constructs her identity in a way which implies she is excessive and indulgent, the 'peripheral' features of her message suggest otherwise. Her profile on the left



portrays her behaviour as unacceptable in the title of her message, using the extreme formulation 'such a nightmare' to construct her identity in relation to her attempts to follow the diet. The problem that LOOBY001 reports in her post is not one of failing to follow the regime correctly, as she has been tracking her consumption and eating the correct *amount* of food. However, the theme of *resistance* in her message suggests that the post is in fact a confession of her lack of self control, and her failure to exercise restraint around in the face of temptation from 'bad' food.

Lack of self control

The discourse of control and resistance permeates the exchanges on the message boards, and can be found throughout talk about food and dieting in general. In LOOBY001's post (post 4.01) she foregrounds the issue of control, and her description of her transgression is exaggerated and over the top. Her use of the word 'scoffed' rather than 'eaten' implies greedy, out of control consumption, and is emphasised by the repetition 'and I mean scoffed'. The description of '... a WHOLE packet ...' of sweets once again gives the impression of excess and gluttony, the exact opposite of the cool, calm attitude to food that Bordo (1993/2003) observes women are *supposed* to have. In giving in to the temptation to visit the vending machine, LOOBY001 has failed to show self control around visibly displayed 'treats'.

Therefore, it seems that what is confessable on the message boards is a *moral* issue, and the problem being reported in the confessional posts may be less to do with the point value of what has been eaten, but is instead concerned with failure to conform to the moral imperative to resist the lure of 'bad' foods. The exchange between MARSATTACK and 666NINA, discussing MARSATTACK's consumption of a chocolate bar, is another example:

5.01	<p>Message Thread 5:</p> <p><b>MARSATTACK</b></p>  <p>12 st 7.5 lb 10 st 0 lb 10 st 0 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">297</a></p>	<p><b>Just truffled a "Ripple" - anyone know points?</b></p> <p><b>15:27:32</b></p> <p>Just been a little piggy and eaten a galaxy ripple... could anyone tell me the points please! Thanks</p> <p>xx ..... I want a bum like beyonce!</p>
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<p>5.02</p> <p><b>666NINA</b></p>  <p>14 st 9.0 lb 12 st 3.0 lb 9 st 9.0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">4945</a></p>	<p><b>15:28:31</b></p> <p>3.5 points! Not that piggy, well worth it I think. x ..... Nina x 12/01/05 - 3.5 lbs No Count</p>
<p>5.03</p> <p><b>MARSATTACK</b></p>  <p>12 st 7.5 lb 10 st 0 lb 10 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">297</a></p>	<p><b>15:29:31</b></p> <p>oohh absolutely! Chicken breast vs. Ripple- ermmm what do I choose he he ..... I want a bum like beyonce!</p>

Like LOOBY001 (post 4.01), MARSATTACK (post 5.01) constructs herself and her behaviour as excessive, out of control, and morally weak. Her description of her chocolate consumption gives the impression of gluttonous gorging, and she portrays herself as a pig, an animal which has a reputation for greed and slovenliness. Not only does she describe herself as 'a little piggy', she also relates how she 'truffled' the chocolate bar. As well as being associated with chocolate, the word 'truffle' also conjures an image of a pig digging in the ground, hunting for truffles. This animalistic description of her consumption suggests that her behaviour is instinctive and out of her control, and 'unfeminine'.

Although MARSATTACK portrays herself as greedy, her use of childlike language ('a little piggy') trivialises her consumption. One one had this could have subversive potential, indicating that she does not take her transgression seriously. On the other this could be a strategy which serves to mitigate the face-threatening nature of her confession, portraying herself as incapable of taking responsibility for her actions. Her request for the point value of what she has eaten also aligns MARSATTACK with the role of a 'good weight watcher', as although she is admitting to eating 'bad' food, like the previous posters she is also demonstrating that she intends to incorporate her consumption into her daily point allowance. This suggests that her lexical choice may reflect a concern for face, rather than a lack of commitment. Her message profile indicates that she has actually achieved her goal weight, and yet she still continues to follow the eating regime and monitor her consumption. MARSATTACK's message suggests that despite her lapse she still intends to follow the eating regime and stick to her diet, and her expression of her intention to continue to engage in self monitoring by counting her points is productive of feminine subjectivity.

Although eating a chocolate bar is confessable in this context, it appears that failure to resist temptation may be defensible as long as the consumption is justifiable. In her reply (post 5.02) 666NINA reports that the bar that MARSATTACK has eaten is not too high in points, with the implication that the 'damage' is minimal. 666NINA describes the consumption as 'Not that piggy', and 'well worth it', which suggests that she considers MARSATTACK's behaviour to be reasonable. However, as in LOOBY001's post (post 4.01), MARSATTACK (post 5.01) constructs herself as open to temptation, foregrounding her lack of restraint, at odds with gendered norms of feminine self-discipline. However, despite these lapses both women demonstrate that they are monitoring and recording their consumption, so their identities as good weight watchers remain intact.

Regardless of the point value of what MARSATTACK has chosen to consume, the exchange suggests that chocolate is something that a 'good weight watcher' would avoid, and in their exchanges the group members construct striving for self-control as being central to the experience of weight watching. The eating regime itself is focussed on perpetual control and scrutiny, members are subjected to continual surveillance, both by themselves and by others, and are constrained by the pressure to restrict their consumption at all times. However, as chapters 1 and 2 described, these experiences are also defining features of feminine subjectivity, and so the regime appears to simply make these activities, which are consistent with cultural gender norms, more explicit.

As chapter 4 discussed in detail, the Weight Watchers regime is promoted as being based around the concept of moderation - all foods are theoretically permitted, as long as members control their consumption and limit particular 'high point' foods. As part of their self-surveillance members are required to make a series of choices about what they consume on a day to day basis. So although they are supposedly 'free' to consume whatever they like, members must remain constantly vigilant, ensuring that they do not consume too much, and must avoid exceeding their daily point allowance. As well as this, the message threads show that cultural norms around the moral classification of food mean that *any* consumption of food which can be considered to be 'bad' can have negative implications for a woman's gendered subjectivity. Any failure to exercise the necessary level of control is something which is confessable on the message boards, and when this happens members report feelings of guilt and remorse.

Rather than eating her chocolate bar MARSATTACK notes that she could have chosen to eat a chicken breast for the same number of points. However, she implies that the choice between a (more nutritious) chicken breast and a (more desirable) chocolate bar is an obvious one, but her 'laughter' at the end of the post suggests that this may be a controversial choice. Although she has not made the 'correct' decision nutrition wise, and group members show their awareness of these foods' classification as 'bad', they are still described as desirable. This may be due to their 'naughty but nice' nature, and MARSATTACK's post seems to suggest that succumbing to temptation is seen to be inevitable.

The chocolate and the chicken breast are presented as two opposing options – the chicken as the 'good' moral choice, and the chocolate as the seductive, enjoyable yet 'naughty' choice that must be denied if one is to retain an identity as a 'good woman'. There is a fundamental tension, both in this exchange and throughout talk about dieting, between the feminine norm of restraint, and the acknowledgement that food can be pleasurable and desirable. This experience defines one of the fundamental struggles of gendered subjectivity and women's relationship to their bodies, as the desirability of food must be routinely de-emphasised by weight watchers but is constantly present as a 'forbidden truth', and MARSATTACK's post explicitly acknowledges this conflict.

It is already apparent that the confessions on the message boards are not solely about deviating from the Weight Watchers regime, and that the confessional posts in the data set are concerned with issues of 'goodness' and restraint which extend beyond the simple calculation of daily consumption. Weight watching is not simply about controlling intake, it is tied into gendered subjectivities and cultural norms about food, morality and femininity. While the classification of foods as 'good' or 'bad' is based primarily upon their perceived nutritional value, the nutritional advice which is disseminated also has its roots in the religious concept of asceticism. As Lupton notes, 'although it is cloaked in the apparently neutral discourses of medicine, science and economics, the language of contemporary nutritional science draws upon moral sub-texts around bodily discipline and the importance of self-control. The moral meanings of dietary choices were traditionally constructed via religious discourses, but are now largely secularized in western societies' (Lupton, 1996: 74). So although many of the Weight Watchers members may not subscribe to a particular religion, religious imagery relating to self-denial, sin and temptation permeates talk about food and dieting.



simultaneously face *promoting*. This seemingly contradictory function reflects the complexity of women's gendered identities and how these relate to their relationships with their bodies and food. Like MARSATTACK in the previous thread, FAYE101's message post displays her status as having reached her goal weight. Therefore, the severity of her confession may be undermined by her overall success as a weight watcher.

However, regardless of her previous successes, a community member can only remain a 'good weight watcher' for as long as she continues to scrutinise her consumption. In the following message thread, the transgression 175VICKI describes is the temptation to 'take a break' from the Weight Watchers regime, and to temporarily stop monitoring her food intake. As well as remaining perpetually vigilant about consumption and desire, one of the key community norms is constant commitment to the weight loss project. If this commitment wavers during their weight loss experience, members may confess this to the rest of the group. The responses to 175VICKI's post will be analysed later in the chapter, but the importance of remaining committed to the weight loss endeavour is stressed by group members at a number of points throughout the message board exchanges:

	Message Thread 7:	<b>Hungover :(</b>
7.01	<p><b>175VICKI</b>              10 st 9 lb            10 st 9 lb            9 st 7 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">1262</a></p>	<p><b>09:38:54</b></p> <p>Morning All.</p> <p>I've only just gotten into work and I'm hungover. I hate being hungover at work, it just makes me so useless.</p> <p>I know that when it gets to Lunchtime, all I'm going to want to eat is something really high in points. But I need to be good coz, I'm going out for lunch on Sunday with the In-Laws. I'm thinking of just starting again on Monday.</p> <p>What do you think?</p>

In this post, 175VICKI (post 7.01) asks for advice from her fellow group members about whether or not she should temporarily abandon the Weight Watchers eating plan. Although she has not yet broken her diet, she is confessing future transgressions, which are presented as tempting ('I know that when it gets to Lunchtime, all I'm going to want to eat is something really high in points'). 175VICKI justifies her weakness by explaining that she is suffering from a hangover, which she expresses her unhappiness about, signifying her emotional state with the use of a 'sad' emoticon in the message title ' :( '. The information about her condition mitigates the face threat posed by her intention to consume high point foods, and could be an

attempt to reduce her accountability for her actions, as she portrays herself as being weak and unable to control her appetite in her current state.

As she is intending to eat high point food for lunch (because she is hungover), and again on Sunday (because she is going out with her In-Laws), 175VICKI suggests an alternative solution – to stop following the plan over the weekend. The idea of an indulgence, followed by a 'fresh start' is an attractive one, and would give 175VICKI the opportunity to begin her weight loss journey again with a 'clean slate' free of mistakes or transgressions. However, in contrast to MARSATTACK and FAYE101 in the earlier posts, 175VICKI's profile reveals that she has not yet lost any weight since beginning the eating plan. Her expression of her intention to 'take a break' from the self surveillance project signals that she may not be completely committed to the regime, and is therefore potentially face threatening. She does not present this as a definite course of action, instead she asks for opinions (or approval) from her fellow group members. The face threat posed by 175VICKI's pre-confession is therefore further mitigated by the fact she is reporting a *possible* transgression, rather than one she has already committed. In posting her message she confesses weakness and appeals to the community for their permission or advice, signalling her accountability to the group, which is consistent with the behaviour of a 'good weight watcher'. The group's response to her suggestion of 'taking a break' will be returned to later in the chapter.

This section has shown that confessional posts not only provide an indication of what is considered to be *confessable* in this context, but they also offer an insight into how group members may mitigate any potential face threat in their accounts of transgression. The analysis shows that confessions are commonly delivered in ways that explain the transgression, and deny or minimise the *agency* and *accountability* of the weight watcher in question. Importantly, it is not the *behaviour* of the transgressing member that is the main focus of the analysis, but their *account* of the behaviour, and the way that the confession is managed within the interaction. The next chapter (chapter 6) will consider a subset of confessional posts which use humour to deliver the confessional message, and which appear to flout some of the group norms outlined in this chapter. However, one post in the data set stood out as unusual, and in this post LOOPYRABBIT (post 8.01) reports her intention to consume bad foods, but unlike the previous posters she explicitly portrays herself as unrepentant.

## 5.4 Defiance

LOOPYRABBIT's post is significantly different from the other reports of transgression, because she does not construct her message as a confession:

Message Thread 8:		Off home now for a huge blowout
8.01	<p><b>LOOPYRABBIT</b></p>  <p>11 st 10 lb 10 st 3 lb 9 st 10 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">791</a></p>	<p><b>17:15:41</b></p> <p>after losing 2½lb today I am treating me and my darling OH to a KFC meal and a bar of choccy and I dont care who knows it LOL bye girls ..... .....!:-..... -!:-Sally-!:- .....!:-.....Definitely NOT a Stepford Wife</p>
8.02	<p><b>CHUCKYEGG24</b></p>  <p>14 st 4 lb 13 st 8 lb 11 st 2 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1755</a></p>	<p><b>17:17:03</b></p> <p>Enjoy!</p> <p>Have a good weekend</p> <p>..... Onwards and upwards... I can do this!</p> <p>Founder member of the WOBBLERS Club - WeightWatchers Obsessed Board Birds Love E-posting Club</p> <p>10% Goal 12st 12lbs</p>

By sharing her intention to eat bad foods with her fellow group members, and by refusing to express guilt about it, LOOPYRABBIT actively rejects the subject position of a 'good' woman. Her attempts to distance herself from the social norms of femininity are also reflected in her message signature, where she describes herself as 'Definitely NOT a Stepford Wife', a statement which fashions her identity as one of independence and individuality. By so explicitly rejecting one of the key community values, LOOPYRABBIT's post has the potential to threaten group face, because in saying that she '[doesn't] care who knows' that she intends to consume 'bad' foods, she fails to display accountability to the community. Her post has the potential to be disruptive to the group, because her apparently unrepentant report of her future transgression publicly and boldly acknowledges that fast food and chocolate are desirable and pleasurable, without any of the 'struggle' that is common to the community's (and to women's) talk about food.

This post could signal that LOOPYRABBIT is not committed to the self surveillance project, but despite her defiant tone, the fact that she has posted the message at all suggests that she considers her consumption of 'bad' food to be something worthy of note, and which must be reported. In choosing to do so she still displays her accountability to the group, and actually

shows that she is still engaged in monitoring of her consumption. Her claim that she '[doesn't] care who knows' about her intended action suggests that eating KFC and chocolate is something to hide, and signals that she is doing something 'wrong'. She constructs her planned consumption as a 'treat' for successful weight loss, and this serves to mitigate the potential face threat posed by any transgression. The potential face threat in her defiant attitude is mitigated by her signalling of laughter 'LOL' at the end of her post.

In her message LOOPYRABBIT constructs herself as *choosing* to eat 'bad' foods, and doesn't display accountability to the group, or attempt to elicit help or advice. Her post does not offer an opening for any response other than alignment, and her closing 'bye girls!' signals that she doesn't require a response. Consequently, the community do not treat her post as a matter for rehabilitation and support, and rather than trying to dissuade LOOPYRABBIT from eating the bad food, or offering her tips to try to reduce the point values of what she consumes, CHUCKYEGG24 (post 8.02) simply replies 'Enjoy!' and wishes her a good weekend. This type of thread is not typical of the exchanges which take place on the message boards. The consumption of bad food is mainly discussed in terms of the best way in which to incorporate it into the eating regime, or in terms of 'damage limitation' and rehabilitation if it has already been consumed. Although the users of the boards are supportive, and rarely chastise one another (a conversational move which will be discussed later in the chapter), a 'blow out' like the one described by LOOPYRABBIT (post 8.01) would rarely be condoned, particularly if it hadn't already been consumed.

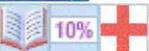
However, although it is rebellious in tone, LOOPYRABBIT's post still displays her commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. By constructing her intended consumption as a reward for successful weight loss, rather than as a confession, she demonstrates that she is still following the eating plan and monitoring her consumption, and remains a committed weight watcher in the long term.

The chapter so far has considered what is confessable on the Weight Watchers message boards, and has examined the way that individual group members deliver the confessional message. However, as the thesis has already established, confession is a sequential and interactional phenomenon, and it involves the community as a whole. The rest of the chapter will consider the interactional management of confession sequences, and will outline the activities which form part of the confessional exchanges in this context.

## 5.5 The interactional management of confession

### Information requesting and giving

The confession of consumption is frequently accompanied by a request for the point value of the food consumed. This may be a face management strategy, as a group member's request for point information is a way of making explicit an intention to continue to monitor her behaviour, and stick with eating plan. Therefore, some replies orient to these requests, resulting in information giving, which can be seen in the initial confessional thread in this chapter (message thread 1):

Message Thread 1:	<b>POints please</b>
<p>1.01</p> <p><a href="#">claire2002</a>              17 st 0 lb            13 st 5.5 lb            11 st 10 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">3690</a></p>	<p><b>10:03:56</b></p> <p>You know those part bake baguettes... how many points are they?</p> <p>naughtily I succumbed to a bacon buttie, didn't realise it was a baguette... Oooops!</p> <p>I know the bacon is 3points, I thought about 5 for the baguette and 1/2 for the brown sauce</p> <p>what do you think?</p> <p>claire            .....            Claire!            whatever you can conceive and believe, you can achieve</p> <p>We all came in on different ships,            but we are in the same boat now.            Martin Luther King, Jr.</p>
<p>1.02</p> <p><a href="#">CHEEKYCHOPS</a>              16 st 6 lb            11 st 2.5 lb            10 st 0 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">35</a></p>	<p><b>10:07:42</b></p> <p>I have a feeling they're 6pts. I know the little petit pains are 1.5 ea from tesco.</p> <p>Chops x            .....            [website]</p>
<p>1.03</p> <p><a href="#">claire2002</a>              17 st 0 lb            13 st 5.5 lb            11 st 10 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">3690</a></p>	<p><b>29/10/2004 10:22:30</b></p> <p>thanks for that.</p> <p>I should have enough for dinner this eve... soup for me at lunchtime!!</p> <p>and trip to the gym            .....            Claire!            whatever you can conceive and believe, you can achieve</p> <p>We all came in on different ships,            but we are in the same boat now.            Martin Luther King, Jr.</p>

In her post (post 1.01) claire2002 describes her consumption as 'naughty', using the same type of childlike language as MARSATTACK (post 5.01) to describe her behaviour, and thus portraying herself as less responsible for her actions. As well as being childlike (like the term 'piggy'), the word 'naughty' can also have sexual connotations, and her report that she 'succumbed' to the sandwich could potentially construct claire2002 as lacking 'moral fibre'. This 'out of control' subject position is at odds with claire2002's motivational message signature, which implies commitment and focus. Although in her post she admits responsibility for her actions, she portrays the *extent* of her consumption as accidental. Her message is confessional in tone, but claire2002's request for information about the point value of what she has eaten reflects an intention to incorporate her consumption into her daily point allowance and to continue to monitor her food intake.

CHEEKYCHOPS's reply (post 1.02) doesn't directly take up the confessional element of claire2002's post, but she provides her with an estimate of the point value of her consumption which assists her with her self-monitoring behaviour. The analysis in this chapter makes a distinction between information giving (which is defined as providing information relating to the eating regime, for example the point value of foods, recipe ideas, or information about which supermarkets specific foods can be found in), and advice giving (which provides suggestions or recommendations for a particular course of action). Pilnick notes that advice giving and information giving may be seen as 'essentially the same activities', but they can have quite different implications in terms of their outcome. While advice giving (which will be discussed in the next section) recommends a particular course of action to an individual, information giving makes no such behavioural demands (Pilnick, 1999: 613). As the next section will discuss, Brown and Levinson (1987) describe advice giving as inherently face threatening due to the powerful footing assumed by the advice giver.

Although it is common on the message boards, and it does not threaten negative face in the same way as advice giving, there is also power involved in the act of *information-giving*, and group members employ interactional strategies which serve to mitigate this. The boards are a context where power relations are assumed to be symmetrical, unlike face to face meetings where there is a more knowledgeable group leader. However, the supportive and solidary nature of the Weight Watchers regime means that even in the context of group meetings unmitigated authoritative moves are rare. On the message boards information giving tends to take one of two forms. It can either be 'factual', and may involve referring to an external authoritative source (like the Weight Watchers guides), or even just posting in lists of

information directly from the original source. Alternatively (as in CHEEKYCHOPS's post), the information provided by group members may be qualified with hedges like 'I have a feeling', 'I think', which manage the face threat posed by assuming a (comparatively) powerful stance. These types of post may also be a result of members orienting to the reputation of the message boards as a source of help and information - in the absence of a 'factual' response they may try to provide their 'best guess' in an effort to be helpful. In her post CHEEKYCHOPS provides claire2002 with the information that she needs to be able to continue her self surveillance activities.

This is reflected in claire2002's reply (post 1.03), where she explicitly states her intention to rehabilitate by 'making amends' for her excessive consumption. She intends to do this by eating (comparatively low point) soup for her lunch, and by exercising in order to 'work off' her excess points. The potential solutions presented on the message boards frequently involve group members compensating for their transgression by limiting future consumption, or by 'working off' the excess points through exercising. This functions both as punishment for the transgression, and as a way in which to regain control of consumption and remain committed to the weight loss project. In his analysis of talk about the pursuit of 'wellness', Conrad found that exercise was often considered to be an 'antidote' to excess eating, and it 'almost becomes a ritual of purification, a bodily catharsis, eliminating remnants of previous wellness transgressions' (Conrad, 1994: 394). Not all of the confessional threads contained these explicit statements of rehabilitation, but what seems to be most important is that members demonstrate their understanding of the Weight Watchers regime, and remain committed to surveillance project, regardless of any lapses that may occur.

The help given in this thread by CHEEKYCHOPS is purely information-based in nature, apart from the emotion work performed by a 'kiss' at the end of her message there is no explicit statement of advice, solidarity or support. However, this message thread demonstrates the collaborative, community based nature of the self surveillance practices that group members engage in. claire2002 confessed her transgression, displaying her accountability to the group, and solicits their help with a request for information. CHEEKYCHOPS provides this information on behalf of the community, and claire2002 restates her commitment to the regime.

Advice requesting and giving

The next message thread is an example of advice giving in a confessional sequence. As mentioned in the previous section, Brown and Levinson (1987) state that advice giving threatens negative face wants and is therefore powerful behaviour, because it assumes a powerful footing on the part of the advice giver. They suggest that advice giving indicates '(potentially) that the speaker does not intend to avoid impeding [the hearer's] freedom of action' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 324). Similarly, Locher and Hoffman note that the asymmetry in power between the advice-giver and the recipient of the advice is 'perceived as threatening and, depending on the context in which advice-giving takes place, it will require mitigation rather than a straightforward realization' (Locher and Hoffman, 2006: 71). Despite the potential for face threat, in the message board context advice-giving is also consistent with the community objectives of help and support, and so group members do frequently give advice to one another, and this is not always explicitly solicited. As the analysis will show, the face threat posed by these message posts is frequently mitigated by solidary behaviours like humour, sympathy or encouragement, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section:

Message Thread 9:		sore head
9.01	<p><a href="#">SHELLYJO666</a></p>  <p>15 st 5.5 lb 15 st 0 lb 9 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">692</a></p>	<p><b>10:05:47</b></p> <p>Mornin all. Still feel a bit yuck today. Got a cracker of a headache, just want to curl up in the dark!</p> <p>Was naughty last night. I have been in Opt soup mode and had loads of points left. So needing to use then I had some healthy treats, but then I had a munchie attack and ate whatever was in my path. My mind switched off. So, back to square one again. GRRRR why do I do I keep doing this</p> <p>.....</p> <p>If you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to get what you've always got! I am 5ft 4"</p> <p>10% reached 22/09/04</p> <p>Starting again 3rd Jan 2005 15 stone!!! :0{</p>
9.02	<p><a href="#">LAURAPD</a></p>  <p>14 st 13 lb 12 st 8 lb 11 st 3 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">2825</a></p>	<p><b>10:08:43</b></p> <p>poor you...take a painkiller and go and lie down babes. As for the munchies...don't keep it in the house! I refuse to stock biccies or anything else so my munchie attacks are limited to WW bars!</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Weigh in at [location]</p> <p>Christmas has come and I have gotten fat I'll be good, do WW It'll put paid to that</p>

SHELLYJO666's profile reveals her identity as a 'lapsed' weight watcher, who reached her 10% target but then regained her lost weight. In this thread (post 9.01) she confesses a lapse in her self control. However, this is not apparent from the title of her post, which instead refers to her health, stating that she has a 'sore head', a strategy which may serve to elicit sympathy and reduce her responsibility for her actions, like 175VICKI's earlier post about her hangover (post 7.01). SHELLYJO666 then shares her confession, and by describing her behaviour as 'naughty' (using the childlike language discussed earlier in the chapter) she indicates to the community that her behaviour is unacceptable. The face threat posed by the confession is partly mitigated by first establishing her awareness of the rules, and then showing that she had been observing them up until the time of her lapse. But in trying to follow the regime *precisely*, by eating her full point allowance as directed, SHELLYJO666 then describes a loss of self control, which she refers to as a 'munchie attack'. The confession is constructed as an uncontrollable physical response, like a 'heart attack', or a 'panic attack'. She then describes the lapse in her self-monitoring behaviour in more detail, reporting her lack of restraint by saying that she 'ate whatever was in [her] path'. The uncontrollable nature of her behaviour is further stressed by her next statement 'my mind switched off', suggesting that she no longer has free will. In her account she separates her mind from her physical body, her body is acting independently of her wishes. The role of the body as agent in the discussion of weight management is something which will be returned to and explored in more detail in chapter 7. Again, by depicting herself as at the mercy of her bodily urges, SHELLYJO666 maintains her own face by offering a justification of what has happened. By confessing to overeating SHELLYJO666 is acknowledging that she has acted in a way which does not fit in with cultural ideals of femininity, as she has failed to show the necessary control and restraint around food. By describing her consumption as something which has occurred as a result of uncontrollable bodily urges, she also aligns herself with the belief that women are not expected to have large appetites. Her excessive consumption has not occurred because she *wanted* to eat a lot of food, but because she has failed to exert sufficient control over her behaviour. She expresses anger and frustration at her lapse and makes it clear that she does not intend to abandon her diet. She is going to rehabilitate herself back into the eating regime, and expresses her intention to return 'back to square one', both in terms of re-establishing self control, and starting to point her consumption again.

LAURAPD's reply to the message (post 9.02) contains two instances of advice giving. The first refers to SHELLYJO's health, and the second acknowledges the confession, and offers a

potential practical solution to the problem. She recommends that SHELLYJO666 removes any tempting foods like 'biccies' from her home completely, rather than simply attempting to exercise control and eat them in moderation. This reply orients to the idea that SHELLYJO666 is not to blame for her actions, placing the agency in the tempting food. She suggests that the only way to prevent this situation reoccurring is to deal with the presence of problem foods, which is consistent with commonly accepted community knowledge about the intrinsic and irresistible lure of 'bad' foods. Although her bald on record imperative 'don't keep it in the house!' is potentially face threatening, it could reflect the urgency of the situation. She also offers advice by describing her own experiences with biscuits (or 'biccies'), a strategy which both affords her the status of 'expert' (as she has experienced the same problem and found a solution), but can also be solidarity-forming and serves to mitigate the potential face threat of her previous statement. Her advice formulation is consistent with the findings of Hudson (1990), whose study of advice giving in a gardening call-in radio show revealed that when issuing directives speakers often avoid 'giving explicit commands which mention the caller as agent' (Hudson, 1990: 296). Her advice 'I refuse to stock biccies' (as opposed to 'you shouldn't stock biccies') doesn't position SHELLYJO666 as the agent in her advice, and is therefore less face threatening. Face threat is also mitigated by the sympathetic nature of her post, attending to the headache that SHELLYJO666 refers to in her original post, suggesting that she takes care of herself and using the term of endearment 'babes!'. This performs solidarity work, which is another common feature of the community, and will be described in the next section.

### Solidarity work

Solidarity work, which includes positive face management strategies such as encouragement, support, sympathy and alignment, performs an important function for the message board community, although as chapter 4 discusses although solidarity may be experienced positively *in this context*, the activities that this type of support help to promote are still problematic from a feminist perspective. The boards are advertised as a friendly place to get help and support with the Weight Watchers regime, and this is reflected in the messages in the data set. Solidarity forming behaviours reinforce the *community* aspect of the weight loss endeavour, and encourage members to support one another in their surveillance practices:

Message Thread 10:		<b>I am a pig.</b>
10.01	<p><a href="#">KIM1005</a></p>  <p>11st 11.0lb 11st 4.5lb 9st 11.0lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">188</a></p>	<p><b>12:47:14</b></p> <p>I have just devoured a McD's, all part of my hangover cure so surely this is ok! To be honest I don't feel fantastic yet, and doubt I will!</p> <p>Anyhoo, tomorrow is a new day! .....</p> <p>Kim xxx</p> <p>ooOOoo Vixen Team ooOOoo</p>
10.02	<p><a href="#">CHUCKYEGG24</a></p>  <p>14 st 4 lb 13 st 8 lb 11 st 2 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1755</a></p>	<p><b>12:50:34</b></p> <p>aw Kim, just remember to count the points and you'll be fine. Sometimes we need these things - and at least you know why you did it.</p> <p>Don't beat yourself up about it. .....</p> <p>Onwards and upwards... I can do this!</p> <p>Founder member of the WOBBLERS Club - WeightWatchers Obsessed Board Birds Love E-posting Club</p> <p>10% Goal 12st 12lbs</p>

Like MARSATTACK's earlier post (post 5.01), KIM1005 (post 10.01) uses the metaphor of a pig to describe herself and her behaviour, and her lack of control is also marked by her use of the term 'devour' to describe her consumption. She frames her transgression as an attempt to 'cure' her hangover. KIM1005's claim 'so surely this is ok!' plays with the moral framework of food and consumption, and the next chapter (chapter 6) will be devoted to an analysis of the occurrence of this type of humour in the delivery of confessions. However, humorous justification aside, she foregrounds her physical state, inviting sympathy and reports that not only did she consume the food because she was suffering from a hangover, but she is *still* feeling unwell despite her transgression.

CHUCKYEGG24's reply (post 10.02) offers her emotional support and sympathy. Her statement 'aw Kim' is nurturing, and sympathetic, and she orients to the surveillance project by reassuring her that she'll 'be fine' as long as she continues to record her consumption. Her assurance 'sometimes we need these things' [emphasis added] performs an aligning function, and constructs transgression as an experience which is shared by all of the members of the group. In some confessional threads members even respond by making a confession of their own, and the solidarity-forming nature of these posts will be discussed in the analysis of the next message thread (message thread 12). CHUCKYEGG24's assertion that they 'need' to consume bad foods constructs transgression as a joint activity which can be 'explained'.

CHUCKYEGG also orients to the account offered by KIM1005 in her original post, consoling her with the fact that 'at least' she 'knows why' she has transgressed. She ends her post with further reassurance, and emotion work, instructing her not to 'beat herself up' about her transgression.

Although there is no advice offered about how to make amends for her consumption, beyond ensuring that she counts the points, KIM1005's original post (post 10.01) contains a statement of rehabilitation of sorts. Rather than expressing an intention to limit her future point intake, or do some exercise (as in claire2002's post for example, post 1.01), KIM1005 resolves to make a 'fresh start', a statement which signals her continued commitment to the eating regime despite her transgression.

Commitment to the community and the regime is also promoted through praise and encouragement, both of which are solidarity forming conversational moves, and this can be observed in the replies to MsJelly's post (post 11.01):

Message Thread 12:		Helpppppppppp me Pleaseeeeeeeeeee
11.01	<p><b>MsJelly</b></p>  <p>15 st 6 lb 12 st 12 lb 9 st 11 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">931</a></p>	<p><b>15:10:00</b></p> <p>Board stiff at work and have already eaten too many points *hangs head in shame* and i was being so good *i'm so ashamed*. Why do i always stuff up when i'm doing good. *cries* *blubber blubber* :(</p> <p>..... *") (. (. * MSJELLY* Xmas Challenge lost 8.5 lbs so far</p>
11.02	<p><b>LOOBY001</b></p>  <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">481</a></p>	<p><b>15:11:46</b></p> <p>Because like me you are bored stupid at work, see if I wasn't here, I wouldn't have ate that Fudge, Fruit Pastilles, Alpen Bar, etc etc etc but I have and now I feel sick</p> <p>..... (. (. * Looby *</p>
11.03	<p><b>CHUCKYEGG24</b></p>  <p>14 st 4 lb 13 st 8 lb 11 st 2 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1755</a></p>	<p><b>15:12:31</b></p> <p>come on girl - pull yourself together!</p> <p>You've done really well this week, don't let it slide now.</p> <p>Plan your fantasy holiday on the web, rearrange all the filing so it's back to front and you have something to do next week - or best of all, come and play with us!</p> <p>You can do it kiddo xx ..... Onwards and upwards... I can do this!</p> <p>Founder member of the WOBBLERS Club - WeightWatchers Obsessed Board Birds Love E-posting Club</p> <p>10% Goal 12st 12lbs</p>

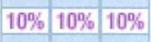
MsJelly constructs herself as in need of help in both the thread title and her post (post 11.01), and her message represents her emotional state as one of despair. LOOBY001's reply (post 11.02) aligns with MsJelly's question (explaining her transgression as a result of boredom), forming solidarity by matching her confession with one of her own. The mirroring of experiences (or 'exchanged vulnerable talking') in talk involving 'painful self disclosure' has been shown to be a solidarity-seeking conversational move within all-female talk (Coates, 1996: 88-89). Although Coates suggests the gendered nature of this type of behaviour is reflected in men's reticence to self-disclose in all-male groups, Tannen (1990) notes that in all-male talk self-disclosure is usually responded to with *advice* (which is a powerful move), rather than with similar disclosure.

In her response CHUCKYEGG24 (post 11.03) assumes a more authoritative stance by issuing the directive 'pull yourself together', encouraging her to renew her focus on the weight loss project. While CHUCKYEGG24's reply assumes a more powerful footing, and has the potential to threaten MsJelly's negative face, it is mitigated by its encouraging nature and the overall solidary tone of her post. CHUCKYEGG24's relatively high post count in her profile reflects her experience as a community member, and she offers advice and encouragement to group members on a number of occasions throughout the data set. Her praise 'you've done really well this week', and further encouragement 'you can do it', is explicitly supportive. Her use of the address form 'kiddo' is another potentially powerful move, although because it is familiar it is also solidary, and it is mitigated with two kisses at the end of her message. CHUCKYEGG24 also takes up LOOBY001's (post 11.02) account of the cause of the transgression, suggesting ways in which MsJelly can distract herself and avoid temptation. Her invitation to 'come and play with us' maintains a light-hearted, childlike, egalitarian and inclusive tone, and orients to the importance of the *group* as an aid to successful weight loss. While CHUCKYEGG24's instruction to 'pull yourself together' is mitigated in her post, some responses to confessional threads contain much more explicit reprimands, and these will be explored in the next section.

### Scolding and reprimands

While advice-giving is potentially face-threatening because it assumes power on the part of the advice giver, it is in-keeping with the community norms of help and support, and with feminine subjectivity more widely. However, the act of *reprimanding* arguably has even more potential to threaten the face of these involved. Openly criticising the behaviour of a fellow weight

watcher seems to directly contradict the supportive and solidary norms of the group, and yet, although comparatively rare, such conversational moves can be observed in the data set. However, it seems that reprimands also have the potential to perform a solidary function, and as the analysis of the responses to 175VICKI's earlier post (post 7.01) show, scolding and reprimands are consistent with the *goals* of the community, so this can mitigate any potential face threat:

Message Thread 7:		<b>Hungover :(</b>
7.01	<p><a href="#">175VICKI</a>              10 st 9 lb            10 st 9 lb            9 st 7 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">1262</a></p>	<p><b>09:38:54</b></p> <p>Morning All.</p> <p>I've only just gotten into work and I'm hungover. I hate being hungover at work, it just makes me so useless.</p> <p>I know that when it gets to Lunchtime, all I'm going to want to eat is something really high in points. But I need to be good coz, I'm going out for lunch on Sunday with the In-Laws. I'm thinking of just starting again on Monday.</p> <p>What do you think?</p>
7.02	<p><a href="#">CHUBBYKITTEN</a>            Recent Posts: <a href="#">8</a></p>	<p><b>09:43:21</b></p> <p>try and get a baked potato or something quite high in carbs but not too bad points wise as it does wonders to soak up the alcohol ...dont give up :o)</p>
7.03	<p><a href="#">ALICERYDER</a>              16 st 5.5 lb            11 st 13 lb            10 st 12 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">12970</a></p>	<p><b>09:43:42</b></p> <p>**tsk tsk**</p> <p>And don't you DARE have the weekend off!!!</p> <p>Get that handbook out and start pointing NOW!!!</p> <p>That way, you won't gain loads at wi!!</p> <p>Alice:)            .....            FORTY IS THE OLD AGE OF YOUTH; FIFTY IS THE YOUTH OF OLD AGE!            TARGET: 11st 13lb [date]            TARGET: 11st 1lb WW's GOLD WEIGHT            TARGET: 10ST 12lb MY GOAL WEIGHT!!            BMI [date]...37.2            BMI [date]....27</p> <p>IF LIFE HANDS YOU A LEMON; MAKE LEMONADE!!</p>
7.04	<p><a href="#">BECCAS</a>              16 st 6 lb            15 st 3 lb            11 st 0 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">815</a></p>	<p><b>09:43:47</b></p> <p>No sympathy for you. If you will go out having fun and enjoying yourself then you've only got yourself to blame!</p> <p>From a very jealous Becca LOL :-))))))))))</p> <p>.....            This time!</p> <p>Becca</p>

7.05

<p><a href="#">LDH1978</a></p>  <p>9 st 7 lb 9 st 0 lb 8 st 7 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">398</a></p>	<p><b>09:38:54</b></p> <p>morning !</p> <p>I'v got fuzzy head too !</p> <p>why not hav a jacket potato with beans or somet for lunch - filling, stodgy but not too high in pts !</p> <p>u'll only make urself feel worse if u start again on monday ! &amp; it'll be harder to get back on track !</p> <p>.....</p> <p>'friends are the family we choose for ourselves!</p> <p>Mrs H x [email address]</p>
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While 175VICKI suggests the possibility of taking a break from the Weight Watchers regime, none of the replies to her post endorse this course of action. Instead they stress the importance of persevering with the regime and remaining committed to monitoring point consumption. They mainly do this through solidarity forming strategies, but also play with constructing authoritarian roles for themselves in the interactions.

Although serious reprimands are unusual on the message boards, ALICERYDER's reply is parental in tone, beginning with the scolding '\*\*tsk tsk\*\*'. The sentence construction is even more forceful with the use of the imperative 'And don't you DARE have the weekend off!!! Get that handbook out and start pointing right NOW!!!'. If serious, this type of post would be extremely face threatening, and ALICERYDER's authoritarian stance appears to directly contradict the group norm of solidarity, but the extreme tone of her post suggests that it cannot be interpreted as a serious reprimand. Her profile shows that ALICERYDER is a well-established member of the group who has successfully reached her goal, and is an extremely prolific poster, and is therefore likely to be well aware of the group norms. The light hearted nature of her post is also marked by a smiley emoticon after her signature ' : ) ', suggesting that her comments are not intended to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, despite the humorous nature of ALICERYDER's post it is still consistent with the *goals* of the community, and contains a significant message regarding the importance of remaining committed to the Weight Watcher regime, and of continuing to monitor the point values of foods consumed. The goal of weight loss is also stressed by describing the potential penalty of failing to follow the plan religiously, as she states that if 175VICKI sticks to the plan 'you won't gain loads at wi!!!'. Therefore, by framing her post as humorous, and by taking her advice to an extreme that takes the form of a 'mock reprimand', ALICERYDER mitigates the face threat of her post yet is still

successful in communicating the importance of remaining dedicated to the weight loss endeavour, and being a 'good weight watcher' and 'good woman'.

BECCAS's reply has a similarly light hearted tone, but does not address 175VICKI's intention to take a break from the eating plan. Instead she refers to the behaviour which has led to her hangover, jokingly placing responsibility for the situation back with 175VICKI with her statement 'No sympathy for you. If you will go out having fun and enjoying yourself you've only got yourself to blame!', a post which plays with the group norms of solidarity discussed in the previous section. As with ALICERYDER's reply, although the post is light hearted in nature, there may still be an element of truth to what BECCAS is saying, as the regime requires each member to take responsibility for controlling her own consumption and monitoring her point intake. By drinking enough to suffer from a hangover, 175VICKI has failed to restrain herself, and is therefore suffering the consequences. However, the supportive community norms would undoubtedly prohibit this type of statement being made seriously, and BECCAS's humorous intentions are stressed by her description of herself as 'very jealous', and the use of CMC conventions like 'LOL', and (just to be sure), a 'smiley' emoticon whose effect is magnified by the inclusion of multiple 'mouths' ' :-))))))))) '. She further aligns herself with 175VICKI by wishing her a quick recovery, and ends with further advice to 'drink lots of water' (a hangover cure which fits well with the Weight Watchers regime).

The norms of the Weight Watchers message board compel members to be supportive and encouraging, and the advice offered is supportive of 175VICKI's attempts to follow the Weight Watchers plan. While the suggestion of taking a break is responded to negatively in the above thread, such actions are discussed in hypothetical terms, as 175VICKI has not yet broken her diet, but in this case such support still requires group members to be critical of 175VICKI's proposed future behaviour. The reprimands which take place in this message thread are clearly marked as light-hearted, and serve to deliver the critical message while mitigating the potential face threat and maintaining group solidarity.

## 5.6 Summary

Although Brown and Levinson (1987) describe confession as a practice which is intrinsically face-threatening, the frequency with which admissions of transgression take place on the board suggests that such practices are common in the commercial weight loss context, and possibly among talk between women more generally. The nature of the responses to these

posts also indicates that the confession of consumption is both accepted and expected on the Weight Watchers message board, and as discussed in chapter 3 one of the main functions of the boards is to offer support to fellow members. Yet while the practice of confession may be considered to be normative, the admission of an inability to control appetite still holds the potential to be face threatening, and this is particularly true for women (Guendouzi, 2004: 1650). By confessing behaviour which they define as 'inappropriate', group members are engaged in the production and reproduction of gendered subjectivity, and the behaviours they describe, such as being out of control, lacking restraint, and succumbing to desire, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2 are considered to be excessive and 'unfeminine'. So although reports of transgressive consumption are not necessarily ultimately incompatible with an identity as a 'good weight watcher', these confessions do have the potential to expose members to a loss of face. In their messages group members employ strategies throughout the exchanges which serve to mitigate this face threat, and their messages play with the notions of agency and accountability. The prevalence of confession on the message boards despite this potential face threat suggests that it is likely to have some potential benefit to those confessing. In fact, in this context the confession of transgression is arguably simultaneously *face promoting*, both in terms of the individual identity of the confessor, and for the community.

Confessions perform an important role in the maintenance of group solidarity, as the act of confession creates (the impression of) intimacy between group members. By confessing a transgression the confessor exposes her weaknesses and lays herself open to criticism, and as such implies the presence of trust between group members. Hymer suggests that, 'confession fulfils a spiritual hunger in us. It allows us to achieve intimacy with others and, thereby, to realize that we are no longer isolated and alone' (Hymer, 1996: 1). Confession can also create solidarity between group members by allowing group members to offer advice, support and encouragement in their replies. As well as establishing group norms, confession 'bonds the group together, as members reassert their commitment to group norms and thereby highlight and strengthen the moral boundaries surrounding the group' (Stinson, 2001: 59).

Paradoxically, although by confessing members present their behaviour in ways which constructs their behaviour as transgressive, the confessional exchanges also present an opportunity for individual members to display their expertise about the Weight Watchers regime. The practices of information and advice giving, along with the interactional solidarity work on the message boards, reinforce the reputation of the community as a source of help and support with the self surveillance project. This display of expertise is not limited to those

who are *giving* advice, as by reporting individual instances of wrongdoing the members who are confessing also display their understanding of 'acceptable' behaviour. As previously discussed, the act of confession is one of the key ways in which the practice of surveillance plays out within the interactions on the message board, and members construct their feminine identities by demonstrating that they are subjecting their consumption to the intense levels of surveillance required of them, while still appearing modest and self-effacing.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that confessional exchanges actually present a space in which the transgressor is able to (re)assert her commitment to the Weight Watchers regime, and (re)align herself with the identity of a good weight watcher and a good woman without threatening the face of fellow group members. Participation in this type of message thread offers a member an opportunity to show that they understand the 'rules' surrounding food and eating, and to renew these rules while producing a subject position as knowledgeable Weight Watcher and 'feminine' woman.

While the confessions in this chapter utilise a number of different strategies to diminish accountability for their consumption, and to mitigate any potential face threat caused by their transgression, ultimately all of these individuals construct their behaviour as unacceptable, positioning themselves as accountable to group cultural norms and responsible for their own actions. Even in LOOPYRABBIT's 'rebellious' post (post 8.01), her message has multiple potential interpretations, as she demonstrates that she is still aware of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' gendered behaviour, despite her reported intention to disobey the 'rules'.

Throughout their interactions on the message boards, the members of the Weight Watchers community are positioned as feminine subjects of varying kinds. These subject positions are often contradictory, as, for example, individuals are constructed as simultaneously out of control, yet carefully scrutinising their consumption. The exchanges on the boards suggest that the reporting of transgression does not necessarily have to be inconsistent with an identity as a 'good weight watcher', but what appears to be important in occupying a subject position as a 'good woman' is to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the moral framework surrounding food and consumption, and to take responsibility for any transgression committed.

The next chapter will consider a subset of confessional posts in which this commitment to the ideals of Weight Watchers is less clear. While the majority of the confessions in the data set

follow the conventions, or 'rules' of the regime, a small number of these posts make use of *humour* to deliver the confessional message. While these are comparatively rare, with only 9 instances of humorous confession in the data set, these message threads are particularly significant in terms of the maintenance of a 'good weight watcher' identity, and are therefore worthy of further scrutiny. Although humour can be observed throughout the exchanges on the message boards, and much of the interaction is light hearted and playful in nature, chapter 6 is concerned specifically with posts containing humour which inverts (or subverts) the norms of the Weight Watchers regime.

# Chapter 6: Humour, confession and identity management

## 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter showed that the confession of transgression is common on the message boards. Through confession group members construct their gendered subjectivities as women and weight watchers, as by confessing 'bad' behaviour they acknowledge what is 'acceptable' in this context. One of the key features of the confessions discussed in the previous chapter is the admission of *accountability* for what has happened. In these women's confessional narratives they appear to present themselves as tempted to eat 'bad' food because they are weak, and as succumbing to excess because they lack self control. The act of confession therefore reflects the constant self-surveillance which women subject themselves to and the morality surrounding food and its consumption. This chapter will consider a small subset of message threads which 'play' with these ideas of morality and accountability, and use *humour* to deliver the confessional message.

Conversational humour is constructed collaboratively through interaction (e.g. Hay, 2001; Coates, 2007). The analysis of the humour found within the message threads will therefore not only explore the function that humour performs within the context of the Weight Watchers message boards, but also how it emerges and is managed *within the interactions*, between group members. The analysis will pay particular attention to the management of face, the construction of gendered subjectivity, and the formation of solidarity between group members within the exchanges.

## 6.2 Weight watching and humour

Although previous studies of commercial weight loss organisations (e.g. Stinson, 2001; Heyes, 2006) provide a detailed analysis of the experience of members of these groups, their observations suggest that the weight loss endeavour is a solemn and serious one. The act of confession in particular is one which is traditionally considered to be serious, fraught with feelings of deviance and guilt (e.g. Spitzack, 1990), yet this is not always the case in this context. Many of the posts on the message boards were light-hearted in tone, and some of the message posts explicitly used humour in their delivery of the confessional message.

The use of humour in discussions surrounding weight loss and diet-breaking is not restricted to the online message boards, as similar humour could also be observed in the 'real life' Weight Watchers meetings, where the general mood was light-hearted throughout. For example, one member who had put on weight while she had been away on holiday blamed her weight gain on the hotel breakfast, joking (in a very suggestive manner) that 'you know me, I can't resist a sausage'. Her fellow group members, and the group leader, responded to this comment with laughter. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the group member did not *experience* guilty emotions, but she manages her confession in a way which appears significantly different to the more seriously delivered confessions analysed in the previous chapter. Similarly, one group leader joked that it would be a good idea for members to eat all of their children's Easter eggs in one go to 'get them out of the way'. The same group joked about the calcium content of milk chocolate making it 'healthy', making light of the struggles that some members reported in their attempts to resist eating chocolate. This humour did not necessarily indicate that the group leader or the members were not taking the eating regime *seriously*, but their discussion of their eating habits and their progress (or lack of it) was often jovial and laughter was common.

It seems therefore that dieting-related humour is a phenomenon worthy of further scrutiny. Humour is a particularly rich and complex form of face management, and so this chapter will explore these messages in more detail. Baym also notes the importance of studying humour in an *online* context, as she observes that 'humorous performance can be used to create group solidarity, group identity, and individual identity in CMC', yet the phenomenon is often neglected in the study of online groups (Baym, 1995: online article). Therefore, the analysis will consider the significance of humour both in terms of the weight management context, and the online community context in which it occurs.

### **6.3 The social functions of humour**

The social benefits of humour in interaction are summed up by Norrick, who explains that, 'conversational humor generally allows us to present a personality, share experiences and attitudes, and promote rapport' (Norrick, 2003: 1348). The development of rapport is particularly important in the context of the Weight Watchers message boards, which are advertised as a place in which members can interact with like-minded people, and obtain support with the weight loss experience. Humour can act as a 'short-cut' to intimacy, serving

to 'enhance bonds between individuals by highlighting a shared sense of humor or common ground' (Hancock, 2004: 48), or 'who we are, what we are doing, and how we do things' (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008: 399). If individuals find the same things funny, then this is something they have in common, making them seem more similar, and consequently closer, and more likely to trust one another. Their shared humour reflects shared beliefs, values and understanding of the world.

Humour has been shown by many authors to play an important role in the formation and maintenance of group solidarity, and Hay notes that, 'every attempt at humor is an attempt to express solidarity with the audience and construct a position of respect and status within the group' (Hay, 2001: 716). Much of the work on humour has studied face to face interaction, but the solidarity-forming functions of humour have also been observed in an online context. In fact, the functions of humour may be particularly salient in this context, as Baym suggests that in an online situation, which lacks face to face cues, the use of humour is one way in which individuals can create closeness and intimacy with one another, 'by creating a friendly social context despite the impersonal elements of the medium' (Baym, 1995: online article).

The potential positive emotional benefits of humour are numerous – the solidarity and rapport created by certain forms of humour have been shown to increase morale (and consequently productivity) in a work environment (Romero and Pescosolido 2008), and joking can be used as a way to relieve stress, or to deal with uncomfortable situations (for example Sanders, 2004; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988). As noted in the discussion of advice-giving in the previous chapter (chapter 5), humour can function as a face management strategy, and can be used to maintain equal power relations (Locher and Hoffman, 2006). Finally, Coates observes that the use of humour 'allows us to explore, in new ways, what we know, and even, by using other words, to explore things which are difficult or taboo' (Coates, 2007: 32).

Humour may increase solidarity and allow a freedom of expression, but not all types of humour perform a solely positive function. In some cases 'humour can be seen as an attack or a put-down' (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008: 398) and can be used cruelly to mock or undermine others (Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 1997).

The link between humour and power is a complex one, and it can perform several different functions simultaneously. In some ways humour may 'even out' the balance of power, for example by giving subordinate employees the opportunity to raise issues that are important to

them in a 'safe' environment (e.g. Mullany, 2004; Romero and Pescosolido, 2008). However, in other situations humour can be hostile and derogatory (e.g. Boxer and Cortes Conde, 1997). While some humour theorists (such as Lefcourt, 2001) make a clear distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' humour, the interpretation of the intended effect of humour can depend upon the situation, and some forms of humour, such as teasing, can walk a fine line between the two, being 'positive' and 'negative' at the same time (Hay, 2001; Grainger, 2004).

As well as strengthening the identity of groups as discussed earlier, humour also has the potential to *destabilise* group identity, as the expressive freedom it affords has also been shown to play a subversive function, acting as a form of resistance (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 2003; Obrdlick, 1942 in Martineau, 1972). Germov and Williams (1999) note that although dieting women may be complicit in their own 'oppression', 'they can also resist patricarchial social control through the construction of alternative discourses such as fat acceptance' (Germov and Williams, 1999: 130). While there was no evidence of a fat acceptance discourse on the message boards, the use of humour relating to the Weight Watchers regime may represent an attempt to adopt a subject position which at least partly resists the dominant discourse of the 'thin ideal'.

The use of humour does not always necessarily signal complete *opposition* to something, but may reflect an awareness of possible contradictions or failings of the focus of the humour. In such a situation humour acts as a collective acknowledgement of these shortcomings. The potential of humour for relatively 'minor' subversion or rebellion was noted by Baym, who describes how joking in the online interactions of soap opera viewers often involved criticism or mocking of the programme the site was devoted to. This resistance was contradictory, with viewers caught between 'close involvement with the narratives and reasoned criticism of their construction', or the tension between 'pleasure and cynicism' (Baym, 1995: online article). Although the women in her study were committed *fans* of the soap operas they discussed, they were still able to critically evaluate them, and did so through the use of humour.

#### **6.4 The interactional construction of humour**

While much of the early work on humour was concerned with the telling of jokes, classifying jokes, and determining what makes them funny, Hay observes a more recent interest in 'spontaneous spoken humour as it occurs in interaction' (Hay, 2001: 57). Such an approach views humour as interactionally constructed, and takes into account the whole 'play'

sequence. Coates (2007) uses Bateson's (1953) concept of a 'play frame' in order to explain how participants in a conversation collaborate to construct humour. She describes how such collaboration is essential in 'playful talk', as in order for the humour to continue participants must recognise that the play frame is in place, and then 'join in' to work to maintain it. Individuals are able to switch between serious and playful frames, which means that playful talk can potentially be initiated at any time during an interaction.

## 6.5 Humour on the message boards

On the message boards numerous instances of humour and light heartedness can be observed in threads concerned with a variety of topics, but this chapter will concentrate upon humorous posts which relate specifically to the weight loss endeavour. Several of the humorous threads on the boards are concerned with food or its consumption, and even the Weight Watchers regime itself does not appear to be considered to be above occasional gentle mocking. Humorous *confessions* are less common on the message boards than 'serious' or 'straight' confessions, but are particularly interesting because they show a playfulness on the part of the group members regarding a key occurrence in the weight loss experience. The previous section has explained the significance of humour in group interactions, and as the phenomenon of humour in weight loss discourse is one which has not been addressed in previous work it is therefore worthy of further scrutiny.

The posts analysed in this chapter all contain at least one element of humour. The first half of the chapter will explore what is considered to be humorous in the context of the weight loss organisation, through the analysis of jokes told by group members. The second half of the chapter will examine the use of humour in the delivery and management of confessions. The analysis will concentrate particularly on the way in which this humour plays with the established group norms, namely those of food classification and accountability for consumption, and the implications this has for the formation of feminine subjectivity. In the confessions in the previous chapter, the notion of 'bad' foods is very clearly defined, and the issues of commitment and individual accountability are both commonly accepted. However, in this set of message board exchanges group members appear to use humour to invert these norms.

## 6.6 What is humorous in this context?

Before analysing the humorous sequences in any detail, it is first necessary to establish how humorous posts can be identified. This task is not necessarily a straightforward one – Hay explains that 'the problem of defining humor is a notoriously thorny one', with different definitions foregrounding the importance of either the intention of the speaker, or the interpretation of the audience (Hay, 2001: 56). Hay's own work used the criterion 'anything the speaker intended to be funny' (ibid: 56), but she states her awareness that this definition is a somewhat problematic one. There can be difficulties inherent in interpreting ambiguous interactions as humorous, particularly in the online context, and so it was important to set some clear criteria when choosing message threads for analysis.

In order to select an initial sample of humorous message threads, the first criterion I used was that I, as a reader of the message boards, interpreted a particular post in the data set as humorous in nature. Secondly, if the take-up of a post was humorous then it was classed as such and included in the subset. Finally, although (as already discussed) the intention of the poster can often be difficult to establish, the message threads were further scrutinised for any language or other symbols which indicated that any individual posts were intended to be humorous (for example 'only kidding'), abbreviations (like 'lol', 'rolf'), or emoticons ( :-) ;-) ). As noted in the previous sections, analysis revealed that the dieting-related humour in the message board posts all involves the inversion (or subversion) of commonly accepted group values and beliefs. This is consistent with research into the characteristics of humour (e.g. McGhee, 1972; Suls, 1972; Mulkay, 1988), which notes the importance of *incongruity* in identifying an utterance as humorous. As Mulkay observes, 'in every joke and in every humorous remark, structure and content are in fact designed to produce the incongruity essential to humour' (Mulkay, 1988: 21).

McGhee (1972) outlines three 'conditions' which are necessary for an individual to be capable of interpreting an event as humorous: 1) they must possess knowledge about how things *should* be, 2) they must be aware that the situation being reported somehow *flouts the rules* of what they know to be correct, and finally 3) they must be confident that they have sufficient understanding of the first condition (how things should be) to confidently interpret the situation presented as *incongruous*. In the context of the Weight Watchers boards, in order to engage in humour relating to their weight loss experience, the group members must first be very sure of the 'rules' (or norms) surrounding the eating regime and dieting in general in

order to be able to make and understand jokes about it. Group members must also be confident that their humour will be understood and 'taken up' by their fellow group members, as a joke is only as funny as its audience interprets it to be.

As humour is a collaborative phenomenon (Hay, 2001), the analysis will examine how it emerges through the interactional exchanges, and will explore both the construction and the function of humour on both an individual and a group level. Incongruity alone is not necessarily enough to identify an utterance as humorous, as the way in which an utterance is *interpreted* and the *context* in which it occurs must also be taken into account. As Baym notes, 'humor cannot be separated from the group in which it is used or the individuals who participate. It is embedded in shared knowledge, shared codes and shared emotional significances which provide its meanings and determine its appropriateness' (Baym, 1995: online article).

The analysis will examine the way in which group members make use of incongruity in dieting-related humour, and in the presentation of humorous confessions. It will examine the way in which the confessable situation is constructed by the group members as non-serious, playing with the norms of behaviour in place on the boards. In the analysis of the confessional posts I will pay particular attention to the way in which humour acts as a face management strategy, and as a means of forming solidarity between group members.

One of the most explicit examples of humour in the data set is a list of jokes which one group member posts on the board. While (as already discussed) there is some debate about what specific features mark an utterance as humorous, the structure of the joke, and the fact that they are described as 'Friday funnies' means that the humorous intention of the post is clear. Furthermore, these jokes explicitly flout several of the core beliefs about acceptable behaviour when dieting, therefore they are incongruent, and establish the 'play frame' (Coates, 2007):

12.01

<p>Message Thread 12:</p> <p><a href="#">DAZNJILL</a></p>  <p>14 st 5 lb 14 st 5 lb 11 st 8 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">3516</a></p>	<p><b>mornin' all, Friday funnies!</b></p> <p><b>08:23:22</b></p> <p>HEALTH QUESTION &amp; ANSWER SESSION</p> <p>Q: I've heard that cardiovascular exercise can prolong life. Is this true?</p> <p>A: Your heart is only good for so many beats, and that's it... don't waste them on exercise. Everything wears out eventually. Speeding up your heart will not make you live longer; that's like saying you can extend the life of your car by driving it faster. Want to live longer? Take a nap.</p> <p>Q: Should I cut down on meat and eat more fruits and vegetables?</p> <p>A: You must grasp logistical efficiencies. What does a cow eat? Hay and corn. And what are these? Vegetables. So a steak is nothing more than an efficient mechanism of delivering more vegetables to your system. Need grain? Eat chicken. Beef is also a good source of field grass (green leafy vegetable). And a pork chop can give you 100% of your recommended daily allowance of vegetable products.</p> <p>Q: Should I reduce my alcohol intake?</p> <p>A: No, not at all. Wine is made from fruit. Brandy is distilled wine, that means they take the water out of the fruity bit so you get even more of the goodness that way. Beer is also made out of grain. Bottoms up!</p> <p>.....        :♥:~*♥~) ,♥*~        (: ( ;♥Jill♥</p>
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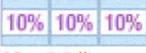
DAZNJILL's post (post 12.01) contains a list of 10 'question and answer' jokes about the 'rules' of dieting, and their 'puzzle and solution' structure is common to many jokes (Mulkey, 1988: 14). They are not all reproduced here, but they all cover themes which directly contradict two elements of commonly accepted knowledge about how to lose weight: 1) that in order to effectively lose weight you must combine dieting with physical activity, and 2) the moral classification of food.

The first joke plays with the concept of exercise as a means of losing weight, suggesting that cardiovascular activity is actually *bad* for you. The premise is expanded on in other jokes, one of which explains that swimming cannot be good for your figure, as whales do it all the time! The second joke twists the concept of meat, a food considered traditionally to be 'bad' in a dieting sense, and reframes it as 'good', because the animals the meat comes from lived on vegetables (a 'good' food). Along similar lines, the next joke suggests that alcohol, which the Weight Watchers regime suggests members cut down on due to its high point value, must actually be *good* for you, because it is made from fruit. Other jokes continue this theme, explaining that fried foods are good for you (because they are cooked in vegetable oil), as is chocolate (because it is made from beans).

Even if they weren't explicitly marked as 'funnies', this post could easily be interpreted as humorous in this situation, as the statements made within it are so incongruous with societal and community norms. While this is particularly true in the context of a commercial weight loss organisation, the concepts that are being contradicted are so key to our wider cultural understanding of weight loss (in order to lose weight you must cut down on calorific ('bad') foods and take more exercise) that even someone with no specific knowledge of the Weight Watchers regime would be able to identify the incongruity. The post flouts Grice's (1975) conversational maxim of quality 'do not say what you believe to be false', drawing on several 'facts', which give a surface illusion of truth (through clever use of language and 'logic'), but which common sense tells us are actually false. As the information given is so absurd, the only possible alternative interpretation of this post, that DAZNJILL actually believes these statements to be true, is incredibly unlikely. Therefore, the contradiction between what is *claimed* to be true, and what is *known* to be true marks the post as humorous.

Because of this incongruity the message is also potentially subversive, threatening DAZNJILL's face as a 'good weight watcher', but the risk to face involved in the post may be part of what makes the contents humorous. DAZNJILL's post is simultaneously face promoting, because it assumes common ground, making fun of a topic in which the group share a common interest, and is therefore solidarity forming. The take up of DAZNJILL's post shows that other posters share in the humorous frame:

Message Thread 12:		<a href="#">mornin' all, Friday funnies!</a>
12.02	<p><a href="#">brunel</a></p>  <p>14 st 0 lb 10 st 9.4 lb 10 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">176</a></p>	<p><b>08:28:28</b></p> <p>i like that on a Friday morning – made me smile!</p>
12.03	<p><a href="#">DRAMARAMA</a></p>  <p>13 st 1 lb 11 st 9 lb 9 st 7 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">230</a></p>	<p><b>08:28:37</b></p> <p>This is so funny!!!! Great for a Friday morning – really made me laugh. I am going to print it out and take it to work. Thanks!!!!</p> <p>..... D xxx</p> <p>[date] 2lbs on!!!! My first gain since I started :(</p>

12.04	<p><a href="#">SHEILA ROBERTS</a></p>  <p>13 st 8 lb 12 st 10 lb 10 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">225</a></p>	<p><b>08:29:08</b></p> <p>Just sent this to some friends, really funny. Hubby is now gonna live by these rules!!!!</p> <p>Sheila x</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Keep going, it's worth it in the end</p> <p>Friendly fairies member</p>
12.05	<p><a href="#">ALICERYDER</a></p>  <p>16 st 5.5 lb 11 st 13 lb 10 st 12 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">12970</a></p>	<p><b>09:27:03</b></p> <p>ROLF!!!</p> <p>Thank you Jill!!</p> <p>Alice:)xxxx</p> <p>.....</p> <p>FORTY IS THE OLD AGE OF YOUTH; FIFTY IS THE YOUTH OF OLD AGE! TARGET: 11st 13lb [date] TARGET: 11st 1lb WW's GOLD WEIGHT TARGET: 10ST 12lb MY GOAL WEIGHT!! BMI [date]...37.2 BMI [date]....27</p> <p>IF LIFE HANDS YOU A LEMON; MAKE LEMONADE!!</p>

In this way humour serves to *reinforce* the rules of the regime rather than subvert them, and the members who reply to the list of jokes posted by DAZNJILL all respond to the humorous content positively. Every reply explicitly conveys appreciation of the humour, showing that they have understood the joke, either by describing the post as 'funny', or by reporting or representing a physical response (e.g. 'made me smile', 'really made me laugh', 'LOL' (laughing out loud), 'ROLF' (rolling on the floor laughing). Jokes place 'interpretative demands' upon their recipients, and they are 'required by the very nature of joking exchanges to indicate very quickly and clearly that they have satisfied these demands – that is they have seen the point of the joke' (Mulkay, 1988: 17). Several members thank DAZNJILL for her post, and some express their intention to share the jokes with others. One thing which is particularly noticeable about the message thread is the large number of exclamation marks in the responses. Although group members do not respond with their own jokes, their expression of appreciation and excessive use of punctuation continues the humorous frame. Hancock notes that one of the conventions of humour in an online context is 'the playful use of punctuation, such as ellipsis or multiple exclamation or questions marks, to highlight that a message may be ambiguous or humorous' (Hancock, 2004: 58).

Despite the potential threat to face, this type of humour can have positive implications for both group and individual identity. In presenting this information as incongruous (and

therefore humorous) DAZNJILL is showing that she possesses an understanding of what the real 'rules' of weight loss are. The same can be said for the group members who respond to the jokes, as by finding the post funny, they illustrate their own familiarity with the weight loss regime. In joking about weight loss and Weight Watchers, these group members are displaying themselves as competent enough in their knowledge of the regime to be able to make judgements about what is considered to be humorous. Baym observes that the positioning of fellow group members as knowledgeable, and continually referring to shared knowledge bases, is one way in which humour has a 'social power to create and enhance participant solidarity and group identity' (Baym, 1995: online article). These examples show that it is possible for the use of this type of humour to have positive consequences for both group identity and individual gendered subjectivity, and there is no suggestion in the humorous threads that joking about the Weight Watchers regime is inappropriate. It is consistently responded to in a light-hearted fashion, and appears to be treated as something that the group can share and enjoy together. It is likely that the norms surrounding food and dieting are so culturally ingrained that there is virtually no chance that the jokes will be misinterpreted, and there is therefore little risk of loss of face to the poster.

## **6.7 Humorous confessions**

Analysis of the message thread above shows that humour relating to the Weight Watchers regime is one way of reinforcing the norms on the message boards, and that this humour plays with some of the 'rules' of weight loss, namely the importance of exercise and the commonly accepted notions of 'good' and 'bad' foods. However, the telling of jokes is only one very specific example of humour (Norrick, 2003). The sole purpose of this post is to relay humour, but less explicitly marked humour can be identified throughout the other interactions on the boards, in posts which also perform other functions. The second half of the chapter will expand on the analysis in the previous chapter to look specifically at posts which use humour in their delivery of confessions.

As in the joke thread, the humour in this set of confessions comes from the flouting of some of the central norms of the Weight Watchers regime, and of dieting more generally. The humour in confessional threads can be divided into two broad categories - posts which flout the rules surrounding the morality of food, and posts which flout the rules of individual accountability for transgression. The first set of confessions uses a similar type of humour to that found in the joke thread: the original poster confesses to eating a 'bad' food, but it is reframed as

'good' (and therefore non-confessable) through the use of humorous justifications. This reframing may take place in the original confession, or in the replies posted by other members of the group. In the second subset of humorous confessions, the moral classification of food is not disputed. The food in question is portrayed as undeniably 'bad', but rather than admitting guilt, posters use various humorous strategies which appear to distance themselves from accountability for their transgressions.

Although the humour in the joke thread was responded to positively by group members, it is possible that humour in a confessional context has a greater potential to pose a threat to face of the member using this strategy. If a member has transgressed, but does not express remorse, or attempts to avoid accountability for her actions, then she risks presenting herself as a 'bad weight watcher'. The analysis examines how this potential threat to face is managed in the exchanges.

The moral classification of food

The following two threads contain reports of the consumption of cakes and alcohol, food and drinks which would be classified as 'bad' due to their high point value, as well as their reputation as pleasurable. Both of the threads contain humour which relates to the moral status of the food in question:

Message Thread 13:		<a href="#">Do you think...</a>
13.01	<a href="#">Miss Musical</a> 14 st 3 lb 13 st 3 lb 9 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">103</a>	<b>13:52:14</b>  A slice of CARROT cake counts as one of my portions of fruit/veg for the day (lol)!??  It's a good job I'm going down to the gym tonight.  MMx
13.02	<a href="#">UKcazza</a>  11 st 10.5 lb 10 st 2 lb 9 st 10 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">451</a>	<b>13:59:55</b>  If you eat something and no one sees you eat it, it has no calories.  Hope it was nice.  ..... Cazza  When the world says, "Give up," Hope whispers, "Try it one more time."

13.03

HARLOW



13 st 7 lb

11 st 5.5 lb

10 st 0 lb

Recent Posts: [1004](#)

14:00:02

NICE, i like that as a concept!

On that theory, chocolate is good for me yes? Well, it comes from the cocoa bean which must be a veg as well!!

Miss\_Musical's post (post 13.01) confesses the consumption of a slice of carrot cake, but she humorously reframes the moral classification of the 'bad' food (cake) by stressing the fact that it contains 'good' ingredients (carrots). She aligns herself with her fellow group members, drawing them into the humorous exchange by asking them for their opinions on her theory that her consumption 'counts as one of [her] portions of fruit/veg for the day'. Like the jokes in the initial post, this message cleverly plays with commonly held knowledge about particular foods being 'good' or 'bad', using the nutritional goodness of carrots as a way to justify her transgression. This strategy is used in other message posts, for example describing wine as 'grape juice' (and therefore healthy).

Miss\_Musical makes her humorous intention clear by representing laughter ('lol') and using excessive punctuation. She also resolves to 'get back on track' and to make amends for her consumption, explaining that she intends to go to the gym later in the day. In doing this she shows that despite her joking, she remains committed to the weight loss endeavour, and is aware that any transgression must be compensated for.

Fellow group members respond to the humour positively, continuing the play frame by showing their appreciation and adding their own jokes, which again plays with the 'rules' of weight loss, and of the classification of food. The responses to these threads suggest that the rules of the Weight Watchers regime relating to point values and the moral classification of food are so integral to the experience of being a weight watcher that members are able to make fun of the experience of dieting without their identities as 'good weight watchers' being threatened.

The following thread uses a similar strategy, by reframing 'bad' consumption as 'good' to justify transgressive consumption:

Message Thread 14:		Points Pls
14.01	<p><a href="#">SHELLYJO666</a></p>  <p>15 st 5.5 lb 15 st 0 lb 9 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">692</a></p>	<p><b>21:13:02</b></p> <p>Still feeling yuk so I've had a Baileys to cheer myself up – anyone any idea of the points? Does it still count if medicinal???? :-)</p> <p>..... If you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to get what you've always got! I am 5ft 4"</p> <p>10% reached [date]</p>
14.02	<p><a href="#">NEARLYSLIM</a></p>  <p>12 st 4.5 lb 12 st 5 lb 10 st 7 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">676</a></p>	<p><b>21:21:07</b></p> <p>aaaaaaaaaaaaawwwwwww, poor you Baileys Irish Cream 25ml 2 Baileys Mini 50ml 4.5 Baileys Glide 100ml 3 (but if it's medicinal then surely no points????? lol) get better soon hun x</p> <p>..... First mini-goal - lose the 5lb christmas gain!</p>
14.03	<p><a href="#">SHELLYJO666</a></p>  <p>15 st 5.5 lb 15 st 0 lb 9 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">692</a></p>	<p><b>21:23:05</b></p> <p>sounds good! thanks NS, am off to bed now, nite nite</p> <p>..... If you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to get what you've always got! I am 5ft 4"</p> <p>10% reached [date]</p>

The thread is started by SHELLYJO666 (post 14.01), whose confession of an episode of out of control consumption (made earlier the same day) was analysed in the previous chapter (post 9.01, 'sore head').

SHELLYJO666's initial post (post 14.01) is similar in content to KIM1005's post in the previous chapter (post 10.01, 'i am a pig'), in which she confesses to eating fast food in an attempt to 'cure' a hangover. Like KIM1005, SHELLYJO666 justifies her consumption in two ways. Firstly, her declaration that she is 'feeling yuk', and has drunk some Baileys to 'cheer [herself] up' mitigates the face threat of her confession, by explaining and rationalising her actions as a response to her illness. Her description of herself as in need of cheering up, and the inclusion of a 'sad' emoticon at the end of her message, both clearly signal her negative emotional state. Although SHELLYJO666's post is not as overtly 'funny' in tone as those in the previous threads, there is still humour to be found in the second part of her post. Her lack of seriousness in her question 'Does it still count if medicinal????' by the use of multiple question marks, and although the question is presumably rhetorical (as she knows that all point consumption should be recorded), it invites other members of the group to join in and take up the humour.

The fact that she has already asked the group for the point value of the Baileys indicates that she intends to record her consumption and is not going to cheat on her diet. However, questioning whether her consumption counts plays with the idea that medications such as tablets and cough syrups are not allocated a point value in the Weight Watchers regime, despite any effect they may have on weight, as they are only consumed during illness when they are needed. By suggesting that her Baileys might be 'medicinal', and therefore free of points, SHELLYJO666 reframes her consumption as potentially acceptable, and as consequence-free.

NEARLYSLIM's reply (post 14.02) initially orients to SHELLYJO666's emotional state, and answers her question about points. The humorous frame is then taken up in brackets, echoing SHELLYJO666's question about the medicinal nature of alcohol, and even mirroring her use of multiple question marks. Her addition of 'lol' ('laughing out loud') confirms that the suggestion is a humorous one. She ends by offering further emotional encouragement, giving sympathy and well wishes. The affective function of her post is further enhanced by her use of the term of endearment 'hun', and her inclusion of a 'kiss' at the end of her message. Significantly, the post also provides the information that SHELLYJO666 needs in order to be able to track her consumption accurately, which implies that she has not taken the suggestion that Baileys is medicinal seriously. So despite the continuation of the play frame her post ensures that SHELLYJO666 has the information she needs to remain committed to the weight loss project, and aligned with the role of a 'good weight watcher'. SHELLYJO666 responds (post 14.03) by showing her appreciation of the continuation of the humour, but ends the play frame by thanking NEARLYSLIM for her response, and wishing her goodnight.

### Food as accountable

The threads in the previous section show that humour which plays with the moral classification of food appears to be readily accepted and supported on the message boards. However, there is a different form of humour which can be found in the delivery of confessions which has the potential to pose a more serious threat to the face of members. In these posts the humorous content does not relate to the moral status of the food that has been consumed, but to the accountability of the individual who has consumed it. While the responses to jokes about 'bad' foods suggest that this seems to be acceptable on the boards, the notion of individual accountability is one of the core tenets of the Weight Watchers regime. Every member must monitor and control her own consumption, and is responsible for making amends for any

transgression. If confessions are delivered in a way which fails to accept this accountability, then this may threaten the member's identity as a 'good weight watcher', and so the analysis will explore whether this seems to be the case. Humour is used to deflect or downplay the issue of accountability in several different ways, as the following threads will show.

One strategy employed in the delivery of humorous confessions is the anthropomorphism of food. The following two messages show how group members portray the food itself as responsible for their transgressions:

Message Thread 15:	<a href="#">Quick distract me</a>
15.01 <a href="#">SALLYLOVE</a> 18 st 0 lb 15 st 3 lb 12 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">107</a>	<b>12:45:24</b>  One of my colleagues has just come back with a huge tin of the most gorgeous looking chocolate biscuits that are sitting there winking at me!  Tried having an apple but somehow that was not a satisfying substitute!  ..... Started [date] one day at a time .....

In this thread, SALLYLOVE (post 15.01) has not yet consumed the food she describes, but is reporting temptation to do so. The confessions in the previous chapter showed that temptation was in itself a confessable offence, as temptation can signal moral weakness. SALLYLOVE does not explicitly describe her situation as one of temptation, but the cry for help in her message title 'Quick distract me', along with the knowledge that chocolate biscuits are a 'bad' food suggests that this is the case. The way in which she describes the tempting scenario is significant, as she does not portray herself as accountable, either for the presence of the tempting biscuits (which were brought in by a work colleague), or for the temptation itself. SALLYLOVE's description of the 'huge tin of the most gorgeous looking chocolate biscuits' makes them sound both excessive and alluring, and she then goes on to explain that the biscuits are 'sitting there winking' at her. As with the previous posts in this chapter, the humour here comes from the incongruity of the situation that is being presented. Common sense tells us that biscuits are not capable of winking, but this suggestion has important implications in terms of the allocation of accountability. By making the biscuits themselves accountable for the situation, SALLYLOVE appears to be a passive, innocent victim who is at the mercy of the seductive food.

She describes her attempts to resist temptation by eating some 'good' food instead, but she reports that this was unsatisfying, drawing on the 'common knowledge' that 'bad' foods are



Group members maintain CIAOBELLA80's face by co-constructing the play frame rather than suggesting action that she could take to compensate for her transgression. The light-hearted tone is marked in the thread both through the presentation of incongruous scenarios, and the use of multiple exclamation marks throughout. SARAH-LOU (post 16.02) takes up the play frame, orienting to the common knowledge that chips are enjoyable, by making a comment about salt and vinegar. SUZIEGETSKINNY (post 16.03) takes up the confessional theme of the original post, and responds with a confession of her own, aligning herself with CIAOBELLA80. Her disclosure of her own transgression mirrors that of CIAOBELLA80, using the same description of 'falling' food and exclamation marks.

It is safe to assume that SARAH-LOU and SUZIEGETSKINNY do not actually believe that a portion of chips leapt into CIAOBELLA80's stomach, and the comment 'Funny thing that' seems to indicate a certain knowingness. However, the continuation of the humorous play frame by fellow members of the group indicates that this is an accepted way in which to deliver a confession. The continuation of the humorous theme not only mitigates the face threat of SUZIEGETSKINNY's own confession (as well as the face threat posed to CIAOBELLA80), but also performs a solidarity forming function, by stressing the similarities between their experiences of dieting.

Fellow group member as accountable

A potentially more risky strategy is employed in the following post, as rather than blaming her consumption on the food itself, LILLYP (post 17.01) portrays a fellow group member as accountable for her transgression. If her accusation was taken seriously then this could potentially pose a serious face threat:

17.01	<p>Message Thread 17:</p> <p><b>LILLYP</b></p>  <p>12 st 8.5 lb 10 st 1 lb 9 st 7 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">893</a></p>	<p><b>FAO Chuckyegg....</b></p> <p><b>14:23:03</b></p> <p>That virtual chocolate cake gave me such a chocolate craving I've just eaten a chocolate chip cookie! I hold you entirely to blame.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Lilly x</p> <p>I live in my own little world. But it's OK. They know me here.</p>
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<p>17.02</p>	<p><a href="#">CHUCKYEGG24</a></p>  <p>14 st 4 lb 13 st 8 lb 11 st 2 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1755</a></p>	<p><b>14:27:01</b></p> <p>I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry</p> <p>*begs forgiveness*</p> <p>..... Onwards and upwards... I can do this!</p> <p>Founder member of the WOBBLERS Club - WeightWatchers Obsessed Board Birds Love E-posting Club</p> <p>10% Goal 12st 12lbs</p>
<p>17.03</p>	<p><a href="#">LILLYP</a></p>  <p>12 st 8.5 lb 10 st 1 lb 9 st 7 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">893</a></p>	<p><b>14:28:53</b></p> <p>You are forgiven.... even if I have to do 50 laps of my office to burn it off....</p> <p>*starts constructing office assault course...*</p> <p>..... Lilly x</p> <p>I live in my own little world. But it's OK. They know me here.</p>

LILLYP's post is unusual, because it is directed toward one specific group member, rather than to the group as a whole. Her message contains a confession of the consumption of a 'bad' food, this time a chocolate chip cookie. The inclusion of an exclamation mark after her admission of consumption marks it as something surprising or out of the ordinary, suggesting that this is unacceptable. LILLYP refers to a previous thread in which CHUCKYEGG24 'shares' a 'virtual chocolate cake' with fellow group members, which she claims gave her a 'chocolate craving'. The use of language relating to addiction mitigates her confession, as this portrays her consumption as something beyond her control. However, not only does LILLYP not accept accountability for her own actions herself, but she then goes on to state that she holds CHUCKYEGG24 responsible for her transgression. If taken literally this move is potentially incredibly face threatening, as on the surface the post is accusatory, and suggests that CHUCKYEGG24 has sabotaged her efforts to lose weight and stick to her diet.

However, this post is so face threatening that it is impossible to believe that it could be meant seriously, especially as the post suggests that the two members have interacted on the message boards before and may know one another quite well. The post also plays with the virtual nature of the context, as the idea that one member could somehow be held responsible for the consumption of another is particularly ridiculous considering the physically remote nature of the interactions. LILLYP's use of extreme formulations 'I hold you *entirely* to blame' makes her allegation appear even more absurd, as this statement flagrantly flouts the norm of individual responsibility, once again flouting Grice's (1975) maxim of quality. By steadfastly

refusing to accept any accountability for her consumption LILLYP makes her intentions appear even less serious. Her use of ellipsis at the end of the statement also means that the post does not have a clearly defined end, and could be seen as an invitation for CHUCKYEGG24 to respond and to get involved in the joke.

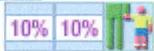
CHUCKYEGG24 takes up the play frame (post 17.02) and responds humorously, continuing the light hearted tone by orienting to the idea that she is to blame for what has occurred, and offering an exaggerated apology. Her repetition of 'I'm sorry' and her description of 'begging forgiveness' mirror the exaggerated allegations made against her, signalling that she has not interpreted LILLYP's post seriously, and her post also plays with the online context, using asterisks to represent physical actions.

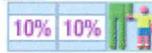
LILLYP's reply (post 17.03) presents a resolution to the situation, still maintaining the pretence that CHUCKYEGG24 is accountable, and stating her forgiveness for CHUCKYEGG24's role in her transgression. She then resolves to make amends for her consumption, continuing the play frame, and mirroring the creative use of asterisks by describing her construction of an assault course in her office to 'burn off' the cookie. Although LILLYP never constructs herself as accountable for her transgression in her confession (post 17.01), she portrays herself as responsible for finding a solution to make amends for it (post 17.03). Even though this penance is a fictional one, it still provides a resolution to the situation, and is in keeping with the humorous tone of the message thread.

As in the previous thread, although delivering a confession in this way could be potentially face threatening if the context were such that the addressee could possibly be accountable, the scenario that is presented is so absurd that it demands to be interpreted humorously. As the post so flagrantly flouts the norms of individual accountability and of politeness on the message boards, it actually serves to mitigate the face threat posed by confession. The fact that LILLYP feels able to single out CHUCKYEGG24 and make this humorous accusation, and that CHUCKYEGG24 is able to understand and appreciate the joke, and even contribute to it also has a solidarity forming function. Shared humour, and particularly risky humour, signals intimacy between the participants, as Baym notes, 'the humor is a joint production, which the audience not only understands but helps create. This joint authorship enhances group identity and solidarity' (Baym, 1995: online article).

Fantasy scenario

The final confession in this chapter also involves the joint construction of humour. While each of the previous confessions has involved an element of fantasy, this post creates an entire fantasy scenario, and includes the invention of fictional 'characters' who are portrayed as accountable for transgression. The fictional nature of the pizza fairy character and her actions is an example of fantasy humour, defined by Hay as 'the construction of humorous imaginary scenarios or events' which 'is usually a collaborative activity, in which the participants jointly construct a possible (or impossible) series of events' (Hay, 2001: 62):

Message Thread 18:	<b>Doomed!!!! Pizza Fairy</b>
18.01	<p><a href="#">lizzie</a>              18 st 3 lb            14 st 10 lb            11 st 6 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">4652</a></p> <p><b>12:53:43</b></p> <p>just been and landed in the office, company bought loads of pizza's for everyone, sales had a good month!!!</p> <p>Did I resist?..... like hell            Did I stop at one piece?.....            .....</p> <p>Nope - Pizza Fairy shoved loads down my throat!!!</p> <p>no din dins for me tonight.!!!</p> <p>how's everyone?</p> <p>lizx</p> <p>.....            photos on [website]</p> <p>lost so far 58½lbs, 8 SS's            *~*~*            (.,. (*~*~*) ,.,.~*)            (.,. (*~*~*) Lizx*</p>
18.02	<p><a href="#">PEEKABOO</a>              13 st 10 lb            12 st 4 lb            11 st 0 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">530</a></p> <p><b>12:56:25</b></p> <p>Hi,            Your post made me smile.            We have a pizza place not far from me called Fairy Pizza !!!            And oh my, they are delicious!! I don't blame you for not resisting!!            x</p> <p>.....            Starting again today [date]            Weight 12st6lbs - Wish me luck!!</p> <p>[date] 12st 4lbs!! Wooohoooo!!</p>
18.03	<p><a href="#">SALLYLOVE</a>            18 st 0 lb            15 st 3 lb            12 st 0 lb            Recent Posts: <a href="#">107</a></p> <p><b>13:07:28</b></p> <p>Don't you hate that pizza fairy, sounds almost as bad as the evil money goblin that keeps spending all my cash</p> <p>.....            Started [date] one day at a time .....</p>

<p>18.04</p> <p><a href="#">KAZ REID</a></p>  <p>11 st 11.5 lb 10 st 5 lb 10 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">2423</a></p>	<p><b>13:08:54</b></p> <p>the fish and chip monster visited me the other day, he remmed chips and a sausage in batter donw my throat and then left</p> <p>.....</p> <p>4.5lbs on in 3weeks. goal weight is 10stone but i'd like to get back to 9stone 10lbs.</p> <p>Plan for the week-FULL CHOICE</p>
<p>18.05</p> <p><a href="#">lizzie</a></p>  <p>18 st 3 lb 14 st 10 lb 11 st 6 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">4652</a></p>	<p><b>13:12:22</b></p> <p>these things are evil aren't they!! lol</p> <p>I have one of those money goblins too!</p> <p>lizx</p> <p>.....</p> <p>photos on [website]</p> <p>lost so far 58½lbs, 8 SS's</p> <p>*~*) (...~*) Lizx*</p>

The confessional nature of lizzie's post (post 18.01) is marked in the title of the message, as her statement 'Doomed!!!!' signals that something bad has occurred. As in the earlier post (15.01, 'Quick, distract me') her post constructs the presence of pizza as beyond lizzie's control (and therefore not her fault), by explaining that it has been bought by her employer. She further removes accountability from herself by referring to the character of the 'Pizza Fairy', whose lack of introduction suggests that group members should already be familiar with her.

Her description of her transgression is contradictory, as when she describes her failure to resist she refers to her own behaviour ('Did I resist', 'Did I stop at one piece'), yet ultimately she describes her consumption as a result of the actions of the pizza fairy, who 'shoved loads down [her] throat'. These utterances both have an interrogative form but perform a *declarative* function. This is the place in the thread where the confession takes place, but by asking questions, rather than making statements about her failure to resist the pizza, the force of this confession is diminished. This 'question and answer' form is another indication of the humorous nature of the confession, as discussed earlier in the chapter the 'puzzle-solution' contrast pair is a commonly used tool in the delivery of jokes (Mulkay, 1988: 14).

The post is incongruous on two levels. Firstly, the description of the pizza fairy and her actions contradicts common sense knowledge about the world (that fairies do not exist, and if they did they would be unlikely to force pizza down people's throats). Secondly, the post flouts the

norm of individual accountability (that lizzie is entirely responsible for her own consumption). lizzie's description of her consumption places accountability for events firmly with the pizza fairy. Rather than portraying herself as actively eating, and possibly enjoying, the pizza, the message constructs lizzie as a passive and helpless victim. Her use of the word 'shoved' implies force, increasing her status as victim, and conjures up an image of an assault by a fairy brandishing a slice of pizza. The description of 'loads' of pizza also creates a conflict with the concept of the 'good woman' as one who shows control and restraint around food, and is potentially damaging to lizzie's identity as a 'good woman' and 'good weight watcher'. However, simultaneously this rather extreme description of her consumption may also have a *positive* effect on lizzie's face. If a confession is delivered humorously, then an individual also shows that she does not take herself too seriously, and as Baym notes, 'self-effacing humor serves the self-presentational goal of creating a positive face, for it shows that the speaker has the admired personality trait of being able to laugh at her own shortcomings' (1995: online article), so the use of humour mitigates the face threat in the confession.

lizzie's resolution to rehabilitate herself back into the role of a 'good weight watcher' is also humorous. Her declaration 'no din dins for me tonight' indicates that she doesn't intend to abandon her diet, and is going to make up for her consumption by denying herself food later in the day, in order to 'get back on track'. The statement has a number of possible interpretations – on one hand the use of the childlike 'din dins' once again gives the impression of vulnerability, of someone who can't be expected to take responsibility for her failure to resist, but the infantile language is also instrumental in constructing lizzie's role as a transgressor, by positioning her as a 'naughty' child. In her post lizzie takes up the position of both the transgressor and the authority who issues her punishment – this dual role reflects the contradictory nature of women's subjectivities when dieting, as their self monitoring practices place them in both the position of the 'watcher' and the 'watched'.

PEEKABOO's reply (post 18.02) supports the play frame in the original post by acknowledging the humour, but remains outside it. Hay (2001) notes that it isn't always necessary to *contribute* to the humour to support it, but it is often enough simply to acknowledge it as humorous. It is important to be seen to have 'got the joke'. However, SALLYLOVE and KAZ\_REID both continue the play frame, and contribute their own humour to the thread. SALLYLOVE (post 18.03) collaborates with the construction of the pizza fairy as an authentic character, aligning herself with lizzie by voicing her own disapproval of her ('don't you hate that pizza fairy'). She also introduces another character, the 'evil money goblin', which is not

concerned with food but still 'plays' with accountability for transgressive behaviour. KAZ\_REID (post 18.04) introduces yet another fictional character and delivers her own confession of transgression, which closely mirrors the structure of lizzie's description of events (post 18.01). She describes how the 'fish and chip monster' 'rammed' food down her throat. As in the original post, her choice of vocabulary suggests a violent assault by an external force, rather than a voluntary transgression for which she is accountable. This joint construction of this group of fantasy characters plays a similar solidarity-forming function to the exchange between LILLYP and CHUCKYEGG24 in the previous thread (message thread 17, 'FAO Chuckyegg'), as the exchanges suggest shared knowledge and experiences (albeit entirely fictional ones!).

## 6.8 Summary

Analysis of the message threads shows that two main kinds of humour can be observed in the context of confession on the message boards. Both of these approaches 'play' with key assumptions of the Weight Watchers regime, which are also consistent with more general societal ideas about food, eating, and 'normative femininity'. One strategy is to reframe 'bad' consumption as 'good', and the second is to save face by portraying the group member as not accountable for her transgression. Although potentially face-threatening, the use of humour appears overall to be considered acceptable and (like confession more generally) is simultaneously face promoting as it ultimately has a beneficial effect upon individual identity and group solidarity. As noted in the previous chapter (chapter 5), the act of confession seems to be normative on the message boards, and the use of humour in this context constructs solidarity between group members, thus strengthening the function of the message boards as a place to find support and friendship.

Humour is also a way in which members can demonstrate their *understanding* of the Weight Watchers regime, because as noted at the beginning of the chapter joking about a topic shows that you possess sufficient knowledge about it to be capable of formulating humour. Humour foregrounds the shared knowledge and experiences of group members, signalling that they are similar enough to one another to understand and appreciate the same jokes, and to be able to use humour without fear of misunderstanding or reproach. To put it simply, members posting humorous messages are showing that they *know* what the 'rules' of weight management are, and showing that they know that the *other* members know too.

However, humour is a complex phenomenon. Although the social group benefits of light-hearted posts are clear, theories of humour suggest that it may perform a number of different functions simultaneously. As well as creating intimacy and solidarity between group members, humour can be used as a strategy to deliver difficult information. Mulkay notes that, 'informal humour is frequently regarded by participants as a way of expressing serious intent and of conveying serious information without appearing to do so' (Mulkay, 1988: 69). There is a possibility that humour is being used in this context as a coping strategy, a way to distance confessors from their transgression in order to deal with the discomfort or guilt caused by the situation (as in Sanders, 2004; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988). While the the act of confession in this context would not be considered to be as 'traumatic' as some of the situations these authors cite, humour nevertheless plays an important face-saving function in the interactional management of its delivery.

Unlike the advice-giving and sympathy in the responses to the more seriously delivered confessions in the previous chapter, replies to the humorous confessions respond primarily to the *humour* rather than to the transgression. Although group members remain committed to the weight loss regime, occasional lapses in control appear to be expected as part of the weight loss process. While the sharing of the transgression suggests that such an occurrence is *notable*, the fact that confessional threads can be managed humorously shows that (as in the 'straight' confessions in chapter 5) it is enough for members simply to acknowledge that the transgression has occurred and that they are continuing to subject themselves to constant surveillance and scrutiny.

There were no instances within the data set of members using humour to disparage or ridicule one another, and the group norms of mutual respect and encouragement appear to eliminate the occurrence of teasing or personal humour. Only one humorous post referred directly to another group member (post 17, 'FAO Chuckyegg'), and the humour in this post was directed towards the poster herself, and her own transgression, rather than at CHUCKYEGG24. The use of humour relating to the Weight Watchers regime is similar in many ways to that observed by Baym (1995) in her study of soap opera fans. The main target of the humour is not fellow group members, but the regime itself, and members elicit humour from situations by playing with established group norms, and contradicting commonly held beliefs. Therefore humour may reflect some level of self awareness among members of the process of self surveillance, and the role that confession and accountability play in this surveillance. By delivering confessions in a way that portray themselves as not accountable for their actions, group

members show a playfulness in the way they carry out the self monitoring routines required of them. At first glance the members posting these humorous confessions may not appear to be treating the task of weight loss with the necessary seriousness, but making fun of elements of the regime does not necessarily signal a lack of commitment, and in fact humour is another way of orienting to the community norms. Although the humorous confessions appear to have more potential for subversion than the jokes discussed at the beginning of the chapter, this potential is still very limited. Despite the light-hearted tone of these messages, and the fact that they do seem to have positive emotional benefits for the members of the group, it must also be remembered that the eventual outcome of these threads is to provide further encouragement to group members to subject themselves to stringent surveillance and self-denial – activities which are ultimately harmful to women.

Even if a group member delivers her confession in a humorous or light-hearted way, she is still confessing a misdemeanour, and even if she does not portray herself as accountable, she is still ultimately portrayed as responsible for her own rehabilitation and weight loss journey. As in the confessions in the previous chapter, there is not always an explicit statement of an intention to rehabilitate, but the fact that she has posted the message at all suggests that she is aware that her consumption is unacceptable. The incongruity of flouting one of the central group norms (of individual accountability) is what makes these posts humorous in the context of the Weight Watchers boards, and there is no obvious indication in the responses to the threads that the group consider these humorous confessions to be a genuine attempt to avoid accountability. The accountability of individual members for their own actions appears to be a central norm, which is taken for granted to the extent that members are able to deliver confessions in a humorous way without their commitment being called into question.

In summary, analysis of the threads indicates that this type of humour appears to be perfectly acceptable on the message boards, which suggests that the moral classification of food and the norm of individual accountability are both so central to the experience of weight loss that they are taken for granted. While humour could be argued to reveal cynicism about the Weight Watchers regime, the responses of fellow group members suggest instead that the humorous delivery of confessions may act as a mitigating face saving strategy and a means of forming solidarity, and members appear to remain committed both to the organisation and the regime. However, a small subset of the message threads contained posts by group members who report instances of inexplicable (and consequently undeserved) failure. The

next chapter (chapter 7) will explore the way in which these reports of failure are managed on the message boards.

## Chapter 7: Managing Reports of 'Inexplicable' Failure

### 7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have explored different ways in which group members negotiate their online feminine subjectivities (as 'good weight watchers' and as 'good women') through their delivery of confessions and their subsequent rehabilitation. The analysis showed that although the practice of confession has the potential to be face threatening, it also offers members an opportunity to demonstrate that despite their lapse they are following the regime carefully and monitoring their consumption, and presents an opportunity for them to restate their commitment to the eating regime.

As discussed in chapters 5 and 6, the resolution of confessions of transgression must be delicately managed among the group, but the problem itself (the consumption, lack of self control, or inappropriate desire) and the solution (redressive action or resolution to 'start afresh' and do better in the future), are both made quite clear in the accounts. In contrast, this chapter will consider reports made by group members of unsuccessful weight loss, for which they claim to have no explanation. What constitutes 'failure' is defined by the group members themselves, and the analysis will consider posts from members who present their situation as problematic, whether they have gained weight, their weight has remained the same, or they have not lost what they consider to be a significant amount of weight. Despite the differences in their circumstances, each group member in these posts reports a perceived failure, but does not present the situation as one which is her own fault.

When compared to confessions of transgression, reports of 'inexplicable' failure are potentially more problematic, as these posts have the potential not only to threaten the face of the individual weight watcher, but also to destabilise the identity of the group. The interactional management of these posts is particularly interesting, as by professing to have done everything right, and by not accepting responsibility for their failure in their messages, these posters may ultimately place the effectiveness of the Weight Watchers regime under question. Arguably *the* central group norm is the belief in the regime as an effective means of losing weight. Stinson suggests that one of the fundamental assumptions of commercial weight loss group membership is 'an unwavering belief that the body can be moulded into the desired size

and shape, if only you spend enough time, use the right tools, apply the correct techniques, and work at it hard enough' (Stinson, 2001: 53). The onus is on the individual to put in enough effort to make these changes, to ensure that their body meets the required standards. There is a shared assumption that this it is possible for anyone to reach a desired weight, through a combination of commitment and discipline.

However, if members feel that they have been following the regime correctly, but are not achieving the desired *results*, then they may begin to 'lose faith' in Weight Watchers and in the self surveillance project. All of the members of the message board community are invested in the regime, often financially as well as emotionally, and it is therefore important to them to succeed. Germov and Williams observe that dieting can be a negative experience for women, and they express feelings of guilt if they transgress, or if they fail to lose weight (Germov and Williams, 1999: 122). The members of the group have been brought together by their shared desire to lose weight, and any posts which have the potential to undermine the group's faith and commitment can pose a serious threat to the key belief upon which the surveillance project is based. Members who respond to such posts therefore work to maintain a delicate balance between protecting the face of the original poster in light of their failure, yet avoiding damage to group identity by ensuring that the weight loss project and the Weight Watchers regime are not left open to criticism. The way in which these posts are managed shows how group members work within the interactions to maintain group solidarity and ideals when these are potentially under threat.

This chapter will therefore analyse the way in which the issue of 'inexplicable' failed weight loss is managed on the boards. The first section will discuss the construction of inexplicable failure in members' message board posts, and the second half of the chapter will explore the way in which community members respond to these posts. In order to ensure the sustained commitment of group members to body reduction practices and goals it appears to be important that replies to these messages address any doubt about the effectiveness of the Weight Watchers regime. The analysis will therefore explore how face management occurs within the interaction, and will outline the rationalisation strategies employed in the exchanges to explain any failure to lose weight.

## 7.2 Constructing 'inexplicable' failure

The following two posts are examples of messages reporting failure to lose weight. While in the posts in the previous empirical chapters members were reporting their failure to regulate their own behaviour, in these message threads the problem in question is not one of lack of *control* (in other words a failure to conform to feminine norms of restraint), but of lack of *success*. Therefore, in the following post the potential face threat is not posed by the confession of a transgression. Instead as the analysis will show, the potential threat to face is posed by the *absence* of a reported transgression, and the subsequent implication that the Weight Watchers regime may be ineffective. In the following post (post 19.01), JESSIE reports a failure to lose weight, but constructs herself as without explanation for her lack of success:

<p>19.01</p>	<p>Message Thread 19:</p> <p><b>JESSIE</b></p>  <p>14 st 0 lb 12 st 8 lb 10 st 0 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">205</a></p>	<p><b>why oh why?</b></p> <p><b>17:49:21</b></p> <p>am i not losing any weight? What am I doing wrong? Can't seem to shift anything for the last few weeks..it's really getting me down....</p> <p>Does any1 have any hints? am sooo close to giving up.... :((((</p> <p>..... Failure is not an option</p>
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Although JESSIE's message does report *failure* of the Weight Watchers regime, it is not presented as such. The construction of her message is in keeping with the ethos of the neoliberal regime, where self surveillance is the key to successful bodily transformation. When the practices of point counting and restriction of consumption fail to produce results, then confusion and demotivation may set in. Yet rather than question the effectiveness of the Weight Watchers regime, JESSIE instead constructs herself as 'without explanation', and lacking sufficient knowledge about how to be a 'good weight watcher'.

JESSIE marks her lack of explanation for her situation in the title of her message, so unlike the confessional message threads discussed previously she does not portray herself as lacking discipline or self-control. The wording of her post suggests that she claims not to have broken her diet, as she expresses a complete lack of understanding of why her weight loss efforts have been unsuccessful. The repetition in the formulation of her question ('why oh why', 'What am I doing wrong?') reinforces the impression of confusion and bafflement. JESSIE constructs her emotional state as one of bewilderment and despair, explaining that 'it's really getting me down...', and using the emoticon ':(((((' to denote extreme sadness or displeasure.

As well as expressing her disappointment with her lack of progress (which is to be expected, given that the aim of following the Weight Watchers eating plan is to lose weight), JESSIE also reports a potential loss of commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. While she describes herself as currently still invested in the regime (and therefore maintains her identity as a 'good weight watcher' for now), her revelation that she is 'sooo close to giving up....' constructs her as a weight watcher whose faith is being tested. The post is potentially damaging to the identity of the group, as JESSIE's commitment is jeopardised due to her failure to achieve satisfactory results from following the regime. It is possible that JESSIE does genuinely intend to abandon her diet, but as discussed in chapter 5, 'giving up' is thoroughly counter to the Weight Watchers norm of commitment. This course of action would also contradict her own message signature, which states that 'Failure is not an option'. JESSIE's admission of loss of faith may therefore be indicative of, and partly constructs, the sense of 'desperation' of her situation, and her signature implies that such a course of action would be a last resort. Rather than being an expression of intended action, her message appears to be a 'cry for help', expressing frustration with her situation. The suggestion of abandoning the regime could also be potentially extremely face threatening, as a lack of commitment to the regime would not only mark JESSIE as a 'bad weight watcher', but it also calls into question the success of the weight loss endeavour, and consequently both the purpose and effectiveness of the entire group.

However, by asking 'What am I doing wrong', and asking for 'hints' JESSIE's message seems to acknowledge the possibility that her failure may be due to an 'error' on her part. Rather than explicitly question the effectiveness of Weight Watchers as a means to lose weight (an extremely face threatening move), JESSIE constructs herself as baffled, confused, and searching for answers. Her question implies that she may have *inadvertently* failed to exercise the necessary control required in order to be a successful weight watcher, and despite her reported bafflement she constructs herself as being responsible for modifying her behaviour to remedy the situation. By portraying her position as a result of her own lack of knowledge, rather than a failure of the eating plan, JESSIE constructs the situation as one which is *solvable*, by gaining further understanding of the regime through advice from her fellow group members, which she explicitly enlists. This formulation of 'solutions' can be observed throughout the subset of message threads, and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. By asking her fellow group members for their advice, JESSIE's post not only implies that her situation is one which can be resolved by being a better, more knowledgeable weight

viewer, it also reinforces the reputation of the message boards as a valuable source of help and support. Her problem is one upon which the group can work together as a community.

In her post (post 20.01), CLARA25 has gained weight at her weekly weigh in (WI), despite reporting her weight watching behaviour to be beyond reproach:

Message Thread 20:		Don't understand
20.01	<p><a href="#">CLARA25</a></p>  <p>14 st 7 lb 13 st 3.5 lb 11 st 0 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">391</a></p>	<p>09:36:42</p> <p>It is my WI day today and I have been really looking forward to it cos I've been so good this week and done so much exercise and drunk all my water. Got on the scales and was HORRIFIED to see that I had put on 1.25lbs.</p> <p>I can't believe it. you couldn't have found a more model WW this week so why have I put on?</p> <p>..... GO GREEN TEAM GO!!!!</p> <p>I HAVE THE WILL POWER TO SUCCEED THIS TIME! BMI 30.4 [date] BMI 29 [date] Mini goal - 13stone by end of January when I order my wedding dress! Goal by my wedding day [date]</p>

Like JESSIE, CLARA25's message signature states her commitment to the Weight Watchers regime, stating her 'willpower' and her intention 'to succeed' in her efforts to lose weight before her wedding. In her post CLARA25's delivery of the news of her weight gain constructs the outcome as shocking and inexplicable, and by doing so she portrays herself as not responsible for her lack of success. By repeatedly describing herself as confused and without explanation ('Don't understand', 'I can't believe it', 'so why have I put on?') she portrays her weigh in result as both unexpected and unfair, as she clearly outlines a discrepancy between her behaviour (which was 'good') and the outcome (which was 'bad'). CLARA25's displeasure and confusion are emphasised by her description of her 'HORRIFIED' reaction to her weigh in result, and her construction of the experience of weight gain as horrific illustrates the extent to which even a small amount of weight gain is an unfavourable outcome in this context. The precision of the measurement ('1.25lbs') reflects the intense levels of scrutiny that group members subject their bodies to as part of the practice of weight loss. Yet although CLARA25 makes it *very* clear in her post that her own behaviour is beyond reproach, and consequently her lack of success is unjust, she still does not explicitly question the effectiveness of the regime. Instead, like JESSIE (post 19.01), she portrays herself as searching for answers, maintaining solidarity by orienting to the notion of the group as a source of advice and information, and asking her fellow group members for explanations.

While JESSIE's message tentatively suggested that she may be 'doing something wrong' in her weight watching, in this message CLARA25 never suggests that her own conduct may have been the cause of her failure to lose weight. Instead her message portrays her behaviour as impeccable, using extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) to describe the extent to which she has complied with the requirements of the regime, 'I've been *so good*', 'drunk *all* my water'. She even goes as far as to describe herself not just as 'good', but as a 'model WW (weight watcher)', and her suggestion that it would be impossible to find a *more* model weight watcher elevates her claim of perfection even further. CLARA25's self-congratulation seems to flout the community norm of modesty and self-deprecation, but in this context what would normally be considered to be boastful behaviour actually appears to perform a face saving function. Such extreme formulations of her 'good' behaviour serve to realign CLARA25 with a feminine identity as a 'good weight watcher' in the face of repeated failure to lose weight. Her post pre-empts any questioning of her actions, or any suggestion that she is somehow responsible for what has happened, and her description of being 'good' draws upon the moral discourses surrounding food and behaviour discussed in chapters 2 and 5.

As these examples have shown, group members who claim to have followed the eating regime but not achieved the 'expected' weight loss may construct themselves and their situation as without explanation. They also describe their psychological state in negative terms, reflecting the emotional impact of seemingly 'unjust' failure. Yet despite the 'undeserved' nature of their lack of progress, and admission of thoughts of 'giving up', these members do not explicitly criticise the Weight Watchers regime. Even though they present their weight watching behaviour as impeccable, the message posts also invite advice from the community regarding potential solutions to the situation, thereby suggesting that they may be able to become successful by modifying their actions. The interactional management of requests for explanation will be explored in the rest of the chapter.

### **7.3 Responses to reports of failed weight loss**

The group responses to reports of 'inexplicable' failure fall broadly into two main categories. In the first of these members reformulate the situation as one which is non-problematic, either by orienting to any positive elements of the posts, or by foregrounding the long-term nature of the weight loss endeavour rather than the short term 'reward' of regular weight loss. In the second category, group members employ a variety of strategies which serve to 'rationalise'

poor results, formulating explanations for failed weight loss, and offering advice on how to resolve the problem. Although these approaches will be discussed separately there is a large amount of overlap between them - they are often interrelated, and in this context members frequently volunteer multiple explanations and/or solutions. What all of these approaches share in common is that they are *protective* of the Weight Watchers regime, and of the weight loss endeavour more generally. As the analysis will show, group members perform face work which positions them as 'experts', sharing *knowledge* about the Weight Watchers regime to enable the original poster to become a 'better weight watcher'. This serves to neutralise any potential threat to the original poster's commitment to the regime, and ensure that she remains engaged in the 'body project' and aligned with gendered subjectivity.

## 7.4 Reframing situation

### Reformulating situation as non-problematic

Unlike the previous two message posts, Rebecca81 (post 21.01) reports that she *has* actually lost weight, but her description of her emotional state ('disappointed', 'im really naffed off') and her use of a 'sad' emoticon indicates that she is displeased with her result, and she explains that she was 'hoping for more'.

In her post Rebecca81 makes some attempt to account for her perceived failure by referring to her menstrual cycle ('it might be totm but...'), a commonly cited excuse for weight gain and transgressions. Talk about the body and its functions is a common theme on the message boards, and this will be discussed in more detail later in the analysis of the next message thread. Rebecca81 aligns herself with a 'good weight watcher' identity by explaining how carefully she has followed the regime. Again, her extreme case formulation 'i have been so good and been to the gym *everyday*' (emphasis added) constructs her lack of success as without explanation, and she expresses her dissatisfaction with the result she has achieved in relation to the amount of effort that she has put in. Like CLARA25 in the previous post (post 20.01), she constructs her weigh in result as undeserved, as she has been following the 'rules of the game', and consequently should expect to experience results as a consequence.



message. The later replies to Rebecca81's post respond in a different way, by offering her advice and information, and the remainder of the thread will be analysed later in the chapter.

Remaining committed to long term weight loss

A common way in which group members redefine unsuccessful weight loss as something to be expected, and strengthen the norms of commitment on the message boards, is to stress the long term goals of the weight loss endeavour. In the previous thread (post 21.02), MEERCAT reminds Rebecca81 that every weight loss 'counts', no matter how small, placing her disappointing weigh in result in the context of her long term weight loss project. Therefore, however minor the weight loss it is still regarded as significant, and is constructed as another step on the road to her goal weight. Similar posts suggest the possibility of redefining goals, for example by gauging progress by measuring the body, rather than weighing it. Although the Weight Watchers regime measures success in terms of weight loss, as group members attending meetings are weighed each week to monitor progress, by suggesting decreased body size as an alternative goal, this provides an opportunity for unsuccessful members to be redefined as successful. Once again the group norm of remaining committed and faithful to the Weight Watchers regime is key to the interactions, especially in situations of 'inexplicable' failure, where this commitment may be threatened. If a group member feels that she has done everything that is required of her, yet has failed to see any reward, then her resolve may waver. This approach can be seen in the responses to CLARA25's earlier post (post 20.01):

20.01	<p>Message Thread 20: <a href="#">Don't understand</a></p> <p><a href="#">CLARA25</a>            14 st 7 lb          13 st 3.5 lb          11 st 0 lb          Recent Posts: <a href="#">391</a></p>	<p><b>09:36:42</b></p> <p>It is my WI day today and I have been really looking forward to it cos I've been so good this week and done so much exercise and drunk all my water. Got on the scales and was HORRIFIED to see that I had put on 1.25lbs.</p> <p>I can't believe it. you couldn't have found a more model WW this week so why have I put on?</p> <p>.....          GO GREEN TEAM GO!!!!</p> <p>I HAVE THE WILL POWER TO SUCCEED THIS TIME!          BMI 30.4 [date]          BMI 29 [date]          Mini goal - 13stone by end of January when I order my wedding dress!          Goal by my wedding day [date]</p>
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<p>20.02</p> <p><b>CAITLINB</b></p>  <p>15 st 0 lb 10 st 8 lb 10 st 10 lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">1351</a></p>	<p><b>09:48:56</b></p> <p>Clara, you won't want to hear this but sometimes your body just does this. Even when you've been absolutely perfect in every way, sometimes your body just decides that this week it isn't going to let you lose anything. It is really frustrating and upsetting and you wonder why you have bothered being good when you could have been bad.</p> <p>All you can do is try and keep going and see what happens next week. WW is a long term way of eating and sometimes you have weeks where nothing happens or you gain but it will eventually balance out. There's a good chance that you will lose even more next week</p> <p>Hugs Caitlin</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Now I'm married how long can I maintain?</p>
<p>20.03</p> <p><b>TRISHAP</b></p>  <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">103</a></p>	<p><b>10:17:48</b></p> <p>That happens to me sometimes, and it is a real downer. I know from experience though that if I stick to it for a second week I usually get a reward on the scales next time. Keep going you know you can do it.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Party Dress Challenge</p> <p>W1 -2.5 W2 +1.5 (oh dear) W3 -0.5 (oh well it's a start) W4 -1.5 W5 -sts (grrr!) W6 +3 (no idea how) W7 -4 (yipee!)</p>

CAITLINB's reply (post 20.02) portrays the body as self-governing and uncontrollable, a theme which frequently emerges in the exchanges, and will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Her reply does not actually propose a solution to the problem reported, and in the absence of a rational explanation, the posts in this thread construct the situation in a positive light by concentrating on the long term nature of the weight loss endeavour, and encouraging CLARA25 that if she remains committed to the Weight Watchers regime then she will be rewarded with greater success the following week. CAITLINB positions herself as knowledgeable, and her 'expert' role is reinforced by her message signature, which shows that she is an experienced weight watcher who has successfully reached her goal weight. Her advice that '*All you can do is try and keep going*' [emphasis added] suggests that giving up is not an option, and both CAITLINB (post 20.02) and TRISHAP (post 20.03) stress the importance of sticking with the weight loss regime and remaining motivated. TRISHAP's post (post 20.03) draws on her own experience, constructing herself as an 'expert' in her message. Her assertion that 'sticking to it' leads to a 'reward on the scales' at her next weigh in substantiates CAITLINB's claims, and she also mirrors CAITLINB's encouragement to 'keep going'.

'Keeping the faith' and remaining positive, upbeat and committed to the surveillance project is of great importance on the message boards, and 'inexplicable' or 'unfair' weigh in results have the potential to jeopardise members' commitment or motivation. The emotional impact of failed weight loss is acknowledged in the above posts, describing the experience as 'frustrating', 'upsetting', and 'a real downer', yet CLARA25 is encouraged to carry on regardless. In her reply (post 20.02) CAITLINB also orients to the 'unfairness' of CLARA25's lack of success, describing how she 'could have been bad' and still achieved the same results. However, responsibility for this discrepancy is not placed with the Weight Watchers regime, but instead with her body, an accounting strategy which will be discussed in the next section.

### The autonomous body

One way in which the message board community makes sense of members' failure to lose weight is by mobilising an argument that the body is *autonomous*. CAITLINB's reply (post 20.02) constructs the body as uncontrollable and self governing, and portrays CLARA25's failure to lose weight as a result of the body having 'decided' that it 'isn't going to let [her] lose anything'. The functioning of the body and its relationship with food are commonly recurring themes throughout discussions of the weight loss experience, and in this message thread the autonomous body is invoked as a means of portraying the success or failure of the weight loss project as beyond CLARA25's *control*. However, the autonomous body is *also* key to a number of 'pseudo-scientific' explanations of unsuccessful weight loss, which encourage members to take action to *solve* their problem, and these will be discussed in the next section.

This explanation invokes the Cartesian principles of mind-body dualism (see Bordo, 1993/2003 for a more detailed discussion), where the cool, logical mind is contrasted with the unruly and uncontrollable body. CAITLINB takes up CLARA25's (post 20.01) construction of a 'good weight watcher' identity and explains that failure to lose weight can even happen to the best weight watchers, as it can happen 'even when you've been perfect in every way'. This maintains CLARA25's face, and reassures her that she is not responsible for her lack of success, but this directly contradicts the neoliberal norms of the weight loss regime, where all members are responsible for their own surveillance and progress. However, great care must be taken in order to ensure that the effectiveness of the regime as a technology of self is not placed in doubt. Therefore, by constructing CLARA25's weight gain as a 'decision' made by her *body*, rather than as a result of the regime failing to work, belief can be maintained in the Weight Watchers regime as an effective method of self surveillance.

While the message threads in this section have explained failed weight loss simply as 'part of the process' of weight loss, and encouraged continued commitment to the surveillance project, the next section will consider replies which provide explanations for this lack of success that offer up potential *solutions*.

## 7.5 Offering solutions

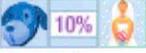
This section will explore the strategies that community members employ to *explain* instances of failed weight loss. There is some overlap between these responses and those in the previous section, as both sets of message threads contain an element of 'rationalisation', which attempts to make sense of the failed weight loss situation. However, while the responses discussed in the previous section attempted to 'reframe' the reported failure in some way, either by redefining it as success, or by invoking the long term nature of the weight loss project, this section will consider replies which attempt to suggest *reasons* for the failure, and suggest potential *solutions*, which go beyond simply 'sticking with it'.

Responding to posts in this way renders the situations described explainable, and encourages another group norm, advice giving (which was discussed in chapter 5). If the problem presented can be constructed as having an identifiable cause, then it therefore becomes more straightforward to find a solution. Throughout the exchanges group members protect group face by offering explanations which encourage continued commitment to the self surveillance project, but as the following thread will show, these explanations must be carefully managed as they can have the potential to threaten the face of the unsuccessful weight watcher.

### The importance of precision

As the previous discussion has noted, the Weight Watchers regime operates as a technology of the self. Members are required to subject their consumption to micro-levels of scrutiny - every item which is eaten must be weighed, its point value must be accurately assessed and recorded, and members must be constantly vigilant about what they consume. The weight loss endeavour is therefore reduced to a series of calculations, and successful weight loss is constructed as achievable by meticulously following the eating regime, and ensuring that every morsel is accounted for. The message threads in this section show the extent to which the community is protective of the Weight Watchers regime, as one way that group members

account for lack of success is to question whether the failed weight watcher is following the regime *correctly*, as the responses to JESSIE's post, which was discussed at the beginning of the chapter (post 19.01) show:

Message Thread 19:		why oh why?
19.01	<p><b>JESSIE</b></p>  <p>14 st 0 lb 12 st 8 lb 10 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">205</a></p>	<p><b>17:49:21</b></p> <p>am i not losing any weight? What am I doing wrong? Can't seem to shift anything for the last few weeks..it's really getting me down....</p> <p>Does any1 have any hints? am sooo close to giving up.... :((((</p> <p>..... Failure is not an option</p>
19.02	<p><b>BRIONY12</b></p>  <p>10 st 9 lb 9 st 8 lb 9 st 4 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">853</a></p>	<p><b>17:52:23</b></p> <p>aaawww chick..dont give up now..look how well you have done so far....probably just hit a bit of a plateau....are you truthfully tracking....(we are watching y'know) there has been a lot of talk about the wendy plan kick starting weight loss again...look back over the threads of the info.....but dont give up...plllllleeeeeeaaasseeeee.x</p> <p>..... *~*) (,.,,*;*) ,,**) (,.,* *Briony</p>
19.03	<p><b>SAMMIE3</b></p>  <p>13 st 11 lb 12 st 1.5 lb 10 st 10 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1066</a></p>	<p><b>18:20:00</b></p> <p>If you are honestly trackign and weighing things to check you are calculating things right then it could be time for the Wendie plan.....</p> <p>..... give me a place to stand and I will move the earth</p> <p>Wedding [date] Flying out [date] 6 weeks to go.....</p>

Although JESSIE's post implies that she has been following the Weight Watchers regime correctly, and she constructs herself as confused and without explanation ('why oh why?'), the replies on the thread take up her question 'What am I doing wrong?'. Both BRIONY12 and SAMMIE3 orient toward the view that JESSIE 's lack of success may be attributable to a failure to follow the eating regime precisely enough, even to the point of openly questioning whether she is monitoring her consumption accurately. This is a move which is potentially incredibly face threatening, as it questions JESSIE's *honesty*, as well as her competence as a weight watcher.

The face threat is mitigated in BRIONY12's post (post 19.02) by its friendly (rather than accusatory) tone, and she offers up a *range* of possible explanations for JESSIE's lack of success. She begins the post by offering sympathy ('aaawww chick'), encouragement ('don't

give up now'), and praise ('look how well you have done so far'), and offers alternative explanations for JESSIE's situation ('probably just hit a bit of a plateau', the concept of the plateau will be explored in more depth in the final section of the analysis) before suggesting that she may personally be at fault. She then ends her message with yet more encouragement ('dont give up... plllllleeeeeaaasseeeee.x'), constructing JESSIE's commitment as personally important to her.

BRIONY12's question 'are you truthfully tracking...(we are watching y'know)' directly reflects the panoptical role that the community plays the dieting experience (see Foucault, 1979, Germov and Williams, 1999). Her cautionary message 'we are watching y'know', with its informal spelling, appears less formal and more friendly. The statement also seems tongue-in-cheek, as the remote nature of the online community, and the lack of face to face presence, means that members are not able to *physically* monitor one another. However, her warning that the members of the group are 'watching' explicitly acknowledges the role played by the message board in the regulation of the behaviour of its individual members.

The need for constant surveillance is also reflected in SAMMIE3's response (post 19.03), which also casts doubt upon the truthfulness of JESSIE's claim to have acted impeccably. The advice that she gives comes with the precondition 'If you are honestly trackign (*sic*) and weighing things to check you are calculating things right'. The implication is that JESSIE may either be 'cheating' in her diet, or making some kind of error when calculating the point values of what she has consumed. Again SAMMIE3's post emphasises the importance of precision in the Weight Watchers regime, and the accusation (of not following the regime correctly) must be carefully managed, as either of these scenarios would mark JESSIE out as a 'bad weight watcher', either due to lack of self discipline, or lack of competence. The face threat in SAMMIE3's message is mitigated slightly by her suggestion that JESSIE could try the 'Wendie plan' (which will be discussed later on in the chapter), but her post still seems to be quite accusatory in tone.

The fact that fellow group members are willing to risk the face threat posed by such statements (rather than question the effectiveness of the Weight Watchers regime) shows the extent to which unquestioning acceptance of the regime is normative in the context of the message boards. By re-framing the problem as one of individual error this approach protects the reputation of the regime, and constructs the situation as explainable, and the solution to the problem as a simple one - to follow the eating plan more carefully. Indeed, these replies

reframe JESSIE's situation as one which she can resolve by being a 'better weight watcher' by being even more committed to the regime and exercising even *greater* surveillance over her own behaviour and consumption.

Throughout the message threads the importance of precision and constant vigilance are stressed, as in order to be 'good weight watchers' members must follow the plan *to the letter*. This is reflected in the community's response to BUDGIE's report of unsuccessful weight loss, the title of which ('help....') explicitly frames her post as a request for support from the group:

Message Thread 22:		help....
22.01	<p><b>BUDGIE</b></p>  <p>13 st 4 lb 13 st 4 lb 9 st 11 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">8334</a></p>	<p><b>09:20:32</b></p> <p>:0( I weigh at home and during the week i have a sneaky peek on the scales to check that my weight is going in the right direction! Naughty i know, but i can't help it!</p> <p>Anyways, last week i only stuck to the plan for one day and ate rubbish for the rest of the week- resulting in a 4lb gain!</p> <p>I've been pointing since Monday and the scales haven't budged (well, that's a fib because at one point they were showing i'd GAINED 1lb already!).</p> <p>Everything is "regular" and i have no idea why this is happening. I wasn't expecting the whole 4lb gain to come off this week but was hoping to see some of it go- because i've been so good! (And i know my weightloss works like this from past experience!)</p> <p>So, the only things i can think of is: a.) the battery in the scales might need changing OR... b.) i need to drink my water (which i admit i haven't drank enough of this week as i've been in uni and can't nip out of lectures for a pee all the time!!)</p> <p>:0( ..... 2005 is gonna be my year!!! I'm graduating, getting a job and getting to goal!!!</p> <p>*~*) .....*~*) (...)*~*) *Princess*</p> <p>I'm a No Count-er!</p>
22.02	<p><b>MEERCAT</b></p>  <p>17 st 5 lb 16 st 11 lb 12 st 6 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">2574</a></p>	<p><b>09:22:08</b></p> <p>change the battery and drink your water and STOP CHEATING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! you are just going to make yourself feel down by weighing your self during the week, just keep going and that 4lb will probably have disappeared by the time WI comes along xxx</p> <p>..... AKA Crusty Gizzard Nose..at your service :)</p> <p>Nothing tastes as good as slim feels</p> <p>*~*) .....*~*) (...)*~*) Meercat*</p>



However, the main focus of BUDGIE's message is her report that she has gained weight despite being 'so good'. She initially constructs herself as without explanation ('i have no idea why this is happening' ), and like the posters in the previous threads she expresses disappointment and bewilderment at her lack of success, indicating her emotional state through the use of 'sad' emoticons at the beginning and the end of her message. Her 'unexplained' weight gain is constructed as an unfair outcome – while her previous week's failure is portrayed as an expected outcome after her bad behaviour, her more recent good behaviour has not been rewarded.

Although BUDGIE initially constructs herself as having '*no idea*' why she may have gained weight, she actually goes on to suggest two possible reasons why this may be the case. The first of these accounts involves a problem with her weighing scales, which she implies may be giving an incorrect reading due to needing new batteries. The second account constructs BUDGIE as responsible for her lack of success, suggesting that she may have failed to lose weight because she 'admits' that she has not been drinking sufficient water. Although water is not incorporated into the main Weight Watchers eating plan, the organisation recommends that members drink eight glasses a day as an aid to weight loss. BUDGIE aligns this behaviour with that of a 'bad weight watcher', offers an excuse to account for her failure to drink enough. While both explanations are quite different, they each provide ways of making sense of BUDGIE's seemingly inexplicable weight gain.

Each of the replies offers a solution to BUDGIE's 'mysterious' failure to lose weight by taking up at least one of the two explanations she puts forward in her original post. In fact, MEERCAT's advice (post 22.02) directly mirrors the initial post, telling her to 'change the battery and drink your water'. Her third imperative 'STOP CHEATING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' refers to BUDGIE's admission that she has been weighing herself. This bald on record reprimand appears to go against the supportive and solidary norms of the message boards, and exposes BUDGIE as an undisciplined weight watcher, incapable of exercising enough self-control to observe the weekly weigh-in ritual expected by weight watching community. The face threat of MEERCAT's reprimand is not mitigated by any statements of empathy, sympathy or encouragement, but is partly mitigated by the fact that 'cheating' in this context refers to being *too vigilant*. Once again, the importance of precision is stressed, as members are expected to subject even the smallest actions to micro-levels of surveillance, and the problem is reframed as one of *too frequent weighing*, rather than failure to lose weight. The face threat of MEERCAT's reprimand

is also mitigated by her explanation of her motivation, as she has issued the instruction to 'stop cheating' because weighing herself is going to make BUDGIE 'feel down'. This concern for BUDGIE's feelings is reflected in her reassurance that her excess weight 'will probably have disappeared' in time for weigh in, and her inclusion of multiple 'kisses' at the end of her message. Therefore, rather than place the effectiveness of the Weight Watchers regime in doubt, MEERCAT's response reframes BUDGIE's lack of success as predictable and expected due to her failure to wait a full week before being weighed.

The responses posted by joannet and CHEEKYCHOPS both take up the themes of weighing and water consumption, but are less powerful and foreground solidarity. joannet (post 22.03) aligns herself with BUDGIE by confessing that she too has 'not been very good' with drinking water, and that she has also indulged in 'sneaky' weighing, *and* has gained weight. Her declaration of her intention to 'get back into it' acts as a statement of rehabilitation. CHEEKYCHOPS (post 22.04) also admits to being tempted to weigh herself, but warns against it, describing the 'danger' that it holds. As previously discussed in chapters 5 and 6, the sharing of similar experiences performs a solidarity-forming function within the group, which strengthens group identity. Also, by describing their own experiences, group members are able to comment with authority on a situation, as they can claim to have some 'expertise' on the subject.

joannet and CHEEKYCHOPS also both highlight some of the contradictions inherent in the dieting experience, particularly daily fluctuations in weight which mean an individual's weight can be quite different at different times of day (as illustrated by joannet's humorous anecdote about absorbing bath water). While such natural fluctuations would suggest that measuring progress in terms of pounds (or fractions of pounds as in CLARA25's earlier post, post 20.1, 'Don't understand') may not give an accurate picture, the appropriateness of such micro-management of weight is not questioned. Instead the replies recommend that BUDGIE weighs herself at weekly intervals (as specified by the Weight Watchers regime), and replaces her batteries 'just in case'. The seemingly random nature of weight loss is alluded to, as joannet (post 22.03) notes that 'you can't always rely on your scales', and CHEEKYCHOPS (post 22.04) advises her not to worry, her use of the term of endearment 'hun' signifying intimacy and support.

BUDGIE's response to the replies (post 22.05) expresses gratitude to the community members, and she displays her improved mood with the use of a smiley emoticon. She resolves to follow

their advice, but despite initially claiming to be without explanation for her weight gain, BUDGIE had actually *given* the answers to her own question in her initial post (post 22.01). Rather than providing substantial new information, the 'advice' from fellow group members corroborated her suggestions and offered support and encouragement, emphasising the importance of following the Weight Watchers regime precisely.

Gaining 'expertise' and becoming a better weight watcher

The next message thread illustrates the extent to which group members orient to the content of the initial message post in the explanations and solutions they offer in response to reports of 'inexplicable' failure. Although in the previous message thread BUDGIE's problem seems to have been resolved, less than two hours later she started another message thread reporting the *same problem*. Although in this post (post 23.01) BUDGIE is still reporting her lack of success in losing weight, the way in which she presents her situation is quite different, and the replies that her post receives reflect this, taking up her request for specific information about the weight loss process:

23.01	<p>Message Thread 23:</p> <p><a href="#">BUDGIE</a></p>  <p>13 st 4 lb 13 st 4 lb 9 st 11lb</p> <p>Recent Posts: <a href="#">8334</a></p>	<p><a href="#">will having a cold/ taking medication affect my...</a></p> <p><b>11:06:31</b></p> <p>weightloss?</p> <p>I'm looking for any reasons that the scales aren't moving!!!</p> <p>Could it be that i've had a cold for 2 weeks and my body is putting all its energy into making me better rather than losing weight??!!</p> <p>And, i've been taking regular doses of Sudafed and ibuprofen!</p> <p>.....</p> <p>2005 is gonna be my year!!! I'm graduating, getting a job and getting to goal!!!</p> <p>*") .....*") (.....*") *Princess*</p> <p>I'm a No Count-er!</p>
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independently of her own desires or actions, this removes responsibility for any failure from her as a weight watcher.

As in the previous thread, the responses take up the potential suggestion made in the initial post, so all of the replies orient to the idea that illness and medication can have an adverse effect on weight loss. ALICERYDER's post (post 23.02) is face promoting, creating solidarity by offering sympathy ('\*\*\*poor Budgie\*\*\*') and get well wishes, kisses and smiles, and by sharing her *own* experience of illness and weight gain. While she does not explicitly make the link, her juxtaposition of the two facts suggests that ALICERYDER attributes her weight gain to her ill health, and her statement 'hope that you don't gain!!!!' confirms this. ALICERYDER's post therefore protects BUDGIE's face by supporting her suggestion that her failure to lose weight may be due to her ill health, and offers reassurance and emotional encouragement.

In contrast, longtallsally's response (post 23.03) is purely informative in nature. She does not address the issue of BUDGIE's health, but she too takes up the suggestion posed in the original post, and provides her with details about the effect the medication she is taking may have on her weight loss. The 'facts' are delivered in an authoritative manner, explaining that ibuprofen contains 'an agent' which causes water retention. Her position as a 'knowledgeable' weight watcher is reinforced by her message signature, which shows that she has been successful in reaching her goal weight. The pseudo-scientific formulation of the post lends weight to the information, and although it provides precise amounts in terms of the number of tablets taken and how much weight is gained as a result, it is vague when it comes to explaining exactly how this works.

Agency is removed from the weight watcher and attributed to the *body* (which is 'holding onto fluid'), and the 'agent' in the medication (which is causing it to do so), offering an explanation for failed weight loss which does not threaten BUDGIE's face, or question the effectiveness of the regime or of the self surveillance project in general. Although it is lacking in detail, it is not important whether this explanation stands up to scrutiny, what is significant is that it is accepted as feasible by the members of the group. In her reply (post 23.04) BUDGIE appears to readily accept this account, expressing her shock ('really?!!!'), and her concern that she has taken several tablets already ('OMG (oh my god) – I've taken about 8 this week!'). As the solutions presented are intricately bound up with the explanations offered, the solution to BUDGIE's problem is quite different to that proposed in her previous thread. She resolves to increase her self monitoring behaviour, and 'steer clear' of ibuprofen until her weigh in. Her

willingness to forgo medicine when ill suggests that successful weight loss may be valued more than her own comfort, or health, despite the notion of weight management as a 'healthy' behaviour.

This message thread has shown that community members tend to offer solutions to situations of failed weight loss which orient to any possible suggestions put forward by the unsuccessful weight watcher. These solutions construct the problem of failed weight loss as one which is 'solvable', and the community provides members with additional 'knowledge' about the weight loss process to help them rectify their situation. By modifying their behaviour, and by subjecting themselves to additional forms of surveillance, members are given the opportunity to become more committed and successful weight watchers.

As the discussion so far has shown, it does not necessarily appear to be important whether the course of action suggested actually *works*, what matters is that the failed weight watcher remains committed to the self surveillance project. The group members seem willing to unquestioningly accept (or to at least *appear* to accept, as it is not possible to know what they are actually thinking, only how they present themselves in the interaction) even the most unlikely sounding explanations for their lack of success, as the remaining responses to Rebecca81's post (which was analysed earlier in the chapter, 21.01, 'disappointed') show:

	Message Thread 21:	<b>disappointed</b>
21.01	<a href="#">Rebecca81</a>  Recent Posts: <a href="#">68</a>	<b>13:19:13</b>  hi  im really naffed off only lost 0.5 lb last nite @ w/i it might be totm but i have been so good and been to gym everyday so was hoping for more :{  ..... week 1 - lost 4lb week 2 - lost 1.5lb week 3 - lost 0.5lb week 4 - sts week 5 - + 1lb :{  I will NOT fall off the wagon this time!!!



21.05

[TRACY1963](#)



12 st 7.0 lb / 10 st 7.0 lb /  
11 st 1.0 lb

Recent Posts: [3024](#)

13:44:20

Hi Rebecca

These are the points for x trainer (think they're for one that works arms at same time)  
15mins = 2.5bps 20mins = 3 bps  
25mins = 4bps 30mins = 5bps

The one I use doesn't so I count 1pt for 10mins.

Anyway if we go with 1pt for 10 mins you're earning 4.5pts for x trainer  
30 mins Hillwalking earns 4bps  
15mins swimming earns 2bps

So in total you're earning 10.5bps a day which is loads. You can bank 12bps in a week. If you go to the bym every day you're earning 73.5bps a week.

If you're not using any of the bps this is probably why you're not losing much weight. Either cut down on the amount you do or eat some of the bps you earn every day.

Hope this makes sense.

Trudy

.....  
It's taken ages but I got there  
Height 5ft 6"  
Started WW [date]  
10% reached [date]  
GOAL!! reached [date]  
2st lost [date] Yeh!

Although TRUDY62 (post 21.03) describes Rebecca81's weight loss as 'ok', her post attempts to rationalise her lack of success in losing a larger amount of weight. Again, her *own* success as a weight watcher is reflected in her message signature. She takes up Rebecca81's comment that she has 'been to the gym everyday', and suggests that this may be the reason why she has not lost more weight. Rather than 'cheating', or not following the eating plan carefully enough, as in the discussion of weighing, this explanation constructs Rebecca81's failure as a result of being *too* conscientious a weight watcher. However, like longtallsally's (post 23.03) description of the effect of ibuprofen on the body, and much of the pseudo-scientific talk on the message boards, this theory lacks detail and doesn't hold up to scientific scrutiny.

Again, TRUDY62's post (post 21.03) places agency with the body, explaining that doing lots of exercise makes it 'hold onto' food. Her description of 'starvation mode' does not explain how the body 'holds onto' food, but the use of terms relating to physiology and metabolism give TRUDY62's post an air of medical authenticity and authority. She claims an 'expert' identity in the thread by sharing her own experiences of the eating regime, suggesting that she needed to eat extra food on the days she exercised (using up bonus points earned), because 'my body *needed* the extra food to *cope* with weight loss and exercise' [emphasis added]. Once again, the body is portrayed as acting independently, beyond the control of the weight watcher, and

she evokes the discourse of counselling or psychology with her description of food as a bodily 'coping' mechanism.

Rebecca81's reply (post 21.04) treats the information as a welcome 'revelation', and her response is very similar to that of BUDGIE in the previous thread (post 23.04), exclaiming 'really – i didn't know that'. She appears to accept TRUDY62's suggestion that she may be over exercising as a satisfactory explanation, and outlines her daily exercise regime, asking for advice about whether she is doing 'too much'. TRUDY62 responds with a lengthy and complicated calculation, concluding that the way for Rebecca81 to successfully lose more weight is to either eat *more* food, or to do *less* exercise!

This seemingly contradictory advice appears to be accepted without question, and dubious 'scientific/medical knowledge' can be seen to go unchallenged throughout the interactions on the boards. However, although TRUDY62's advice is deeply flawed, as previously discussed such accounting strategies perform an important face management function, which may help to explain why such far-fetched ideas appear to be accepted without question by group members. Firstly, this explanation of the process of metabolism removes any responsibility from Rebecca81. She is positioned as *too good* a Weight Watcher, innocently trying too hard and lacking 'specialist knowledge' about the way in which the body works, thus eliminating any face threat. It also affords TRUDY62 the status of 'expert', and strengthens the reputation of the message boards as a place from which to get helpful advice and information, reinforcing the group norms of advice seeking and giving. And finally (and perhaps most importantly), this explanation serves to rationalise the more unpredictable and uncontrollable elements of weight loss, helping to explain why members may sometimes fail to lose weight despite carefully following the eating regime. As the Weight Watchers plan is founded on the idea that commitment leads to guaranteed results, it is essential to explain why committed weight watching activity sometimes doesn't work, otherwise group members may lose faith in the regime and its ideals. Therefore, through the replies on the thread, a cause has been identified for Rebecca81's problem, and a solution has been proposed, so the issue has reached a resolution. Although these explanations do not necessarily construct group members as responsible for their *failure* to lose weight, the responsibility for taking action to remedy the situation is placed firmly with the individual and is constructed as within their power. In these message threads group members are enabled to take control of their own weight loss experience, and to make changes in order to rectify their situation. In doing so,

members move from being helpless and without explanation, to having the wherewithal and potential for self-actualisation and improvement (as also observed by Heyes ,2007).

### The 'plateau'

The final section of the analysis provides a discussion of the 'plateau', a concept which is frequently invoked by community members to explain instances of stalled weight loss, and which is officially endorsed by the Weight Watchers organisation (to the extent that there is a description of it included in the Weight Watchers website's 'Science Centre', see appendix 8). The plateau is described as a slowing down of weight loss after a period of following the regime, so that members no longer achieve the same levels of weight loss as they did when they started. The concept is commonly accepted by the community as a 'stage' in the weight loss process. Therefore, instead of treating failure to lose weight as a result of regime failure, or of failure of the individual weight watcher to follow the regime properly, invoking the plateau reframes the situation as one which is simply an expected part of the weight loss experience. As in the earlier message threads, the inexplicable situation then becomes more straightforward to deal with, as by identifying a specific *problem*, it is therefore possible to recommend a specific *solution*. In these pseudo-scientific explanations volunteered by the group, the *body*, not the weight watcher, is portrayed as responsible for the individual's failure to achieve the desired results. As the plateau is caused by the body, then weight loss (or lack of it) is therefore beyond the control of the weight watcher, or beyond the scope of the eating regime. This creates an interesting paradox, because while the weight loss regime is based entirely on the notion of individual control, situations of failure are often rationalised by constructing the body as *out of* their control.

Although the group member is not portrayed as responsible for her failure to lose weight, this does not mean that she is not responsible for taking action to rectify the situation. The concept of the plateau is so readily accepted in the Weight Watchers community that a standard 'solution' has been developed by a Weight Watchers member, known as the Wendy plan. The plan is *not* a part of the Weight Watchers regime, and is not officially endorsed by the organisation, but is frequently suggested by members of the message board community as a way to encourage weight loss, and is constructed as an 'enhanced' version of the Weight Watchers regime. The Wendy plan involves the redistribution of an individual's point allowance, so that instead of eating (for example) 20 points each day, on some days she will eat more than 20, and on others eat less than 20, but will consume the same amount over the

course of a week. In the following thread HIPPYCHICK's lack of satisfactory weight loss is explained as the result of reaching a plateau:

Message Thread 24:		Need Advice
24.01	<p><b>HIPPYCHICK</b></p>  <p>14 st 8 lb 13 st 3 lb 11 st 0 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">17</a></p>	<p><b>12:58:15</b></p> <p>Hi</p> <p>I've been doing ww for a few months now - have lost 1.5 stone - but in the last 3 weeks i've only lost 1lb - i've stuck to the diet strictly and don't know what to do - any ideas?????</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Shrinking...</p>
24.02	<p><b>CHUCKYEGG24</b></p>  <p>14 st 4 lb 13 st 8 lb 11 st 2 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">1755</a></p>	<p><b>12:59:30</b></p> <p>Sounds like you're on a plateau my friend!</p> <p>Congrats on your weight loss so far.</p> <p>You can either sit it out or get things going again with the Wendy plan - this is a redistribution of your weekly points to jolt your metabolism.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Onwards and upwards... I can do this!</p> <p>Founder member of the WOBBLERS Club - WeightWatchers Obsessed Board Birds Love E-posting Club</p> <p>10% Goal 12st 12lbs</p>
24.03	<p><b>lettywebster</b></p>  <p>13 st 1 lb 10 st 5 lb 10 st 5 lb Recent Posts: <a href="#">936</a></p>	<p><b>13:03:32</b></p> <p>.. or just try a few variations in your diet!</p> <p>I stayed the same for 2 weeks running and couldn't be bothered to risk a third. I cut out bread (apart from my toast "treat" on a Friday) last week - I was eating a lot of bread. Lost 4lbs!</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Letty ●</p> <p>For my previous losses see my profile.</p> <p>Week 12 - 4lbs Week 13 -STS Week 14 -STS Week 15 -4lbs Week 16 -STS Week 17 -1lb Week 18 -1lb Week 19 -STS Week 20 -3 (GOAL!!)</p>

Like Rebecca81 (post 21.01, 'disappointed'), HIPPYCHICK (post 24.01) has actually *lost* weight, but does not consider the results she has achieved to be enough. CHUCKYEGG24 (post 24.02) orients to her report of her good progress to date, congratulating her on her success. This is consistent with the positive emphasis observed in previous threads, and she then takes up an 'expert' position by describing HIPPYCHICK's problem as one of being 'on a plateau'. She presents her with two potential courses of action, either to 'sit it out' (which downgrades it as

a problem by implying that the plateau is a situation which will eventually resolve itself), or to take action. CHUCKYEGG24 suggests the Wendy plan as potential solution to the situation, as a way to 'get things going'. This turn of phrase, along with her description of a 'jolt' to HIPPYCHICK's metabolism portrays the body as a piece of machinery which requires attention. Similarly, other message posts referring to the plateau describe the Wendy plan as a way to 'kickstart' weight loss, again constructing the body as a machine, the workings of which need to be fully understood in order to make it perform correctly and efficiently.

lettywebster's reply (post 24.03) is in agreement that HIPPYCHICK's weight loss has plateaued, but she proposes a less regimented solution to the situation. Her suggestion that she could 'just' vary her diet implies that the potential solutions are plentiful. She aligns herself with HIPPYCHICK, describing her own failure to lose weight, and shares her own approach to her situation. Her description of her own success (through cutting out bread), while more straightforward than the Wendy plan, still stresses the importance of *behaviour change* as a way to resolve any problems with achieving weight loss, even though HIPPYCHICK's monitoring so far has resulted in lack of results and frustration. By acquiring further knowledge about the practice of weight loss and the way the body responds to different foods in terms of 'metabolism' or 'digestion', HIPPYCHICK is able to make changes on the basis of her newly acquired skills, knowledge and techniques, and is equipped to become a 'better weight watcher'.

## 7.6 Summary

The analysis has shown that group members respond to reports of 'inexplicable' failure in a number of ways, and throughout the message threads members stress the importance of remaining dedicated to the weight loss project and 'keeping faith' in the regime. The responses to these messages are often posted by group members who have been successful in reaching their goal weight, and they are able to share their 'expertise' about the weight loss experience. They may reframe the situation as positive, or as part of the 'process' of weight loss, offering encouragement and support, and stressing the importance of 'keeping at it'. Lack of success is explained as simply one stage in the weight loss 'journey' by describing the experience of weight watching as a long term endeavour.

Another way in which group members respond to this type of post is to offer up an account for the failure to lose weight. Such an explanation may portray the weight watcher herself as

responsible for her lack of success, or may offer an alternative rationalisation for the situation. These accounts serve to rationalise failed weight loss in ways which do not threaten the reputation of the Weight Watchers regime, and frequently draw upon pseudo-scientific terminology. Assumptions are made about the process of weight loss and the way in which the body metabolises food, which are not necessarily scientifically accurate, but are readily accepted as feasible explanations. Although the explanations offered differ in the way in which they rationalise failed weight loss, group members consistently account for any failure to lose weight in ways which do not construct the regime itself or the project of weight watching as deficient. Even if no specific reason is offered the regime is never held responsible, and abandoning the regime is not an option. While group members are not necessarily directly blamed for their own failure, the remedial action suggested by fellow members is always something that *they* as an individual can do, either by making changes to their current routine, or by simply gaining new expertise and renewing or maintaining their commitment to the regime and thus being a 'better weight watcher'.

These responses reframe the problem posed, changing the issue from one of possible regime failure into a problem which the individual weight watcher is able to solve. This not only deflects any potential criticism of the Weight Watchers regime, protecting its reputation as an effective means of losing weight, but also enables group members to share their 'expertise' about the process of weight loss. The analysis has also shown that the solution proposed by the group often reflects any potential reasons for failure volunteered in the original message post. These threads alter the position of the 'failed' weight watcher - from someone who is helpless and without explanation, to an individual who is in control of her weight loss experience and is able to take action to remedy the situation (although paradoxically weight loss is often simultaneously portrayed as something *out* of their control). The analysis has explored how responses to reports of unsuccessful weight loss account for failure in ways which construct the scenario as one which the weight watcher is able to *change*, through modifying her behaviour and subjecting herself to further, more stringent surveillance. As Hayes (2007) notes, the appeal and the *power* of the commercial weight loss regime lies partly in the promise of transformation and self-actualisation. By re-formulating the problem of inexplicable failure into a problem for which a solution can be offered, group members position the poster as powerful, and capable of change through the acquisition of further knowledge. The solutions offered by members of the group enable the weight watcher to 'take control' of her weight loss experience, informing her of changes she can make to her own

surveillance behaviours in order to become a successful dieter (and consequently a successful woman, aligning herself with prevailing norms of femininity).

However, as noted in chapter 2, the power this affords is limited in scope. While members are self-governing in the sense that they are exercising control over their own weight loss experience, as previously discussed, their self surveillance ultimately conforms to gendered behaviour and appearance norms which constrain women to focus their attention on their appearance. While the original *problem* posed in these message threads is different from those in the confessional chapters, the solutions proposed are very similar, requiring members to remain committed to the Weight Watchers regime, diligently follow the eating plan, to keep informed and seek out new knowledge about dieting and the body, and to subject their bodies and actions to constant and meticulous scrutiny. In the context of the commercial weight loss message board, the only option presented as available to members who are struggling to obtain results is to simply 'keep on going' and keep monitoring. Regardless of how carefully members follow the eating regime, the message threads show that there is always scope to work to become a 'better weight watcher'.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion and Reflections

### 8.1 Introduction

The previous three empirical chapters (chapters 5, 6 and 7) have each explored the interactional management of relationships, identity and accountability in the online exchanges between members of the Weight Watchers community. By paying close attention to what group members *make relevant* in their message posts, and how they *construct* themselves and their behaviour in their online accounts, the analysis reveals much about how self-surveillance practices operate in this context, producing disciplined bodies. The analysis shows how the message board exchanges foster solidarity between group members, and encourage commitment to the Weight Watchers regime by constructing it as an effective means of losing weight, further reinforcing the surveillance process.

This final chapter will outline the main findings of the analysis, and will consider the wider significance of the phenomena observed in the message board interactions. The chapter will make the link between the 'micro' level of interaction and the 'macro' level of society by reflecting on how the exchanges between community members sustain the 'moral order' by reproducing and renewing societal norms of feminine behaviour.

Finally, the chapter will reflect on my own experiences of conducting the research, and will discuss the suitability of the chosen research methods for exploring the topic in question, suggesting potential ways to improve or expand the research design. I will consider my own position as a researcher, and will explore the way my own standpoint may have influenced my approach. The chapter will also consider potential avenues for future research, to further explore the initial findings set out in this thesis.

### 8.2 Summary of findings

#### The Weight Watchers community

The thesis has shown that the users of the Weight Watchers message boards are members of an online, brand-oriented community of practice, and has explored the role played by the

community in the maintenance of gendered power relations. The Weight Watchers regime reflects and intensifies the requirement for women to subject themselves to constant surveillance, and the message boards provide a space in which members strengthen and renew their commitment to the regime, and to the body modification project more generally. As chapters 1 and 2 explained, the practice of self-surveillance is central to the experience of womanhood, and of weight watching in particular. Weight watching and self-surveillance are *community* activities, and by confessing transgression a group member makes herself answerable to the group, while simultaneously appealing to them for help.

### Confessing transgression

Chapter 5 explored the interactional management of confession on the message boards, and revealed that the confession of transgression is common in this context. Confession is an act which Brown and Levinson describe as intrinsically face-threatening, but the analysis of the message threads reveals that transgressive consumption is both an accepted and expected part of the weight loss process. Themes of morality and virtue permeate group members' discussions about food and consumption, and foods like chocolate, cakes and takeaways are classed as 'bad', and are referred to as such, while 'good' foods include vegetables, salads and low point soups. These moral value judgements can also be observed in members' talk about *themselves*, making moral judgements of themselves as 'bad' or 'naughty'.

The confession of transgressive consumption exposes the confessor to a potential loss of face because they have failed to exercise the control and restraint required of a 'good woman'. In reporting that they have succumbed to their desires and indulged their appetites, group members construct themselves as being flawed, weak, and lacking resolve. It is not even necessary for actual consumption to have taken place, as experiencing desire or temptation around food is transgressive and worthy of confession in its own right. In the confessional posts group members' reports construct their transgressions in a number of ways which serve to mitigate this potential threat to face by delivering the confessional message in ways which minimise agency and responsibility. They may construct themselves as out of control, or use childlike language to downplay the seriousness of their transgression and give the impression that they cannot be held entirely responsible for their actions. Or they may appeal to the common assumption that certain types of food are desirable, and so their intrinsic lure is impossible to resist. By constructing their actions as accidental, unavoidable or out of control, and consequently as not their *fault*, group members mitigate the potential face threat that

confession holds. This mitigation continues throughout the exchanges, and fellow group members consistently orient to the tone of the initial confessional post, and provide emotional and practical support enabling the confessor to rehabilitate herself back into the eating regime.

While Brown and Levinson treat confession as an *individual* activity (which is therefore threatening to the individual's face), the message threads in the data set show that in the message board context the confessional sequence is a *group* accomplishment, which serves to ensure continued commitment to the weight loss endeavour and the surveillance practices it requires. The analysis shows that in this context the notion of 'face' is more complex than Brown and Levinson imply (as chapters 1 and 3 also discussed), as the confessional sequence has the potential to be both face threatening and face *promoting* to both the individual confessing and the community as a whole.

Firstly, by confessing their 'bad' behaviour, group members display their understanding of the 'rules' of food and consumption, as by reporting their behaviour as transgressive they provide an opportunity to realign themselves with, and renew, the norms of 'acceptable' behaviour. The confession of transgression also acts as a public demonstration of their commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. While confessing 'bad' behaviour signals a lack of restraint, it *also* provides evidence that the individual making the confession is subjecting herself to the levels of self-surveillance the regime requires. By confessing, and resolving to make amends, members are able to construct themselves as committed Weight Watchers in a way which does not threaten the face of fellow members of the group (in the way that, for example, reporting success has the potential to). So although group members' identities as 'good women' may be threatened, there are benefits to be gained in terms of their identities as 'good weight watchers'.

The confessional sequences also have a number of potential face-promoting functions in terms of *group* identity. Group members are not only accountable to the cultural norms of femininity, but also to the message board community, and the confessional threads reinforce the reputation of the group as a means of supporting successful weight loss. Individual members are able to display their knowledge of the Weight Watchers regime, and to offer practical advice and solutions. The solidarity-forming functions of confession have been previously noted (e.g. Stinson, 1990; Hymer, 1996), and the analysis shows that it offers community members the opportunity to align themselves with the confessor, by expressing

sympathy, offering help, or by sharing their own confessions. The confessional exchanges therefore increase group cohesiveness, by highlighting the shared knowledge, goals and experiences of the members.

It seems therefore that confession is not just tolerated on the message boards, it is actually *encouraged*, and confessional threads appear to play an important role in reflecting and renewing the community norms of behaviour. The role of the message boards as a space where group members engage in self-surveillance practices will be explored in more detail in the next section (section 8.3), which reflects on the wider significance of the themes emerging from the analysis.

### Humorous confessions

The analysis revealed that one particularly rich and complex form of face management in the message threads was the use of humour in the delivery of confessions, and these message threads provided the focus of chapter 6. In the message board community humour is used to 'play' with the themes of morality and accountability which are central to the experience of weight watching, and are also consistent with more general societal norms around food and eating. The analysis shows that one of the types of humour used on the message boards foregrounds the pleasurable nature of food by constructing the confessable 'bad' food as something which is actually 'good', playfully re-framing of commonly accepted 'facts' about food and weight loss. The second type of humour plays with the allocation of responsibility for the transgression. Although the confessions in chapter 5 often use mitigating strategies which *downplay* individual accountability, the humour on the message boards subverts this by positioning the transgressing weight watcher as completely *absolved* of responsibility.

Humour which openly contradicts two of the central tenets of the Weight Watchers regime has the potential to threaten the face of the individual who makes the joke, as she may reveal herself not only as having transgressed, but also as failing to take her transgression seriously. However, the analysis reveals that this is not the case, and in message threads where individuals introduce a 'play frame' (Coates, 2007), fellow group members orient to it either by expressing their appreciation of the humour, or by contributing their own humour, and co-constructing humorous scenarios. The analysis demonstrates that the humour on the message boards does not necessarily signal a lack of commitment to the Weight Watchers regime. The fact that the behaviour is being confessed *at all* is significant, and despite their irreverent tone

the humorous posts still shared some important features in common with the non-humorous confessions in chapter 5. Although the humour displays members' self awareness and knowingness about the norms of self surveillance, this awareness does not stop them from conforming to them. Within the humorous message threads it was still possible to identify requests for point information, or for help to resist temptation, as well as statements of intended rehabilitation, which all signal continued commitment to the Weight Watchers regime.

Humour is a complex interactional phenomenon, and there is evidence to suggest that it simultaneously performs a number of different functions in the message board community. In acting as a mitigating strategy it enables members to maintain face while making confessions, and it can also be face *promoting*, as to make jokes about the Weight Watchers regime members must have sufficient understanding of the 'rules' to be able to play with them. Individuals using humour also demonstrate that they know that other members of the community understand them too, and so humour can perform a solidarity-forming function. The collaborative nature of the humour on the boards highlights the shared knowledge and experiences of group members, and is therefore solidarity forming, acting as a 'short-cut to intimacy'.

The analysis also showed that humour is another way in which Weight Watchers members orient to community norms. Playing with these *core* community norms, which all members *know* to be true (like, for example, the fact that each individual is responsible for her own actions) is in fact what makes the posts funny. The fact that the behaviour is confessed at all (albeit in a light-hearted way) indicates that the group member is still subjecting herself and her consumption to the required monitoring, and the analysis reveals that in humorous threads members still state their intention to rehabilitate themselves back into the eating regime. Far from signalling a lack of commitment or being a tool for subversion it is used as a face management, solidarity building strategy, which contributes to the body reduction project by reinforcing community norms.

#### Reports of 'inexplicable' failure

The final empirical chapter (chapter 7) considered a subset of message threads in which members report a failure to lose weight, but do not construct their problem of one of transgression. By describing themselves as 'without explanation' for their lack of success,

group members place the reputation of the Weight Watchers regime in doubt. These message threads therefore have the potential to be far more damaging to community identity, as by constructing themselves as *without fault*, yet still failing to achieve *results*, these posts question the effectiveness of the practices of self surveillance and point counting as a means of achieving successful weight loss.

The analysis shows that the community respond to these message posts in ways which are protective of the surveillance project. In their replies group members offer advice which orients to the Weight Watchers regime as a technology of the self, suggesting ways in which the unsuccessful dieter can *improve* her surveillance practices in order to achieve better results. By reframing the 'inexplicable' failure as something which is both explainable and expected, the community positions the failed weight watcher as capable of taking *control* of her weight loss by making changes to her behaviour, thus ensuring that she remains committed to the surveillance project and the Weight Watchers regime.

Therefore, even when group members report that their self surveillance has not worked as a way of losing weight, the neoliberal ethos of self regulation is still maintained in the message board exchanges. The group 'offer up' explanations which rationalise the lack of success, and therefore point to a potential solution. These solutions may stress the importance of following the regime *more carefully* (by making the potentially face threatening move of suggesting that she may not have been tracking her consumption correctly), or highlight the *long term* goal of weight loss, as opposed to short term weekly weigh in results.

Paradoxically, the explanations offered often cite the *uncontrollable* nature of the body as a reason for failed weight loss, and the body is constructed as agented, 'holding on' to food, or 'deciding' not to lose any weight. In these situations, group members share their 'knowledge' about the body and the weight loss process, invoking pseudo-scientific explanations such as the 'plateau', along with suggestions for how to bring the body under control. The solutions offered are not necessarily based on medical facts, but are afforded an air of authority, and are responded to as such. The weight watcher is then armed with the knowledge she needs to become a 'better weight watcher', by monitoring herself even *more* stringently, and by remaining committed to the self surveillance project, she is able to move forward with more 'expertise' and renewed resolve.

### 8.3 Reflections on main findings

The thesis set out to explore the way that societal norms of femininity are both reflected in, and are perpetuated by, women's everyday talk on the online message boards. In this section, I will explore the central themes emerging from the analysis, and will discuss how particular interactional features of the message board exchanges relate to the wider theoretical concerns of gender and power introduced in the introductory literature review chapters (chapters 1 and 2). The discussion will also consider the specific nature of the commercial weight loss context, and will examine how the Weight Watchers regime draws on our cultural understandings of food, the body and femininity. I will also explore how the commercial weight loss context *perpetuates* and *intensifies* these cultural norms by encouraging women to focus upon their bodies and their consumption of food in increasingly minute detail.

#### Transforming the body

The Weight Watchers organisation plays a central role in these women's experiences of body modification, and the organisation appropriates many of the discursive themes discussed throughout the thesis around femininity and acceptable behaviour around food. First and foremost, Weight Watchers both perpetuates and *profits from* the notion that excess weight is undesirable, and that there is a moral imperative for women to engage in dieting activity in the pursuit of slimness. Key to the success of the organisation is the idea that women should *want* to lose weight, and should make every effort to conform to cultural norms.

Body modification is constructed in neoliberal terms as *self-improvement* and *self-care*, where weight loss can make you both happier and healthier. In this version of weight loss women are not trying to reduce their body weight as a means of conforming to societal standards of appearance, they are doing it because it is *good for you*, and they *owe it to themselves*. Body modification is constructed as a health issue, and in the Weight Watchers literature there are frequent references to the health benefits of losing weight. Interestingly, health is not a theme which received much attention in the message board interactions, but the notion of weight loss as *transformation* could be clearly observed. The Weight Watchers regime operates as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988), where group members are able to achieve self-actualisation through following the eating plan.

The transformative promise of the regime (and weight management in general) is a theme which permeates the Weight Watchers literature, group meetings and website, and this is reinforced by the organisation's use of 'success stories' to promote the eating plan. These take the form of profiles of successful weight watchers, which contrast candid holiday photographs of the individuals 'before' weight loss, and professional 'after' shots showing the weight watcher at goal weight after a makeover and new clothes. The successful weight watcher also tells the story of their weight loss journey. Not only do these reinforce the idea that reaching goal weight is *possible*, but the stories each construct weight loss as a 'life-changing' experience. The successful weight watchers consistently report increased confidence, a more positive outlook, and talk about activities that they do that they 'never would have done' before they lost weight (see appendix 5 for an example). The idea that women will be *happier* if they conform more closely to appearance norms is reflected in the exchanges on the boards. Weight loss is constructed as a 'passport' to a new life, and group members frequently make reference to their intention to lose weight for a holiday or wedding, so that they are able to feel more confident about how they look.

Body modification requires members to subject their consumption to constant surveillance. This is consistent with wider societal norms of femininity outlined in chapters 1 and 2, which require women to be controlled and restrained, particularly around food. The Weight Watchers organisation also constructs the weight loss endeavour as one which requires *constant vigilance*, or 'minute and relentless surveillance', and this preoccupation with appearance and food maintains women's subordination (Bartky, 1990).

The 'points' system provides a practical method of self-surveillance, taking it to an even more extreme level by encouraging women to subject their own consumption to increasingly stringent levels of scrutiny which go far beyond the decision simply to eat a little less. The regime requires members to measure and record every morsel of food they eat, reducing eating to a series of strict calculations, and encouraging a preoccupation with consumption. Weight Watchers even provides a 'points calculator', where members can keep an accurate record of precisely what they have eaten (see appendix 4), and it is this level of detail which lead Heyes to describe organised dieting as 'a particularly extreme version of panoptic culture' (Heyes, 2006: 134). There is a fundamental contradiction in a regime which purports to allow members to 'take control' of their lives, but does so by removing their capacity to make independent choices about what, or when, or how much to eat.

As well as requiring members to count points, the organisation encourages *target setting*, which is also a technology of the self. Members are assigned a 'goal weight', and are required to track their progress towards this goal by weighing themselves at regular intervals. Members who use online resources to follow the regime can do this themselves at home, but members attending weekly meetings are required to go through the process of 'weigh in' upon arrival, and have their weight loss or gain recorded by the group leader. Although the regime makes claims about the health benefits of the eating regime, success (or lack of it) is not judged by any criteria other than the numbers on the scales, and like the points system this encourages a preoccupation with the minute detail of the dieting process. The regime's aim of gradual weight loss (it claims an average of 2lb a week is a realistic and 'healthy' goal), but an emphasis on frequent progress monitoring, means that minor fluctuations in weight are afforded great importance. As the message threads in the analysis show, failure to lose weight over a week long period, or minor *increases* in weight (often amounts as little as 1lb), are a source of great concern among group members. As the analysis in chapter 7 revealed, and I will discuss later in the chapter, members work to rationalise 'failed' weight loss in ways that are protective of the self surveillance project.

#### Confession as a disciplinary practice

The Weight Watchers regime requires women to subject themselves and their actions to constant surveillance, and the analysis shows that one of the key ways that self-surveillance manifests in the message board interactions is through the *confession of transgression*. Spitzack (1990) notes that confession appears to be one way in which the panoptic nature of dieting manifests in women's talk, but she does not look specifically at the detail of interactions. By subjecting the exchanges on the message boards to detailed, turn by turn analysis, the thesis has demonstrated how confession is managed within women's interactions. The full extent of the social significance of the practice of confession was discussed in chapter 2, and the analysis has shown that it is an interactional practice which is productive of gendered norms. In their confessions, group members report behaviour which is not in-keeping either with the requirements of the eating regime, or with more general norms of feminine conduct around food, and consequently reinforce and perpetuate these norms.

Confession of transgression is a common social practice on the message boards, and a range of things are confessable in this context, from failing to control consumption and exceeding the daily point allowance or eating a 'bad' food, to even being *tempted* to consume a food. As

previously discussed, the analysis in chapters 5 and 6 reveals that confessional threads are managed in ways which are protective of the face of the members involved, and rehabilitate them back into the eating regime. The Weight Watchers organisation fosters a culture where the confession of transgression is *encouraged*, and the message board community is promoted as one where members can discuss their progress and ask for help with their weight loss efforts, ensuring that they remain committed to the self-surveillance project.

Chapter 5 showed that in the everyday exchanges between weight loss group members, food and its consumption are inextricably linked with issues of morality and virtue. This finding is consistent with those of Stinson (2001) and Mycroft (2008), among others who observed moral themes emerging from women's dieting talk. The message threads in the data set show that talk about food, and particularly about *enjoying* food, is fraught with contradictions, as women attempt to negotiate the conflicting discourses of food as something which can be dangerous and 'bad', and must be approached with caution, but which is simultaneously tempting and pleasurable. Food is also vital to our survival, so unlike other potentially 'problematic temptations' like alcohol, sex, or gambling, it cannot simply be avoided entirely. The group members are therefore required to exercise control and restraint, and to be 'cool and calm' (Bordo, 1993/2003) around food.

The Weight Watchers organisation itself draws on discourses surrounding the intrinsic lure of particular foods in its literature. In contrast to the strict point counting system it employs, the regime also operates on the notion that 'no food is forbidden'. The regime is constructed as one where members have the freedom to choose to eat whatever they like, and where there is no such thing as an intrinsically 'bad' food. This claim is reflected in another tagline used in the organisation's advertising, which announces that 'no food is a sin' (a strategy which is used to contrast the regime with its closest competitor, Slimming World, which uses the term 'syn' to denote foods whose consumption must be strictly limited). The messages that group members receive from the regime about food are often contradictory – they are free to eat 'whatever they like', but must strictly monitor everything they consume, there is no such thing as a 'bad' food, but the organisation produces and markets lower calorie versions of 'bad' foods which it promotes as a 'virtuous' indulgence. Although Weight Watchers as an organisation avoid explicitly describing food as 'bad', chapter 5 shows that in the exchanges between group *members* these moral judgements can frequently be identified, a distinction which is brought to the fore in the humorous confessions in chapter 6. This shows that the

women in the group draw on wider cultural understandings around food and consumption, as well as the information provided to them by Weight Watchers, when confessing.

### Weight watching is a *lifelong* responsibility

Finally, the Weight Watchers regime portrays weight management as an activity that is *without end*. Once members achieve their goal weight (something which many members are unsuccessful in doing), their dieting journey does not end. Instead, they work to *maintain* their weight. Successful members are awarded 'Gold Membership' and are able to continue attending meetings for as long as they remain within 5lb of their goal weight. Women therefore remain weight watchers for life, and are required to continue to monitor their consumption using the points system, and if group members are *not* successful at reaching goal weight, the only option presented to them by the community is to *keep on going*.

One of the core beliefs in message board threads is the assumption that the Weight Watchers regime *works*. As the analysis in chapter 7 demonstrates, in situations where members report that they have followed the regime correctly, but have still not succeeded in losing weight, the community works to *rationalise* this failure in ways which protect the status of the regime. The community works within the interactions to maintain group solidarity and ideals when these are under threat, and group members draw on neoliberal notions of individual responsibility, offering accounts which reframe successful weight loss as the responsibility of the *individual*. As previously discussed, these rationalisations take different forms, but each solution proposed involves becoming a *better weight watcher* in some way. This may involve following the Weight Watchers regime even more precisely (the implication being that they were not following it correctly before), or gaining some 'specialist' knowledge about dieting, the body and weight loss. The analysis has shown that in the exchanges group members appear willing to accept even the most unlikely explanations for stalled weight loss, and resolve to 'work harder' in the future. The apparent acceptance of information which can be completely lacking in logic (for example, the idea that if you exercise, you need to eat *more* food to lose weight) may tell us something about the extent of the appeal and power that the commercial weight loss regime holds for its members, and the extent to which group members have bought into the ideology of self-surveillance. Members are invested in the regime both emotionally and financially, and the promise of the 'prize' of successful weight loss is so compelling, that they seem willing to do whatever it takes to be a 'good weight watcher'.

## 8.4 Reflections on the research experience and suggestions for further research

### Self-surveillance as common to all women

It would be easy to claim that this focus on self-monitoring is simply a feature of the commercial weight loss experience, where women are actively encouraged to subject the minute details of their actions to intense scrutiny. However, although the thesis deals solely with interactions which take place in a commercial weight loss setting, and Weight Watchers and other similar regimes may foreground and intensify women's monitoring practices, the experience of self-surveillance is by no means restricted to members of Weight Watchers, or even those who are actively trying to lose weight. It is possible to identify talk about body size and food throughout women's day to day interactions, as Guendouzi's (2004) analysis of 'time out talk' shows, and my original inspiration for this research project came from overhearing a conversation between two female colleagues about Jaffa Cakes. Both of the women involved were slim, neither one was 'on a diet', but they were discussing how Jaffa Cakes were 'the best biscuit', not because they tasted the nicest, but because they contained the fewest calories. My own casual observation has revealed that these themes of morality, restraint and surveillance pop up in almost endless everyday situations, including the general talk around the buffet table at conferences, a friend who declared it would be 'ok' for her to have a slice of cake with her coffee because she was going to the gym later in the day, and a colleague who stopped drinking alcohol in the weeks leading up to her wedding because she wanted to be as slim as possible for her 'big day'. It is clear that it is not necessary for women to engage in formalised *dieting* activities to monitor and restrict their consumption.

One potential approach for further research would be to explore how these self-surveillance practices are managed in settings *other* than the commercial weight loss context. Although the message board members are free to talk about whichever topics they choose, on the Weight Watchers site, the eating regime is something all the members share in common, and body modification provides the main focus of the interactions. It would be interesting to find out more about where and how self-surveillance can be observed in women's talk in casual conversation when there is less explicit emphasis on the activity of weight loss.

In this section I will consider how my position as a non-dieting woman affected my approach to the research, but also how the experience of conducting a research project on this topic has influenced my *own* views and behaviour. In the previous section I wrote about how conducting the analysis made me more sensitive to the surveillance practices in the talk of women around me, but studying this topic has also made me scrutinise my *own* relationship to food more closely. I have always considered myself to have a 'healthy' appetite, but I became increasingly aware of surveillance practices of my own, which had previously gone unnoticed. I would occasionally catch myself justifying my decision to eat a pudding after a large meal, or choosing my lunchtime sandwich on the basis of the nutritional information displayed on the front, rather than what I actually felt like eating. It is difficult to say whether this was new behaviour, brought on by a preoccupation with issues surrounding weight and consumption, or whether I had been doing it all along without realising, and it had just come to my attention due to my increased awareness of surveillance practices among women.

When embarking upon the research project I was initially very wary of being critical of the Weight Watchers regime. I felt that my status as an 'outsider' to the organisation, as someone who had never been a member or deliberately 'dieted' to lose weight, meant that I had no right to do so. However, it was never my aim to offer an evaluation of the Weight Watchers organisation, or to make any kind of judgement about whether women should or should not follow the eating regime. By concentrating solely on the *detail* of the message board interactions, and grounding my conclusions in the findings of my analysis, I hoped to provide an account of these women's body reduction practices which took a neutral position on the 'value' of Weight Watchers. I didn't consciously set out at the beginning of the research with a particular agenda regarding the weight loss industry, but it soon became clear that these seemingly minor conversations were inextricably linked with issues of power and female subordination. And as I have already discussed, during the research project it also became apparent that the themes which were emerging from the analysis, and from my exploration of the literature in this area, were not necessarily unique to commercial weight loss groups. Yet while my conclusions *are* based upon the interactional management of the online conversations, it is impossible to remain entirely detached when exploring how these everyday activities relate to social norms and women's position in our culture. Any analytical interpretation is inevitably subjective, influenced by the standpoint and preoccupations of the

researcher. However, just as my own views and research interests may have prejudiced the analysis, in turn my own thinking was influenced by the themes emerging from the data.

My feelings now about the Weight Watchers organisation are now somewhat mixed, but I am probably more critical of the organisation than I was when I began my research. Although Weight Watchers did not *invent* the norms of femininity by any means, they certainly *profit* from them, and they encourage women to subject their bodies and their behaviour to even more minute levels of scrutiny. But as I have already discussed, the commercial weight loss regime also offers women the opportunity to feel like they are taking control of their unruly bodies, and working towards the goal of self-transformation. However, the 'empowerment' offered is only done so within the strict terms of 'normative femininity', and the regime constructs weight loss as an option which is available to all women, and so ultimately it reduces the scope for women to attempt to resist these norms entirely.

This analysis is absolutely not a criticism of the women who join weight loss groups. I have already discussed at length the appeal that the commercial weight loss industry holds for women who feel that they do not match up to society's appearance norms, and if I wanted to lose weight myself I would quite possibly give the Weight Watchers regime a go. I have spoken to a number of women throughout the research who expressed concern that their decision to diet conflicts with their feminist ideals. In fact, one woman I met at a social event drunkenly 'confessed' to me that she had just started attending Weight Watchers meetings, but asked me not to tell her friends in case they thought badly of her. A woman's decision to begin dieting, particularly in an organised setting, is therefore not always as straightforward as it may seem. Several of the current and ex Weight Watchers members I talked to expressed their awareness of the oppressive nature of gendered norms of behaviour, as well as their desire to resist them. Ultimately however, they felt that they were left with no choice as the social and personal consequences of being 'overweight' were too high. These contradictions, and women's attempts to negotiate them, would be another potential topic to explore in more detail in future research, and in the next section I will discuss the importance of considering the 'voices' of dieting women.

#### Involving research participants

As I discussed in the methodology chapter (chapter 3), I had initially hoped to conduct an analysis of the interactions taking place in the offline Weight Watchers meetings, alongside

those taking place online. Part of the reason I was keen to do this was so that I would be able to give the participants in the study the chance to read my analysis, and to give their own opinions (in focus groups or interviews) on how I had interpreted their talk. Unfortunately this was not possible, and so I made the decision to concentrate solely on the online exchanges. It has always been my intention to primarily focus on the detail of the *interaction* between the women Weight Watchers group, and the eventual analysis reflects this. However, although it was not possible to engage the participants in the research process, this is something that I would like to do in the future. While my research approach is entirely defensible both from a methodological and an ethical perspective, I was still not completely comfortable with the lack of involvement of the women whose interactions formed the basis of my analysis. Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) note the pitfalls of carrying out research from a feminist perspective which does not adequately involve or consider those women taking part, and this element of my research design was troubling for me. The nature of my data meant that I was unable to contact the participants, and I would ideally have liked the opportunity to engage with the women whose words I am writing about in order to find out what they would make of my analysis, and give them the chance to make their voices heard. While it would shift the focus of the research away from *naturally occurring* interaction (which was my primary interest), an analysis of the exchanges between group members in a focus group reflecting on their experiences of the weight loss regime in light of the observations made in this thesis would make an interesting research project in itself. Although I was not able to incorporate a more 'reflexive' stage into the research design, my analysis was informed by my experiences of attending weekly weight loss group meetings, and my discussions with all of the women I talked to about the research, the analysis, and dieting more generally, throughout the project.

## **8.5 Conclusive comments**

The aim of this thesis was to explore the relationship between women's (micro level) everyday talk in a commercial weight loss context, and wider (macro level) social norms regarding 'feminine' appearance and behaviour. Close analysis of message board interactions on the Weight Watchers website reveals that the members of the message board community subject themselves and their behaviour to constant self-surveillance. The level of surveillance is enhanced further by the Weight Watchers regime. Members are required to monitor and record every tiny detail of their consumption, and to weigh their bodies once a week to monitor progress, which places them under even more intense scrutiny. The analysis also reveals that the consumption of food is a moral concern, foods were routinely described as

'good' or 'bad', and community members constructed *themselves* as similarly good or bad according to their food choices. The self-surveillance practices of group members are reflected in the discourses of temptation and transgression that permeate the exchanges on the message boards, and confession is a common social practice.

Confession is a significant phenomenon in this context as it both reflects and perpetuates norms of acceptable behaviour for women, and members of the message board community are accountable to both these societal gender norms and to their fellow weight watchers. The commercial weight loss group provides a space in which women are actively *encouraged* to confess their transgressions, and analysis of both 'standard' and humorous confessional message threads reveals that in these exchanges members realign themselves with social norms of 'femininity'. In situations where group members report 'inexplicable' lack of success, the importance of self-surveillance is foregrounded yet again. The community works to rationalise unsuccessful weight loss in ways which do not threaten the status of the Weight Watchers regime as a reliable means of losing weight. The group provides explanations and solutions which require members to remain committed to the surveillance project, suggesting ways in which unsuccessful members can modify their own behaviour to achieve successful weight loss. These solutions further intensify the practice of surveillance, as only by gaining new 'expertise', and by subjecting their actions to increasingly detailed levels of scrutiny, are members able to become 'better weight watchers'. Simply *stopping* dieting is never presented as an option, as the promise of the 'prize' of transformation is too great. The body modification project is one which requires constant, all consuming, and unending commitment, as women strive to reach an often unachievable goal.

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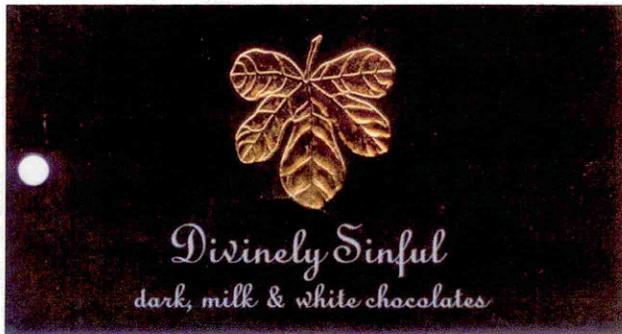
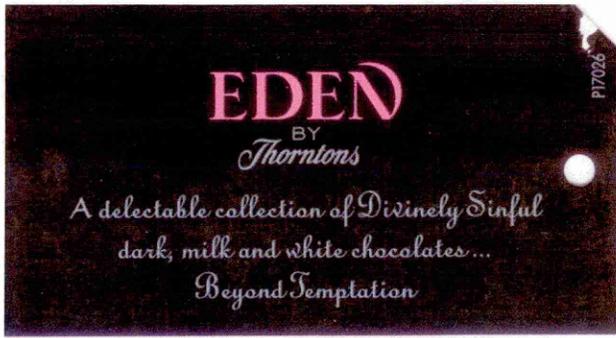
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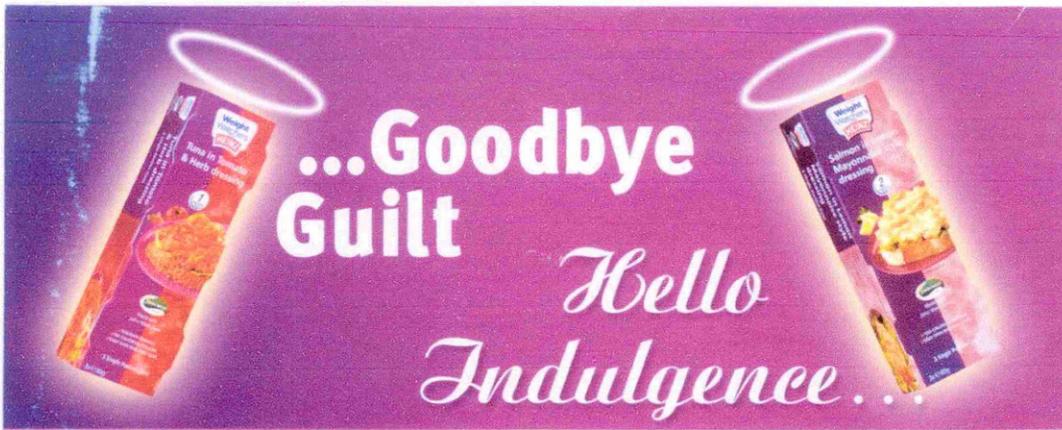
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# Appendix 1: The Moral Construction of Food



Thornton's 'Eden' chocolates



**...Goodbye  
Guilt**

*Hello  
Indulgence...*

*Heavenly...* foods from



**1/3rd off\***

**all WWFH products**

**In store from 29th December 2004 to 25th January 2005**



**So now  
you really  
can be wickedly  
indulgent without  
worrying about your waistline.**

**...Go on be a *Devil!***

WEIGHT WATCHERS on foods and beverages is the registered trademark of WW Foods, LLC, and used under license.  
WEIGHT WATCHERS for services and POINTS are the registered trademarks of Weight Watchers International, Inc. and are used under license.  
WEIGHT WATCHERS foods can help slimming or weight control only as part of a calorie controlled diet.  
\*Based on Retailer's Standard Selling Price. Subject to availability. Some products only available in selected stores.  
Saver Card Offer. Present your Saver Card or key fob to get Saver Card deals. See in store for details.

*Somerfield Magazine December 2004*

Weight Watchers advert: Somerfield Magazine, December 2004

# Appendix 2: Weight Watchers Literature



## BEACH BABES

Whether you're enjoying the benefits of losing weight and shaping up – or just starting out with **Time To Eat** – it's likely you'll be going to the pool or beach at sometime during the summer. Finding the right swimwear to flatter your current shape can really help if you want to make a splash, or even a ripple. If you want to...

...**Slim Down:** Sleek, streamlined swimwear without much detail is most flattering. Wear a swimming costume with built-in support – a Lycra one with underwiring – to hold you in and give you a lift. Avoid brightly coloured costumes.

...**Curb Your Cleavage:** A costume or bikini top with underwiring or secret support will help. This should be in your usual bra size as fit is crucial. Avoid bandeau tops and fussy detail and look for bikini bottoms with a fair amount of coverage to balance out your top and bottom halves.

...**Flatter Your Pear Shape:** Draw the eye upwards with details on your top half. Consider square-neck or halter-neck tops with wide straps as they'll make your top half appear more in proportion with your bottom half.

**Cover Up:** A sarong is perfect for covering up the lower half of your body.

## Luxuriate in a lie in



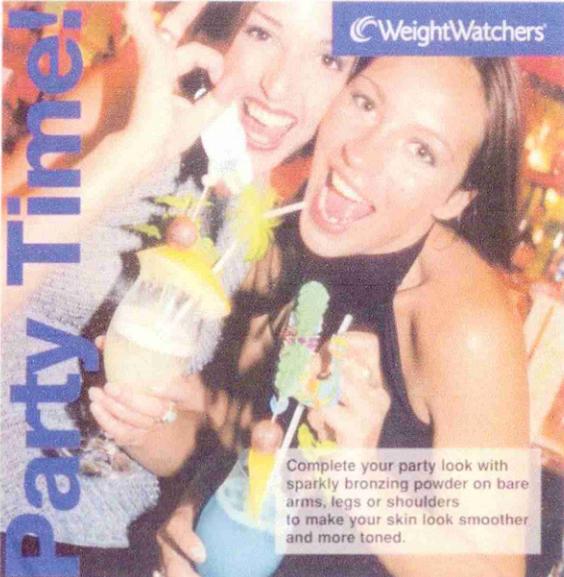
Sleeping is a vital part of healthy living and can help in effective weight loss too. When you're tired and irritable it's tempting to reach for comforting snacks like chocolate and cakes laden with Points. Self-control is at its lowest when you're exhausted. You're much more likely to stay focused on your goals when you're feeling refreshed and rested.

Most of us are only too familiar with tiredness. Around 10% of people in the UK suffer from chronic insomnia – many more face sleepless nights in the short term. And young mums with kids know that many nights can be disturbed by the patter of tiny feet too. This month - make some special, relaxing time for you - to help keep you focused. Book yourself in to your diary for a relaxing, stress-free evening. Then get to bed early and next day enjoy a lie in.

**Find out how on the other side.**

### TIP

If you're exhausted, make this time even more relaxing by arranging for the children to spend the night at their grandparents or a friend's house. They'll enjoy the change and you'll enjoy the peace.

**Party Time!**



Complete your party look with sparkly bronzing powder on bare arms, legs or shoulders to make your skin look smoother and more toned.

Weight Watchers leaflets distributed in meetings

# Appendix 3: The Weight Watchers Website

WeightWatchers.co.uk Find a Meeting Help Log In

Search  For

How Weight Watchers Works | Food & Recipes | Fitness & Health | Success Stories | Community | Shop

## Discover Plan

Learn how to eat well, feel full and control your cravings, even when you're bored or stressed. So you lose weight week after week and discover a brand new you.

How Weight Watchers works ▶

Our approach to weight loss ▶

Flexible food plan ▶



### Weight Watchers Meetings

Learn everything you need to know to lose weight and keep it off from Leaders who have been there and other Weight Watchers members.

[What are meetings?](#)  
[What happens at a meeting?](#)

Find a meeting:   ▶  
Enter Post Code

Meetings or online — [which is right for you?](#)

### Weight Watchers Online

Follow our plan step by step entirely online, with interactive tools, helpful ideas and advice, recipes and more.

[How does Weight Watchers Online work?](#)  
[What you get](#)

Sign up today ▶

### Weight Watchers Meetings

Register **FREE**

▶ [Get Details](#)

### Weight Watchers Online

Save **£20** with 3-month plan

▶ [Sign Up Now](#)

### Monthly Pass

Just **£4.14 a week\*** on average.  
It's our best value membership option.

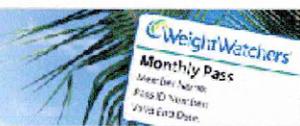


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### Monthly Pass

Just **£4.14 a week\*** on average.  
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### Newsletter

FREE recipes, news and more!



▶ [Get It Now](#)

### Visit our Online Store

See our whole product range.



▶ [See products now](#)

### Get more from Weight Watchers

- At Home
- Food from Weight Watchers
- eSource, internet companion for meetings
- Weight Watchers Magazine

What's on WeightWatchers.co.uk right now:



- Do Summer Different
- Use Zero POINTS Value Foods To Your Advantage
- Atomic Weight Loss Online



- Rebecca's Feeling Better Than Ever!
- Gabby Now Feels Like a Goddess!
- Roberta Lost 3st For Her Baby Boy



- Strawberry and Elderflower Summer Wine Cooler
- More recipes
- Recipes from the community



Get FREE recipes, workout tips and more. Find them in our weekly email newsletter.

▶ [Sign Up Now](#)

[Leaders' Site](#) | [Become a Leader](#) | [About Us](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Affiliate Programme](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy](#) | For subscribers only: [Subscription Agreement](#)

# Appendix 4: Points Calculator

## Weight Watchers eSource

If you already attend meetings, you can sign up for exclusive access to eSource, the Internet weight-loss companion for meetings. And if you take advantage of Monthly Pass, eSource is free.

[Weight Watchers eSource](#)

[SIGN UP FOR WEIGHT WATCHERS eSOURCE](#)

## Weight Watchers Online

Follow our customised plan step-by-step completely online. Get access to interactive tools and videos, over 1000 recipes, workouts, and a rich resource library.

[Weight Watchers Online](#)

[What you get](#)

[SIGN UP FOR WEIGHT WATCHERS ONLINE](#)

## Explore our state-of-the-art interactive weight loss tools



Food Tracker  
Daily tracking and  
TRACK WHAT YOU EAT

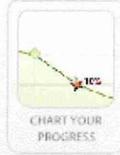
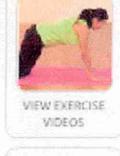


CHART YOUR PROGRESS



FIND FOOD AND RECIPES



VIEW EXERCISE VIDEOS

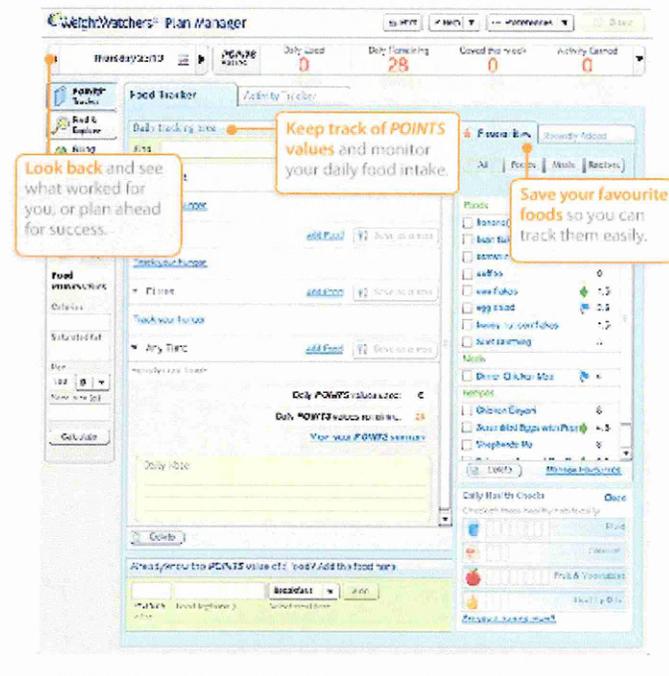


CREATE YOUR FAVOURITE RECIPES

### Keeping track of your eating is your key to success

Track what you eat and make better food and exercise choices.

Manage **POINTS** values, save your favourite foods, or plan ahead for success.



The screenshot shows the 'Weight Watchers Plan Manager' interface. At the top, it displays 'Monday 22/11/11' and 'Daily used 0' points. Below this, there are sections for 'Food Tracker' and 'Activity Tracker'. The 'Food Tracker' section shows a list of food items with their corresponding POINTS values. Callouts highlight key features: 'Look back and see what worked for you, or plan ahead for success.' points to a 'History' tab; 'Keep track of POINTS values and monitor your daily food intake' points to the 'Daily POINTS value used' section; and 'Save your favourite foods so you can track them easily.' points to a 'Favourite Foods' list on the right.

# Appendix 5: Success Stories


Find a Meeting [Help](#) [Log In](#)

Search  For

How Weight Watchers Works | [Food & Recipes](#) | [Fitness & Health](#) | **Success Stories** | [Community](#) | [Shop](#)

Meetings [Online](#) [Share your story](#)

**About Weight Watchers**

- Our approach
- What you'll eat
- Meetings
- Online
- The science of weight loss
- Success Stories

**Ready to start?**

Enter Postcode

Weight Watchers Online

## Bicycling And Belly Dancing: Sian's Lost 4st

[Print](#) [Email](#)




Name	Sian
Age	41
Height	5'5.5"
Was	14 st 8 lb
Lost	4 st 0 lb
Weight	10 st 8 lb

Before

**"I have joined a belly dancing class and we recently appeared on local TV. There is no way in a million years I would have done that before!"**

After

Sian's gone from takeaways to growing her own produce – and taken up some new hobbies along the way.

**Tipping Point**  
I was getting ready for a night out with my new boyfriend and wanted to look my best. I headed into Birmingham to find a new trendy outfit but after trying clothes on in shop after shop and finding nothing that fitted, I literally stood on the high street and cried. It was then I decided I was going to lose weight.

**Online 24/7**  
I decided to follow Weight Watchers Online as I live out in the country so it's really convenient. I am always on the computer keeping in touch with family and friends so going online to lose weight and get ideas and support seemed the logical choice. A big benefit of following Weight Watchers Online for me was having support 24/7. I could go online whenever I felt down or wanted to find something out.

**Maximum Motivation**  
Originally, fitting into a new fashionable wardrobe was my main motivation to lose weight. But then my boyfriend proposed so my new incentive was to fit into a size 12 wedding dress! As I started to lose weight I really noticed my shape changing which inspired me to keep going. My boyfriend is now my husband!

**From Takeaways To Grow Your Own**  
We used to live on a diet of takeaways and family sized bags of Revels. Now all our meals are cooked from scratch and we love trying out new recipes from Weightwatchers.co.uk. Following the Discover Plan™ has meant I've introduced so much more variety into my diet. I'm always trying out new ways to make dishes and meals more exciting whilst sticking within my POINTS allowance and now grow fresh herbs, vegetables and fruit in the garden. These taste delicious, can add new flavours to dishes and also earn me activity POINTS values as I'm gardening!

**Bicycling And Belly Dancing**  
Alongside changing what and how I ate, getting fit was also important to me. Since starting my weight loss journey I have taken up lots of new kinds of exercise including bike riding and kayaking – these are things I would never have done when I was bigger. I have even joined a belly dancing class and we appeared on local TV on Red Nose Day. There is no way in a million years I would have had the nerve to do that before!

**Energy And Confidence**  
I no longer go to bed every night feeling full and bloated. I'm much more active and have so much more energy – probably due to carrying so much less weight around! My confidence has shot through the roof too. I'm sure my vastly decreased intake of chocolate will also make my teeth last longer!

**Shopaholic**  
Shopping for fashionable clothes is my new hobby! I do still find it hard to believe that I'm now a size 12 and often still pick up a size 18 to take into the changing

**Related Stories**

- Raeleen
- Nikita
- Charlie

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**Message Boards**

- Get tips and inspiration to achieve your goals on the Message Boards
- Gold & Maintenance
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[Share your weight loss success](#) with us. Apply to get your story published on WeightWatchers.co.uk

**Become a Leader**: Run a Weight Watchers meeting and help others achieve their goals.

# Appendix 6: The Weight Watchers Community Page

WeightWatchers.co.uk Find a Meeting Help Log In

Search  Entire Site  For

How Weight Watchers Works | Food & Recipes | Fitness & Health | Success Stories | **Community** | Shop

Message Boards | Community Recipe Swap

## Community

Whether you're exchanging ideas or looking for inspiration, our Message Boards are the place to make friends and stay on track with your weight loss.

Go to a meeting today:   **Weight Watchers Online**

**Message Boards**  
With over 20 boards, this thriving community is overflowing with encouragement and ideas. See what they're talking about now.

Select a board

**Today's Hot Topics**

- Do you stick to WW healthy eating guidelines?
- Coping with the heat when your overweight
- Give up or everything in moderation?

**Run your own meetings**

**New to the Message Boards?**

Learn more about our online community.

- WeightWatchers.co.uk Community Introduction
- Read the Community Ground Rules
- New around here? Try the New Community Users Board

**Your Public Profile**

Introduce yourself by creating a public profile. You can add fun icons, your favourite quotes and more.

- About Public Profiles
- Our Privacy Policy

**Become a part of Weight Watchers**

**Weight Watchers Meetings**  
If you attend Weight Watchers Meetings, you can subscribe to Weight Watchers eSource and participate in all our community features, including the Community Recipe Swap.

- Learn more about Weight Watchers Meetings

Find a meeting:     
Enter Postcode

**Weight Watchers Online**  
Get access to all our community features, including the Community Recipe Swap, by becoming a subscriber today.

- Learn more about Weight Watchers Online

See what people are sharing in the [Community Recipe Swap](#)

Get **FREE** recipes, workout tips and more. Find them in our **weekly** email newsletter.

- Sign Up Now

**Newsletter**  
FREE recipes, news and more!

**Claim your free Recipe Book!**  
Including healthy Alaska Seafood recipes for your diet plan.



# Appendix 7: A Message Thread

About Weight Watchers

- Our approach
- What you'll eat
- Meetings
- Online
- The science of weight loss
- Success Stories

Ready to start?

Enter Postcode

Weight Watchers Online

Sign up today

message boards > new community users > can i make a curry without an onion?

## can i make a curry without an onion?

previous thread next thread

e-mail this thread

page 1 of 1

help

POST A REPLY

START A NEW THREAD



24/07/2009 16:05:17

I've run out...

report this post | ground rules

10 st 11.5 lb / 10 st 10.0 lb / 9 st 7.0 lb

Recent Posts: 6952



24/07/2009 16:06:15

Yes, as long as you have all the right spices etc, you'll never notice the onion missing.

report this post | ground rules

11 st 7.0 lb / 7 st 11.0 lb / 9 st 10.0 lb

Recent Posts: 2084

DI  
www  
B/M 19.9  
5ft 2in

POST A REPLY

START A NEW THREAD

page 1 of 1

help

previous thread next thread

e-mail this thread

Select a board

11 Posts | Suggest a Board

back to top

Alaska seafood is high in protein, calcium, vitamins and omega-3 oils.



click here

protein, calcium, vitamins and omega-3 oils.



click here

# Appendix 8: The 'Plateau'

## About Weight Watchers

- Our approach
- What you'll eat
- Meetings
- Online
- The science of weight loss
- Success Stories

## Ready to start?

Enter Postcode

Weight Watchers Online

- Sign up today

## Weight Loss Plateaus

By The Weight Watchers Research Dept.

Print Email



SCIENCE CENTRE

Plateaus are a common part of the weight loss process. A plateau happens when the scale is at a standstill for several weeks — if weight stays the same for one or two weeks or the rate of weight slows but doesn't stop, it's not a true plateau. The progression from initial weight loss to hitting a plateau follows a typical pattern.

### The Predictable Cycle of Weight Loss

During the first few weeks of losing weight, a rapid drop in pounds is normal. When calories from food are reduced, the body gets needed energy by releasing its stores of glycogen, a type of carbohydrate found in the muscles and liver. Glycogen holds onto water, so when glycogen is burned for energy, it also releases the water — about 4g of water for every 1g of glycogen — resulting in substantial weight loss that's mostly water.

Once the body uses up its glycogen stores, it starts to burn fat for energy. Unlike glycogen, fat does not store much water and each 1g of fat releases more than twice the amount of energy (i.e. calories) than 1g of glycogen. The result is that weight loss slows down substantially. At this point, the recommended rate of weight loss is no more than an average of 2lb per week. Losing weight faster than this is generally a sign that amounts of lean muscle mass, which like glycogen is largely water, are being broken down for energy.

As the body's glycogen stores are replenished by increased carbohydrate intake, there is a corresponding retention of water. During this time, weight stabilises or may temporarily increase.

### Why Weight Loss Plateaus Happen

By 6 months, a weight loss plateau is likely to occur.<sup>1</sup> While plateaus are an almost inevitable response to losing weight, the physiological reasons for why they occur is not well understood.

One area of current research involves a possible link to reduced levels of leptin, a hormone produced by fat cells that is involved in the regulation of appetite. Research has shown that weight loss causes a marked decrease in serum leptin levels, which may, in turn, increase appetite.<sup>2</sup> Based on evidence from an animal study, scientists have suggested that a reduction in leptin may contribute to a weight loss plateau.<sup>3</sup> However, more research on leptin's role in human weight regulation is needed before conclusions can be drawn.

Metabolic processes during weight loss may also impact plateaus. Losing weight can lower [metabolism](#) since a smaller body carries less lean muscle mass and burns fewer calories to move it around. Additionally, lower calorie consumption means it takes fewer calories to digest and absorb food. Taken together, a state of energy equilibrium could result, with weight remaining steady for a period of time.

[view footnotes](#)

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Franz MJ. [Effectiveness of weight loss and maintenance interventions in women](#). *Curr Diab Rep*. 2004 Oct;4(5):387-93.

<sup>2</sup> Infanger D, Baldinger R, Branson R, Barbier T, Steffen R, Horber FF. [Effect of significant intermediate-term weight loss on serum leptin levels and body composition in severely obese subjects](#). *Obes Surg*. 2003 Dec;13(8):879-88.

<sup>3</sup> Boozer CN, Leibel RL, Lova, RJ, Cha MC, Aronne LJ. [Synergy of sibutramine and low-dose leptin in treatment of diet-induced obesity in rats](#). *Metabolism*. 2001 Aug;50(8):889-93.

## Science Center

- Main
- In the Spotlight
- Science Library
  - The Physics of Weight Loss
  - The Psychology of Weight Loss
  - Health and Weight
  - Achieving a Sustainable Weight Loss
  - Healthy Nutrition
  - Exercise and Activity
- Science and Weight Watchers

## Science Library Resources

You may browse through the Science Library by topic, or view our Glossary to look up specific definitions and terms.

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- [View Glossary](#)