



## *Longing to Be Thin*

### **Why I Wait Until Tomorrow to Change My Habits**

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**Abstract:** In this paper I write about my struggles with my poor body image and my weight. Through various sociological perspectives I try my best to gain insight into my poor body image and why I procrastinate to achieve something that I have always dreamed of being...thin. Why am I so wrapped up in becoming thin? The media definitely plays a role in the way I glorify thinness because of the way they correlate being thin with being beautiful, successful and happy. I want that, too, but at the same time why am I putting off making those better choices and exercising regularly? Is it because I am afraid of something that is unknown? My weight, as uncomfortable as it makes me, has become a sort of comfort shield and I am having a hard time getting rid of the final piece of that shield. Writing this paper has really been an eye-opener for me to realize that the longer I put off the healthier choices that I need to make, the more precious time I waste. That time I am never to get back, ever! I have to take the responsibility into my own hands, quit procrastinating, and stop listening to the media telling me how I should look and focus more on how I want to look.

Growing up I have been known for being two things, overweight and a procrastinator. One of my friends even jokes on numerous occasions that the only thing I have ever been early for was my birth (I was born five weeks premature). My weight was never a huge issue for me until eighth grade when one of my friends, whom I had a crush on at the time, called me fat. Up until then I had always known I was overweight, but I was still a child and so it did not really bother me. His comment was a rude awakening.

I started to look at myself as this disgusting blob of a human being. My confidence, which was never high to begin with, plummeted. I told my mom that I wanted to go on a diet the next day, but something

came up and I decided to start Weight Watchers that Monday. Monday came and something came up again and well, needless to say, I did not start that Monday, nor the Monday after that, etc., etc.

Being overweight is something that I have grown accustomed to and, in a way, have become comfortable with. I look at my weight as being a shield that has kept the "real me" hidden. During the recent fourth annual Social Theory Forum held at UMass Boston on March 27-28, 2007 ("The Violence's of Colonialism and Racism, Inner and Global: Conversations with Frantz Fanon on the Meaning of Human Emancipation"), keynote speaker Lewis R. Gordon of Temple University spoke about how, according to Fanon, "people can be hidden in plain

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sight." I have always felt that my weight has hindered me from portraying who I really am and how I feel on the inside. I believe that if I am thin I will feel better about myself, people will treat me differently, and perceive me differently. Why don't I do something about it, you may ask? Well, I have done some things about it, just not everything to my fullest potential. I have the tendency to say to myself, more often than not, "Oh, I'll start eating healthy tomorrow," or "I'll start making better decisions on Monday." I know I cannot be the only person who has this problem of procrastination, but why am I letting it get in the way of something I have dreamed of, being thin. Is being thin simply a personal idea I have, or is it part of a larger *ideology*, "a belief that reflects the interests of dominant classes and groups in society" (Kosmas, 79)?

In this paper I am going to try and explore the root of my problem. I am going to first analyze my problem at the **microsociological** level. The microsociological perspectives I will use basically focus on individuals in a social setting. Later on in the paper I will focus on the **macrosociological** perspectives which focus more on society and how society affects individuals.

Just recently, I would say within the past year or so, I have struggled with feeling feminine. This is because I am unable to wear regular women's sizes. Don't get me wrong though; some clothing for plus-sized women is great, but what I really want to do is go into any store and have free reign over all the clothes. I believe that if I had a thin body, I would look good no matter what I wore. In her essay, "Why am I so fat? A study of the Interrelationship between poor body image and social anxiety" (2006), UMass Boston student Jessica Haley writes, "Thinness is a symbol. I feel that it symbolizes the elite (125)." I want to feel feminine, people to notice me, and to turn heads, too, but I feel that that can only be done if I am thin. In my mind, I truly believe that if I am thin, I will receive way more **benefits** than **costs** and more **rewards** than **punishments**.

The **Social Exchange Theory**, studies exchanges of "tangible or intangible goods and services, ranging from food and shelter to social approval or sympathy" (Wallace & Wolf, 304). It "focuses on the assessments that individuals make and the costs, benefits, punishments and rewards of their participation in a certain action before it is taken" (Haley, 125).

The media plays a crucial factor in the way I glorify thinness and also how society and our culture view obesity. "Many studies have shown that idealization of slim bodies and motivation to achieve them is associated with low self-esteem and distorted perceptions of individuals' own body images. The conventional wisdom is that these body-image distortions are encouraged or perpetuated by thinness-depicting and thinness-promoting (and fat stigmatizing) media" (Brewis 549). Through the media, being thin is seen as a **social norm** and a culturally learned idea. These **norms** are established and maintained by power...and their substance may well be explained in terms of the powerful (Wallace and Wolf, 123). Ralf Dahrendorf argues that **stratification**, which is the separation of a society into levels or classes based on wealth or power (Wallace and Wolf, 123) is caused by "norms that categorize some things as desirable and others as not" (Wallace and Wolf, 123). In American culture having a nice body is desired and I would bet anything that if there was an experiment where you had two girls, one thin and one obese and asked people to judge which one was from the higher class, people would most likely pick the thin girl because our culture seems to base everything on appearance.

The media certainly has a lot of **power!** The media gives power to those in society who normally might not have much at all. For example, I give power to the girls who have the perfect look along with the perfect body by assuming that they are better than I. The media also "enables those who possess power to give orders and obtain what they want from the powerless" (Wallace and

Wolf, 122). The media portrays people who have that perfect look along with the perfect body as being part of a high **class** in society. That portrayal now reflects in everyday society. I have fallen victim to this false **class consciousness**. I look at girls who have that perfect look and the perfect body and I automatically assume that they are of a higher class than I, but it could very well be that they are not. The media outlets such as teen magazines **contradict** themselves through the information they print. For example, there will be an article in a magazine that will tell you the fast and easy steps to increasing your self-confidence is by exercising your way to the perfect body. Then, perhaps on the next page, there will be another article about how girls should be confident in themselves no matter what size they are. This is giving girls mixed messages on how they should feel about themselves.

I feel that I need to gain control over my own environment as well as my position in society. This means that I must supposedly partake in what the sociologist Talcott Parsons calls evolutionary process, **adaptive upgrading**, which “involves the idea of control or dominance of the environment” (Wallace and Wolf, 170) and for me this would involve losing a lot of weight and becoming thin. If I were thin then I would have a sense of **authority** or the sort of power that is connected to being that perfect girl with the perfect body in our society. If it were not for the media glorifying thin bodies, I probably would not be so preoccupied with my own negative body image. This preoccupation with my negative body image and the media’s glorification of thin bodies lead to **alienation**, psychologically feeling separate from others, involving a loss of meaning. I cannot help but feel distant from others and depressed when I think about the negative views society has on those who are overweight. Last semester, I was in a class and a girl mentioned that her worst fear is being perceived or looked at as being fat (mind you this particular girl was as thin as a rail and would never, ever be considered over-

weight). It is rather depressing to know that I live as a person’s worst fear. “The obese are subject to a particularly severe degree of ridicule, humiliation, and discrimination” (DeJong 75).

Because of these negative attitudes toward overweight people in the media, most of society now shares what Emile Durkheim refers to as a **collective conscience**, “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society” (Wallace and Wolf, 20). Being thin is now seen as a social norm. However, **phenomenology** encourages us to question these “taken for granted assumptions and challenge these culturally learned ideas” (Haley, 123). Obesity in America is not only a **personal trouble**, “a trouble that occurs within the individual” (Wallace and Wolf, 107), but also a **public issue**, “matters that have to do with the institutions of an historical society as a whole with the overlapping of various milieus that interpenetrate to form the larger structures of social and historical life” (Wallace and Wolf, 107). It is estimated that nearly half of Americans are either overweight or obese ([www.obeseinamerica.com](http://www.obeseinamerica.com)).

We watched the film *Affluenza* in class which was a PBS program that explored the “high social and environmental costs of materialism and over consumption” ([www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)). I now believe I have a serious case of affluenza! I see, through the media, advertisements for various products such as clothing, makeup, handbags and perfumes. The spokesmodels for these products are all thin and beautiful. I have set in my mind that if I am thin then I too will look like one of those girls and the products will make me feel like I am part of the elite. The media and advertisements, I feel, prey on people who are obese. Manufacturers come out with various products and advertisements to catch people’s eyes and promise to bring instant results without the use of exercise. Or, they advertise foods that will magically drop pounds in minutes. They also promote other products that will make you

look like you are 100 lbs less. Of course all, if not most, of these kinds of products are incorrect in their statements, but society buys into them anyway. I have bought into them myself, but thankfully have learned better because I tried them out and they never worked!

I feel that another movie we viewed in class *The Big One* directed by Michael Moore which---a film about the corporate downsizing of big companies and their relocation of factories overseas in order keep up and remain competitive---is similar to the film *Affluenza*. Through these films we see examples of how materialistic our culture is and how it affects us as a whole and as individuals. Most of us, me included, are spending way more than our budgets allow just so that we can be perceived as better off than we really are. Why am I even doing this? I should not even care what class people think I am part of, but yet I buy these handbags that cost me a month's worth of hard work. At the time, it's like "hey look at my new bag!" and then a week later it is more like "I really should not have bought this ..." I consume numerous brand-name products because those are what the beautiful people and the *power elite* or "those who hold dominate positions" (Wallace and Wolf, 107) have.

The media, advertisements, and the brand-name companies target people like me who have a poor image of themselves. They make us believe that a new Dior handbag or a new pair of Prada sunglasses will make us feel better about ourselves. Max Horkheimer, in his critique of mass culture, sees "popular culture as a means of manipulating the inhabitants of a totally administered society" (Wallace and Wolf, 105). I agree with Horkheimer's statement and critique because I have fallen to the pop culture manipulation by buying into the advertisements of products that will make you look better and supposedly feel better about yourself.

The media uses advertisements and the news to tell the world how to lose those ex-

tra few pounds, how to stay fit, or how to look better in a certain color. These are just a few of the headlines or leading stories you may come across on any given day. These kinds of headlines boost ratings because so many people want to know what color they look better in or how they can lose a quick 5 pounds. In *Keeping Good Time*, author and sociologist Avery F. Gordon tells of how a reporter named Beth Shuster in August of 1998 did a report for the *Los Angeles Times* about the fear people have of crime. The media instills in us a fear of crime as the crime rates around the nation drop. This is all because of the media focusing in on the fear people have of crimes. For example, Shuster writes "News organizations amplify fear by ratcheting up their crime coverage ... because it helps ratings" (Gordon, 58). This can also be said for the news media covering the latest diet trends. The fear of crime boosts ratings just as the fear of being fat boosts ratings.

Our culture and society seems to choose what is important to us. Morrie Schwartz, in *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom, describes how our culture and society determine for us what we value and how we think and what we should do about it: "The little things, I can obey. But the big things---how we think, what we value---those you must choose yourself. You can't let anyone--or any society---determine those for you" (Albom, 155). Another valid point Morrie has made about the culture we live in is that "the culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it" (Albom, 42). Unfortunately, I am not strong enough to not buy into our culture of obsessing over how our bodies look. Talcott Parsons *functionalist theory* emphasizes the socialization process, "where societal values are internalized by a society's members" (Wallace and Wolf, 27). Again, I am going to have to be strong enough to not internalize the negativity placed on the obese by society. I am too good a person to let society's negative views rip

me apart.

For years I joined Weight Watchers numerous times and lost a few pounds, but in the end I kept gaining weight. During my first year of college (2002-2003), my weight became an all time high, 260 pounds; 100 pounds heavier than I was in eighth grade. I took a look at myself in the mirror one day and started to cry. Why did I let myself get like this? Throughout my life food had been my comfort. It started when I was young. When I was 9 years old, something traumatic happened to me and ever since then I would turn to food as a way of comfort. So, because I was so upset, I turned to my usual *rituals*---“things we get emotionally attached to which shapes our reality” (Wallace & Wolf, 152)---to comfort me. The same food that hurts me is the food I seek refuge in.

I knew I needed something more than Weight Watchers to help me lose weight. I spoke to my doctor and she said that I should join the Mass. General Weight Center. In March of 2004, I was evaluated by a nutritionist, psychiatrist, and a medical doctor at the Weight Center. A few weeks later I got a call telling me that I had been accepted. I was set up with monthly appointments with a doctor who was going to monitor my weight, blood pressure, heart rate and overall progress. I was prescribed the appetite suppressant Phentermine and it immediately began working. When I began taking the medicine I cut out all fast food and soda from my diet and cut down on the portion sizes I consumed. Within the first 3 months I had already lost about 25 pounds. The weight was literally melting off of me. I was beginning to receive compliments I had never received before and I was beginning to get noticed by other people.

As I kept losing weight, I could sense my then boyfriend becoming uncomfortable with my weight loss (and his weight gain). One night he and two of my friends picked me up from work. We were standing around the car deciding on what to do and I suggested that we all go out to dinner. My two friends thought it was a good idea, but my

boyfriend (now ex-boyfriend) said, in front of them, “Caitlin, all you ever want to do is eat.” I never really **problematized** his actions or pointed out to him that what he had said was wrong in so many ways. At the time, I believed that he was right because all I did was eat, but I ate much healthier choices that were of benefit to me. Even though I was losing weight rapidly and my body was dramatically changing, I was still living with what W. E. B. Du Bois refers to as a **double consciousness**, “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of other’s, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>1</sup> Though I had lost all this weight (close to 40 pounds at the time) I was still viewing and dressing my body as it was when I weighed 260 pounds.

Early in the semester we watched a clip from the film *The Matrix*. Neo, the main character, has to decide between taking a red pill or a blue pill. Will Neo choose to find out the truth about life or will he continue to go on with things the way they are? Before deciding on which pill to take Neo must have been contemplating his choices. He eventually chose to know the truth and because of this choice he had more to gain. I have the choice to continue to procrastinate or to find the root of my problem and change my reality. This using of the example of Neo’s response brings to mind also how we interact in everyday life using symbolic language. Our very selves are shaped by this sort of interaction. This all pertains to the theory of **symbolic interactionism** which “focuses primarily on the individual, ‘with a self’ and on the interaction between a person’s internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behavior. Individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own conduct who interpret, evaluate, define, and map out their own action, rather than as passive beings who are impinged upon outside forces” (Wallace & Wolf, 199).

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Crystal Zollarcoffer and her class presentation for this concept linkage.



It is through self knowledge that we can begin determining our own actions. I am setting myself up for failure every time I say “today is the day I start making better choices!” I know inside and consciously in my mind that, because of my patterns of behavior, I most likely will not follow through with those better choices and put them off for another day. According to Berger and Luckmann’s theory of the **social construction of reality**, “whenever individuals engage in internalization, they are conforming to the expectations of existing social institutions” (Wallace & Wolf, 282). Because our actions and interactions with others make up our reality, in turn, if I can change my actions, I can also change my reality. In her essay, “The Roots of Procrastination: A sociological Inquiry into Why I Wait until Tomorrow,” UMass Boston student Jennifer Kosmas writes, “if we can become aware of our own social constructions, then we can also break out of the self-destructive habits by knowing ourselves (74).

It is only through **self interaction** that I can reflect on what I have learned in the past and make my own interpretations and decisions in determining what course of action I am going to follow---in particular, paying attention to my past failures regarding healthy eating choices, exercise, and why I put them off for another day. During the recent Social Theory Forum conference at UMass Boston, keynote speaker Lewis R. Gordon also said that according to Fanon, “failure is productive” and we have to look at things that do not work out for us and learn from them. I have to take the time and reflect on my life and see where I failed, why I failed, and why I put things off. Am I afraid of something? Am I subconsciously afraid of being thin and not having the comfort of my weight to hide behind? Maybe it is all of the above, I just don’t know ... yet.

When I am around my friends and family I engage in what Erving Goffman refers to as **dramaturgy**---the way in which we present ourselves in everyday life as if we were actors on a stage. On the **front stage** I

do not show that my weight is a big issue for me, but **back stage** I am constantly thinking about my weight, body image, and how other people perceive me. The concepts of the front and back stage have to do with **impression management** and “the ways in which an individual guides and controls the impressions from others” (Wallace & Wolf, 230). My internal thoughts play a huge factor in my failing behavior. This is what George Horton Cooley calls the **looking-glass self**.

The looking-glass self is based on three elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification” (Wallace and Wolf, 203). I can really relate to this concept and also to SUNY-Oneonta student Kristy Canfield’s essay, “Repairing the soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty,” when she writes, “I have always had stress concerning my difference; how could I obtain a positive self-image despite the fact that external factors state that I was of an inadequate nature? The depressive state appeared because of constantly trying to acknowledge my identity. I felt as if society constructed a scale to measure humans’ worth, and if I was viewed as an outsider by some, then it must have been true” (2002 22). I also see my weight as making me different from everyone else, which makes me stand out in a negative way. I have numerous friends, relatives and even doctors say to me “you’re not even that overweight, it could be so much worse” or “but you have such a pretty face.” These comments go in one ear and out the other not in a disrespectful way, but because I cannot see them for myself. As I said before, I still look in the mirror and see myself as I was when I weighed 260 pounds and that was over 60 pounds ago! When I look in the mirror I focus in on the unappealing parts of my body, sometimes it gets to the point where I do not even look at my body in the mirror just to save myself from becoming depressed and even more self conscious. A part of my per-

sonal *goal attainment* tasks is supposed to be, according to mainstream culture, that of focusing on my flaws and trying hard through rigorous exercise and a restricting diet to correct them. Instead, I should be more focused in on living a positive healthy lifestyle rather than having the perfect body.

We watched the film, *Twelve Angry Men*, early in the semester. This film was about twelve men who were serving on a jury and trying to decide whether or not a young boy is guilty or innocent of murdering his father. Eleven of the men are saying that he is guilty and only one man is questioning the young boy's guilt. So, why are these eleven men so quick to convict the boy? They did not take into consideration that people testifying might not always tell the truth, even under oath. The one man who boldly approached and questioned every so called truth from the case takes a phenomenological approach. He was able to see that not everyone tells or sees the truth (Haley, 124). You cannot assume that people are telling the truth, just as I cannot assume that what people notice first about me is my weight problem.

My "natural" attitude towards becoming thin has been that I would just want it to magically happen. I do not think I am alone in thinking that way, who wouldn't want something to just happen without putting any effort in it? But, I believe this sort of attitude is one of the main reasons why I procrastinate so often in terms of changing my eating and exercise habits. When I lost the first 50 lbs. in a matter of months I hardly exercised, but I did cut down drastically on what I ate and the portions sizes I consumed. My mentality now, unfortunately, is still that of when I was losing the 50lbs. I believe I have to change my attitude to incorporate regular exercise if I am to see anymore weight loss results because, now, eating less is just not cutting it anymore.

In conclusion, I believe that I have to start being conscious of how eating affects my life and my body and how that bag of chips is not worth eating. I need to realize I can have more control over what goes into

my body, and that I am not going to live forever and by procrastinating I am only wasting precious moments of my life that I will never get back. Ever since I can remember I have turned to food in times of need, stress, and comfort and those acts have not helped me reach my goal of being thin and healthy. I can have more control over what goes into my body and now is the time to start and not wait until tomorrow to start watching what I eat.

In the book, *Keeping Good Time* author Avery F. Gordon speaks at an Alternative Graduation for non-traditional high school students and gives them this advice which can be related to the media negatively stigmatizing obesity and my longing to conform to the thin-body social norm. She writes, "I realize there are many pressures on you to not make trouble, but rather to conform. These pressures can feel close to the heart, as a long-standing and contradictory American tendency towards submission to authority affects our everyday lives" (Gordon, 71). I have to learn to not consume myself with the media and their portrayal of high class thin bodies and learn to love myself and my body no matter what. I realize that my body is the only one I have and to make the best of it and stop being my own worst enemy all the time.

In the movie *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie says "you must love one another or die." This is one of the many aphorisms Morrie has shared with us. I believe this aphorism could also be interpreted as love *yourself* or perish. I relate to this because sometimes I am so caught up in my poor body image and comparing my body to those of others that I forget the real reasons why I am obsessing over becoming thin. The real reason why I should want to be thin is so that I can be healthy, not to look good or to be considered a member of a higher class. Those are superficial and materialistic rewards. Unfortunately, in my mind, becoming thin is a requirement for my social *integration* and *social mobility*, "the ability to move up on the social ladder" (Wallace and Wolf, 143).

Hopefully I can work on that once the semester is over and realize that looking good is not as rewarding as feeling good. As Minnie Ransom says, in *Keeping Good Time* by Avery F. Gordon, "There's nothing that stands between you and perfect health, sweetheart" (Gordon, 200).

Watching *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I have learned from Morrie that procrastination is a complete waste of time. I am going to take another one of his aphorisms to heart: "once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." If I learn that I am going to die at any moment, I will not procrastinate in regards to changing my eating habits and being healthy. If I continue this pattern of procrastination, then I may never reach my goal and it could end up being too late. I certainly do not want to live my life with regrets. I do not want to die without knowing how it feels to live as a healthy person.

I am going to end my paper with a final quote from Gordon's *Keeping Good Time*. This passage is one that I am going to keep with me until the end of time. This quoted passage is one by Toni Cade Bambara, a Black writer, filmmaker, community activist, and teacher who died from cancer in 1995. The words are quoted in the context of speaking about community, but I am going to take it out of the community context and put it directly into my own life and the context of dreaming to be thin one day. Bambara writes, "*The dream is real and the only unreality is the failure to make it real*" (Gordon, 201). It is all up to me whether I want to become thin. I have to take the responsibility into my own hands, quit procrastinating, and stop listening to the media and magazines telling me how I should look. I am going to change my eating habits and my exercise routines for me and no one else. No matter what I look like I will never change from the humble, quiet, fun loving, optimistic girl I have always been. Becoming healthier is the number one reason why I am going to change my bad habits. In the process of becoming healthier I will accomplish the goal that I have dreamed of reaching for a very, very

long time. Becoming thin will not be the main reason, as I originally thought, for me to stop procrastinating and to start getting my act together and live a healthier life.

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